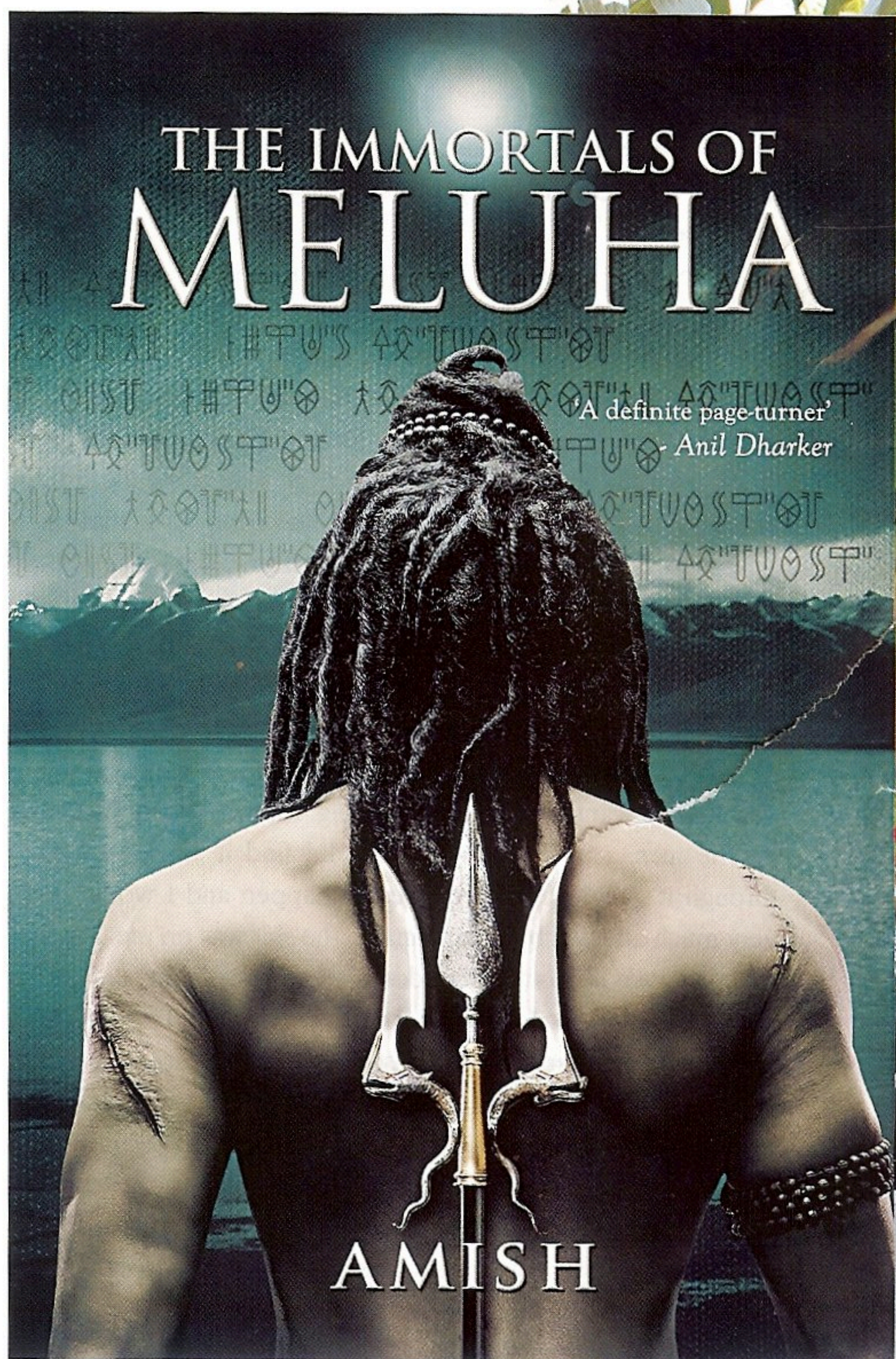


Retelling of mythology has just got hipper. With writers penning the legendary tales of our mythical figures with a sliver of literary oomph, books on mythology are climbing the best seller lists. Society speaks to some of the leading lights who are penning the legends like never before



Mythology In Fresh Ink



BY MANISH MISHRA

“Shiva gazed at the orange sky. The clouds hovering above Mansarovar had just parted to reveal the setting sun. The brilliant giver of life was calling it a day once again. Shiva had seen a few sunrises in his twenty-one years. But the sunset! He tried never to miss the sunset! On any other day, Shiva would have taken in the vista—the sun and the immense lake against the magnificent backdrop of the Himalayas stretching as far back as the eye could see.”

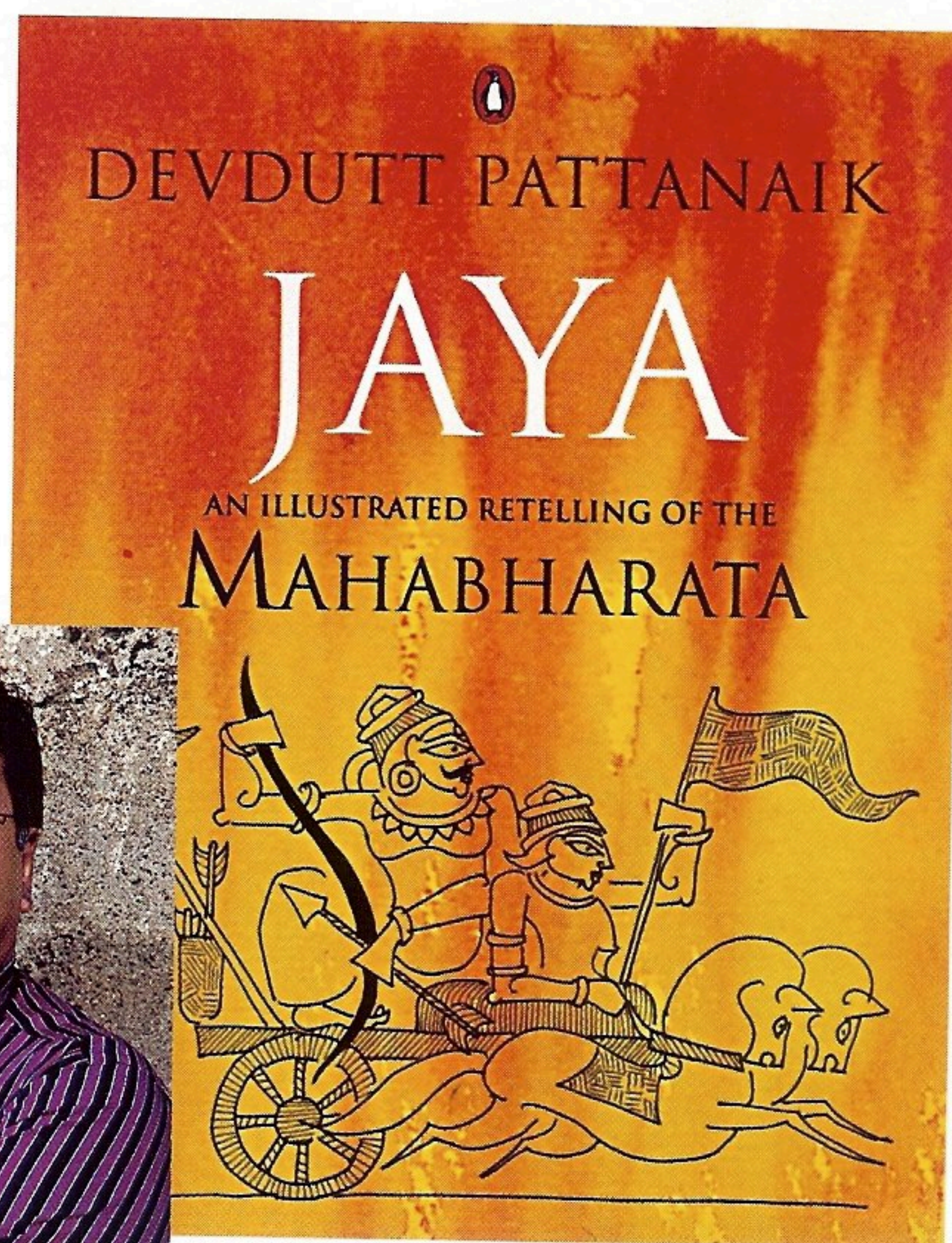
One's quite likely to get blinded by the gleam of Shiva's trident as one visualises him diving into the frozen water of Mansarovar Lake while reading these heart tugging, ecstasy inducing lines

from author Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals Of Meluha*. Amish's book has not just become the celebrated number one bestseller, it has reawakened our minds to our glorious past and resensitised our souls to that age of innocence. Its stupendous success is no fluke. If author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's book *The Palace Of Illusion* is narrated by the strong feminist voice of Draupadi then Ashwin Sanghi's novel, *The Rozabal Line*, draws from several mythologies. In an age of cliché chick lits and steamy dude lits, there are writers with a strong conscience who are retelling us our own stories but with a quirky style which make them all the more edgy and endearing.

"I had actually started *The Immortals of Meluha* as a philosophy book. The key philosophy in it was the nature of evil. But I got some good advice that I should write a thriller/adventure and let the philosophy come across with the story. This would have mainstream appeal. Now, if I had to write an adventure on the nature of evil, who better to be the hero than the destroyer of evil Himself, Lord Shiva! Even in his myths, he does come across as a very charismatic and exciting God—certainly not the usual boring countenance we would expect from divinity. So the fact that he would joke around with his friends appears quite normal to me," says Amish.

Jesus Christ too has been one of the most fascinating and intriguing subjects for authors across the board. Ashwin Sanghi's much celebrated *The Rozabal Line* traces Christ's connection with Kashmir. Ashwin's parents used to regularly take him for holidays to Kashmir during the 70s. During these visits, he would do all the touristy stuff—which included visiting the Rozabal. As a child, however, he did not fully understand the significance of the tomb. It was only in 1999 the notion that Jesus may have left behind a bloodline caught

"Even in his myths, Lord Shiva does come across as a very charismatic and exciting God—certainly not the usual boring countenance we would expect from divinity." —Amish Tripathi



his attention when he read *Holy Blood Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln. A couple of years later, he read *Holger Kersten* and was fascinated with the idea that Jesus could have been inspired by Buddhism and that he may have drawn much of his spiritual learning from India. Ashwin began to wonder whether he could marry the two theories that he survived the crucifixion and travelled to India and that he left behind a bloodline. Sanghi spent the next two years reading each and every book that he could acquire on topics that he wanted to explore viz, the possibility of Jesus having spent his missing years as a youth studying in India, the theory that Jesus did not die on the cross and that he was whisked away to safety, and the notion that Jesus travelled to India to reunite with the lost tribes of Israel who had settled in Kashmir. "In all, I read around 40 books during this time, besides scouring the internet for any information that I could possibly find. I started writing *The Rozabal Line* in 2005 and finished it 18 months later," says Sanghi.

Meanwhile, Amish's famed protagonist Shiva is not merely a God who is worshipped day in and day out as the destroyer of the universe. Here, Shiva is the ultimate liberal, modern god who treats his wife as an equal and loves his children. He is a

virtuoso dancer and a fierce warrior. He treats his followers with understanding and kindness, regardless of their status. He takes up for the marginalised and the oppressed in society. He does have a quick temper, but it subsides just as quickly. Says Amish, "We, as a country, have been modernising myths for many millennia. For example, what most of us know as the *Ramayan* today is actually the *Ramcharitmanas* written in the 16th century by Sant Tulsidas, which is in fact a modernisation of the original *Ramayan* written by Valmiki. Now, there are many differences between the *Ramayans* of Valmiki and Sant Tulsidas. For example, Sita is a much stronger and feistier character in Valmiki's *Ramayan*, reflecting the higher status of women in the ancient era."

Today's writing scenario is seeing the modernisation of our myths with certain newness and contemporary lingo. With India becoming more confident as a nation with its increasing success, an interest in our history and heritage has been aroused. "Earlier, we were either defensive or embarrassed of our past. Now we want to absorb our past with an open mind but we want to do it on our own terms. So a retelling of our myths which reinforces the terrible caste system based on birth or an inferior status of women is obviously not welcome. But the retelling of myths which shows the liberal nature and the grandeur of our past are loved," says Amish.

Veteran journalist and columnist Anil Dharker, who critiqued *Immortals of Meluha*, is surprised with the fact that this literary process is happening now. "These stories were told by mothers. That's how I learnt the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*. They were not straightforward stories of good versus evil. There was a lot of ambiguity about them. If you take Eklavya or Karna—they were such fantastic people but they just happened to be on the wrong side.

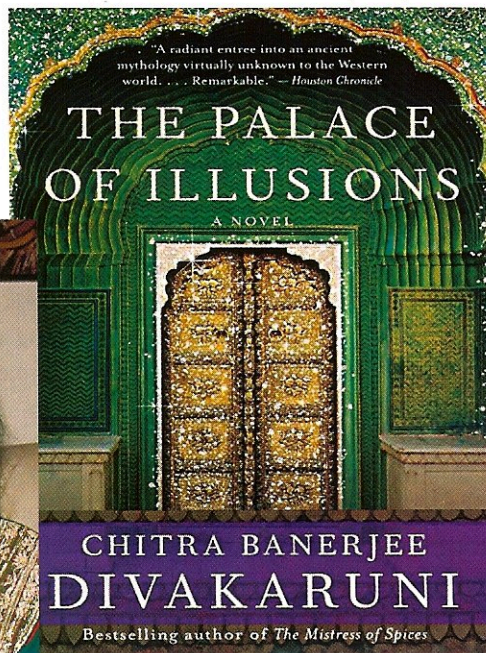
"The first wave of writers like Mulk Raj Anand and RK Narayanan talked about villages. After Salman Rushdie, the whole scenario has changed."—Anil Dharker

That added to their appeal. I suppose Indian writing in English is a relatively new phenomenon. The first wave of writers like Mulk Raj Anand and RK Narayanan talked about villages. They didn't feel confident enough to talk about a modern, urban India. After Salman Rushdie, the whole scenario has changed. Now we are going to our past," he says.

Mythological tales are deeper but they constantly need retelling. Author Devdutt Pattanaik, who has authored books like *The Book Of Ram* and *Hanuman's Ramayana*, however has a different take. "Most of these books are rather superficial and only scratch the surface. But remember, superficial from the point of view of someone who has been studying it now for 14 years, but quite profound from the point of view of someone who knows nothing," says he.

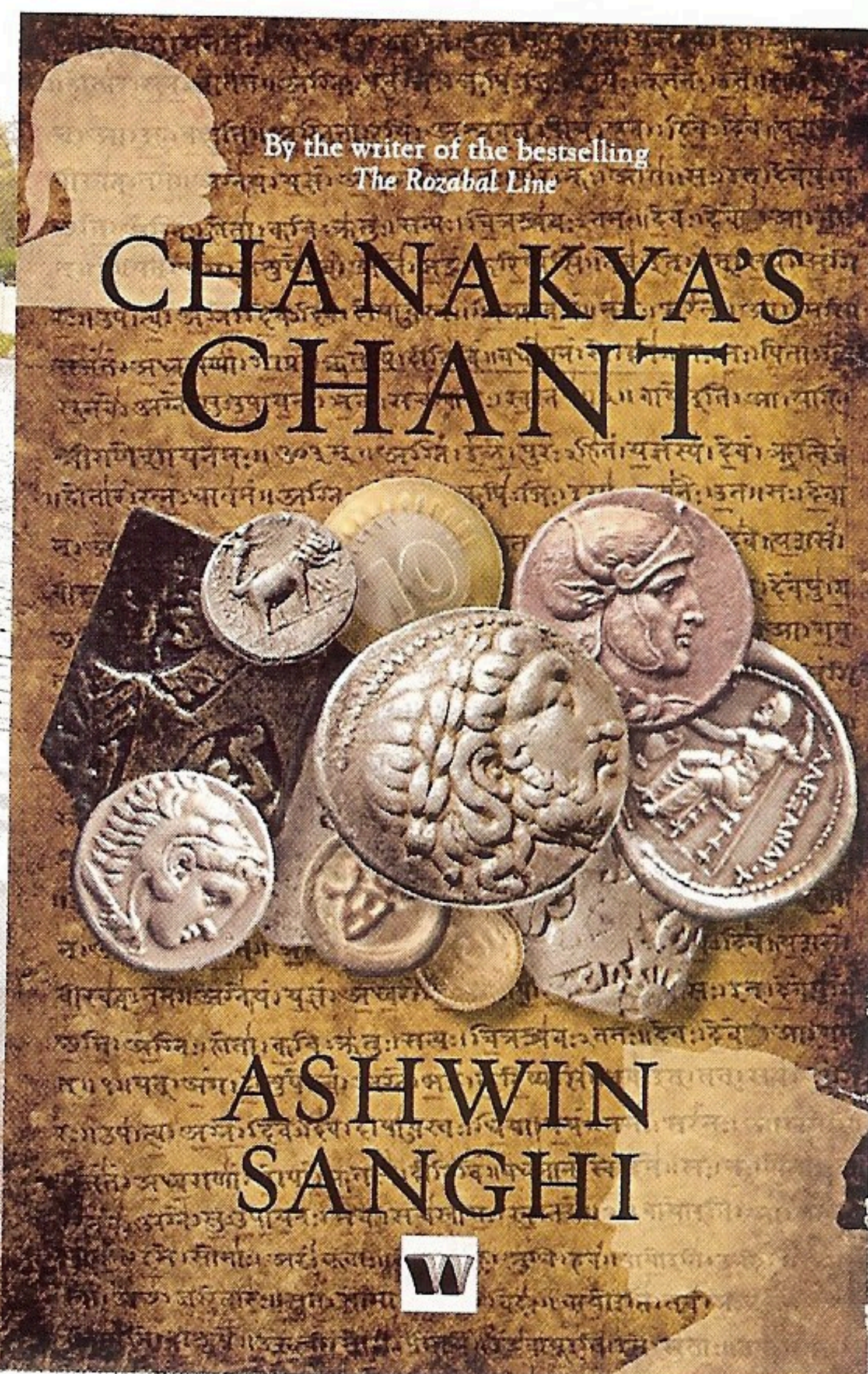
In an endeavour to focus on the story and philosophy, the authors of these books have kept the language simple and contemporary. Amish draws an interesting comparison with

Shakespearean books taught in schools. "This is especially true if one is trying to recreate an old world. Otherwise, the language becomes a barrier to the story rather than a facilitator. I learnt this lesson at my school (Cathedral & John Connon School in Mumbai), where they would teach us four Shakespeare plays as compared to the ICSE board mandate of only one. The attempt was noble. But as students, we could never appreciate the true beauty of those plays because of the unwieldy and ancient English. It was only later when I read those plays rewritten in modern English that I fell in love with the Shakespearean world. The irony is that Shakespeare himself





Ashwin Sanghi



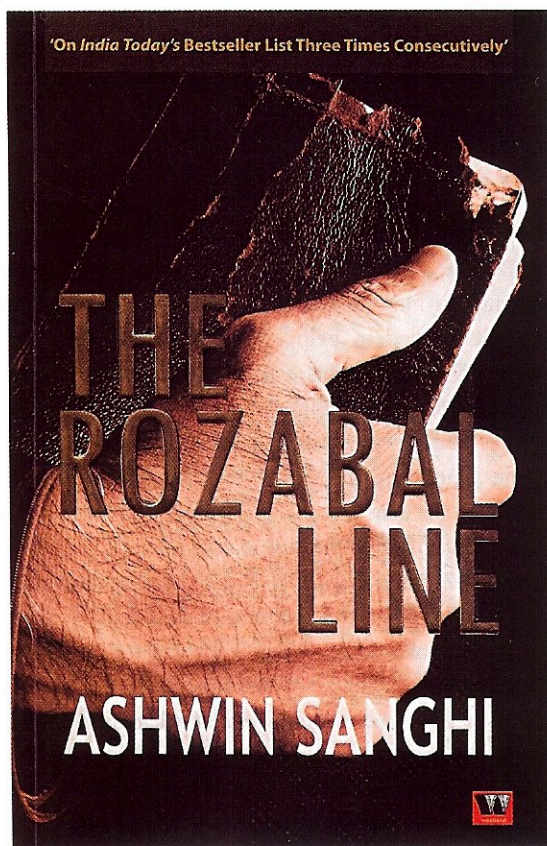
wrote in a language which was modern and used by common people in his age. But obviously, what was modern in his day is ancient now," says he.

Language is not an end in itself. It is only a carrier of the message. The more efficient and simple the carrier, the better it is. Ashwin refutes the claim that usage of trendy English tends to rustle up their reach and popularity. "I think that the formula is that there is no formula. In effect, I can tell you what doesn't work but can't precisely define what does. Viewing success or failure through a 'mythology prism' or 'trendy English prism' would be an error of judgment. We've had many mythological works in India that haven't been commercially successful. The same also applies to works written in trendy English. In fact, there is no way that I can even tell you whether the readers of my book are, in fact, the youth. I have enough senior citizens who write to me after having read my novel," says he.

Devdutt Pattanaik is vocal about the market pressure on authors. For someone who has been writing mythology for 14 years, long before it became cool, he insists that market pressure has never bothered him. "Ultimately, one has to connect with the audience... either you move to their level or you bring them to your level. It's what I do. You can write

stories based on mythology but you cannot reinvent mythology. That is being a bit silly and presumptuous. But then, if you see myth as merely stories, then yes, you can 'reinvent' them," says he. According to him, these books are being read by less than one per cent of the urban youth and it has really no major impact except that in the mythic world constructed by the media, it seems monumental.

An IIM Calcutta alumnus, Amish started work on *Meluha* with zero expectations. For someone who hadn't written fiction before in his life, he credits his book becoming a bestseller to the blessings of Lord Shiva. Author Ashwin Sanghi feels that the success of such novels is related to several parallel trends. "For most of my growing years, Indian publishing meant literary fiction. Authors were encouraged to write epics that spanned several generations and sentimental tales about human relationships. Fast-paced thrillers and mysteries were neither written nor encouraged. Most of us looked for our daily dose of chills and thrills in books by foreign authors. The problem with such an approach, however, is that a Hollywood blockbuster cannot tug at your heartstrings the way a Bollywood flick can. There is a uniquely Indian DNA in movies that can make you laugh, cry, and dance. It is precisely this gap that is



“Viewing success or failure through a ‘mythology prism’ or ‘trendy English prism’ would be an error of judgment.”

—Ashwin Sanghi

be passionate and mercurial while the Suryavanshi kings were thought to be staid and sober. Modern royalty in India also tends to trace its ancestry in this manner. Historically, India was a land of war. Terrible wars were fought. And many times, the Sun line and the Moon line were on opposing sides. I have interpreted this past, with some more embellishments into the theory in *The Immortals of Meluha*,” says Amish who visited the Himalayas on many occasions. Amish’s upcoming novel is the second book of the Shiva Trilogy. It is called *The Secret of the Nagas*. It will begin from the exact moment where *The Immortals of Meluha* ends.

The Palace of Illusion by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni touches upon some interesting but debatable facts—the silent war between Draupadi and Kunti, her animosity towards Arjun’s other wife Subhadra and her deep bond with her brother Dri. “*The Palace of Illusion* was unique because the narrator was none other than Panchaali herself. *The Immortals of Meluha* was special because it attempted to explain Shiva as an ordinary man instead of a God. What the success of such books tells me is that it isn’t history, mythology or religion *per se* that makes for great reading but a unique and interesting perspective on history, mythology or religion,” says Sanghi.

Sanghi likes to call it the retelling of mythology more than the reinventing of mythology. His novel, *The Rozabal Line*, was certainly not a mythological novel as much as it was a theological thriller. His forthcoming novel, *Chanakya’s Chant*, has a Vedic mantra at its core but it is much more of a historical thriller than a mythological one. “The book actually consists of two parallel stories. One story takes place around 300 BC and describes the machinations of Chanakya in placing Chandragupta upon the throne of Magadha. The second story takes place in modern India and revolves around the political intrigues of an Indian Brahmin who wishes to consolidate his power base and become a modern-day kingmaker. The effort is to show that not much has changed over 2300 years,” says he.

The *Bhagwat Gita*, for example, has a huge story to tell with moral lessons to be drawn. If it is told in difficult language, the readership is going to be restricted. The moment you put it into today’s idiom, it appeals to a much broader base of people. However, morality and sensitivity seem to have changed now with a modern ethos coming into writing. <<

being bridged by newer Indian authors. The effort is not only to bring fast-paced adventure and action into the novel but also to tie it to uniquely Indian perspectives, and these are usually to be found in our history, mythology, religion and culture,” says Sanghi.

The trend of reinventing or modernising mythology has been around in post-independence India for some time. The children’s books market has long been active in this arena—from the much loved *Amar Chitra Kathas* of those days to *Bal Ganesh* and *Hanuman* today. “I think this is related to India’s recent economic success and rising confidence as a nation. It manifests itself for example in the more flamboyant celebration of previously quiet or niche festivals like *Karva Chauth*. We want to know more about our past now. And books on mythology serve that need. I certainly see this trend growing stronger,” says Amish.

The contrast and animosity Amish draws in his book between the Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis is intriguing. “The concept of the Suryavanshi (Sun line) and the Chandravanshi (Moon line) kings does exist in our myths. The Chandravanshi kings were rumoured to