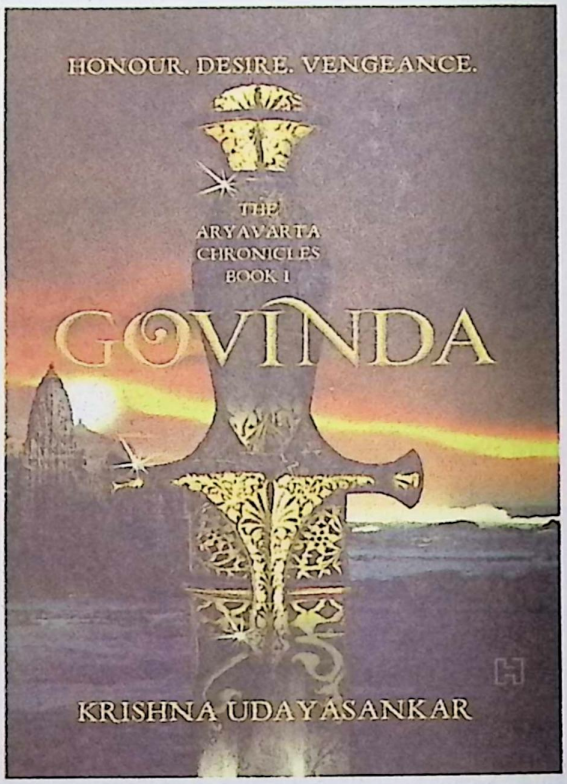
GOVINDA

Myth Retold or Revisionist Fiction?

ZAFAR ANJUM



The Aryavarta Chronicles, Book 1: GOVINDA, by Krishna Udayasankar, New Delhi: Hachette India, 472 pp, paperback. $25.

I remember reading an interview of the late Chilean author Roberto Bolano in which he said that in the third world countries, blooming of literary fTiction precedes mushrooming of genre fiction. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing in itself, I won't go into that (perhaps one needs both?) but this is how the literary scene has evolved in India.

First, there were the R K Narayans and the Raja Raos, then there were the Naipauls, the Anita Desais, and Kamala Markandayas and then came the generation of new diaspora writers such as Rushdie, Vikram Seth and others. At home, the Stephanians ruled the roost for a time but with the liberalization of the Indian economy and the rise of a new Indian middle class, slowly and steadily Indian writing in English, largely an upper middle class phenomenon, went down a slippery slope.

Then came along Chetan Bhagat, the writer-prophet of this newly minted middle class. His novels found a bridge with India's youth. Since his arrival on the scene, there has been a deluge of fiction from all kinds of hacks. Suddenly, Indian writing in English has become accessible to anyone who knows how to read a sentence in English. Today, home-grown Indian writers are writing sci-fi novels and thrillers and there are writers who specialize in chick lit and teen lit (I'm sure Clitlit will follow soon after the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*). The number of books sold by these authors has jumped through the roof and publishers, both *desi* and foreign, are only too happy to encash this trend.

One of the genres that have bloomed during this revolution is that of mythology or the retelling of stories from India's past. Today, there are many leading names in this genre. Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* has become such a runaway hit that a famous Bollywood film director has bought its film rights. I am tempted to place Krishna Udayasankar's debut novel's *Govinda (The Aryavarta Chronicles, #1)* in this category but perhaps I should not.

This is not a junk-food-novel. A few pages into the novel and you know you are reading a well-researched work, a work of mytho-history.