



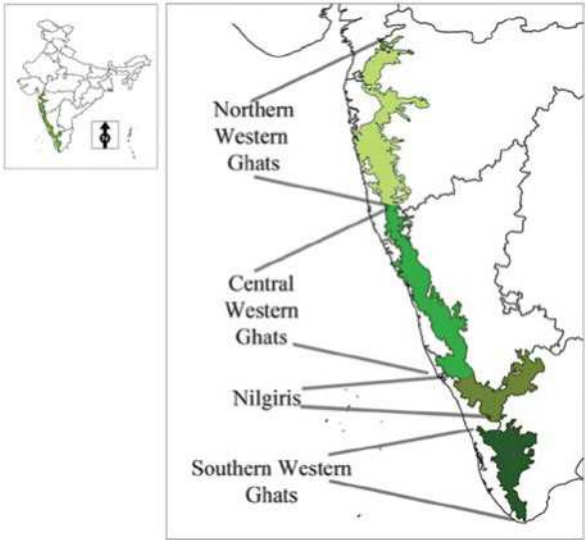
DR. PANDIRI HARSHA BHARGAVI

The 2022 Kannada film ‘Kantara’, directed by Rishab Shetty, has spotlighted a lesser-known, deeply spiritual facet of Bharat’s rich cultural heritage. At the heart of the film lies ‘Bhoota Kola’, a ritualistic dance and spirit worship practiced in the Tulu-speaking regions of coastal Karnataka. This cinematic

portrayal of ancestral deities, forest guardianship, and land rights has opened the world’s eyes to the sacred, symbiotic relationship between man and nature that flourishes in the Western Ghats. ‘Kantara’ has reminded us of how indigenous traditions offer timeless models for ecological harmony. Set in a world where tribal communities coexist with nature not as conquerors but as caretakers, it revives conversations about land, identity, and spiritual ecology. It shows that the forests are not just resources, but repositories of ancestral memory and divine presence.

**Living Landscape of Culture and Conservation**  
Stretching from Gujarat to Kerala, the Western Ghats which is also known as the Sahyadri Hills is one of the world’s most significant ecological zones. These ghats

# Western Ghats: Repository of sacred Ecology and indigenous wisdom



The Kannada film ‘Kantara’ has brought global attention to ‘Bhoota Kola’, a spiritual tradition of coastal Karnataka, highlighting the deep bond between man and nature. Set against the Western Ghats, it reflects how indigenous communities live as custodians of forests and culture. Their timeless wisdom offers vital lessons in ecological harmony and sustainable living

are designated as UNESCO World Heritage Site. The mountain range covers 5% of the country’s landmass which houses more than 7,400 species of flowering plants, 508 bird species, and over 1,500 endemic plants. These forests are the birthplace of rivers like the Godavari, Krishna, and Kaveri, lifelines for millions in peninsular Bharat.

Beyond its breathtaking biodiversity, the Ghats are also a cultural reservoir. The concept of sacred groves (small forest patches preserved through rituals and spiritual belief) exists

in almost every community along the range. Known locally as kaavu in Kerala or devrai in Maharashtra, these groves are protected not by law, but by lore, taboos, and seasonal worship. This model of nature preservation rooted in the people’s lifestyle that has ensured the survival of rare flora and fauna through centuries.

**Custodians of Ecological Wisdom**  
The real guardians of the Western Ghats are its local Janjatiyis, each preserving an ancient way of life attuned to the environment. From the



Todas in Tamil Nadu to the Soligas in Karnataka, these communities inhabit the forests, they interpret them, respect them, and ensure their regeneration.

- The Irulas, known for their unparalleled skill in tracking snakes and herbs, are key contributors to anti-venom research.
- The Kurumbas blend sha-

manic practices with deep knowledge of medicinal plants. They are traditional healers.

- The Kattunayakans, expert honey gatherers, practice techniques that preserve bee colonies and forest harmony.
- The Siddhis have interwoven tribal traditions with their ancestral heritage, creating a unique cultural

mosaic.

- The Warlis, famous for their nature-inspired tribal art, use painting as expression but as a way to encode ecological knowledge.
- The Kotas are known for their craftsmanship, they were traditionally skilled in making tools and musical instruments.
- The Soligas are known for their unique coexistence with tigers.

Their diets, too, are reflections of forest cycles, rich in foraged greens, millet, bamboo shoots, wild honey, and tubers. These food systems are inherently seasonal, low-impact, and nutritionally rich. Their agricultural practices, often labeled as primitive, are actually sustainable models that modern societies are now striving to replicate.

**Sacred Ecology in Practice**  
This sacred worldview is seen in reality of Western Ghats, rivers are worshipped as mothers, groves are seen as temples, and animals are treated with reverence. This culture of sacred ecology fosters a conservation ethic not imposed from above, but emerging from within the community.

The concept of Daiva in ‘Kantara’—a forest deity who guards both people and nature—mirrors the lived belief of many tribes who believe that disrupting the forest invites spiritual retribution. This deep psychological connection fosters an environmental ethic stronger than legal enforcement.

**Learning from the Hills**  
Despite their wisdom, many tribal traditions in the Ghats are under threat—from deforestation, infrastructure projects, climate change, and loss of forest rights. The migration of youth, loss of language, and assimilation into urban life further erode these heritage lifelines.

The future of the Western Ghats depends on scientific conservation in alignment with cultural preservation. Recognising janjati communities as knowledge-holders, granting them land rights, supporting their languages and crafts, and integrating their practices into school curriculums can ensure that their wisdom is not lost.

The model offered by the Western Ghats is clear: coexistence over conquest, reverence over resource extraction. In an era of climate crisis, this philosophy is relevant and is essential.

As the sun sets over the Sahyadris and the mist coils around their ancient ridges, the voices of the forest (human, animal, and spirit) merge into a single, harmonious song.

The Western Ghats are more than a biodiversity hotspot, they are a civilisational legacy of how to live with nature, not against it. And perhaps, in their silence, they carry the most urgent message of our time: to protect nature is to protect ourselves.

(The writer is a Creative Economy Expert)

## Book Review

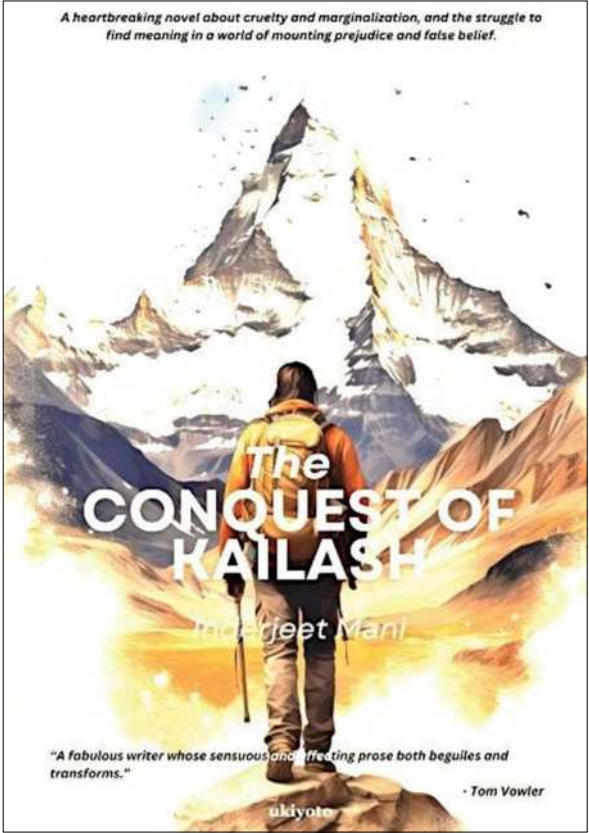
# A journey of love, loss and transcendence

ASKARI JAFFER

As a reviewer, when I opened ‘The Conquest of Kailash’, I expected a reflective, slow-burning novel. To my utmost delight, what I found was a story that seizes the reader, shakes them, and refuses to let go. Inderjeet Mani, acclaimed for his Thailand-set horror thriller ‘Toxic Spirits’, has delivered a literary masterpiece that is simultaneously intellectually ambitious and heart-breaking.

At its center is Ali Akbar, a closeted gay man in his later years, mourning the loss of his wife Helen, who has left to become a Buddhist nun. Returning from California to India, Ali’s journey begins at the Deer Park in Benares, where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, and a simple flyer promising to teach him how to love again sets him on a path that will take him to the icy heights of Mount Kailash. But this is no mere scenic travelogue. Ali must confront childhood sexual abuse, his personal failures including his expulsion from Cambridge University, and the fractured relationships with Helen and their daughter Homa. When he is assaulted at a parade led by a religious fundamentalist, the stakes of his search for love and redemption become sharply immediate.

Mani’s prose melds philosophical reflection, intimate character study, and richly textured travelogue. The phi-



losophy of love it explores takes you far away into the world of Socrates in classical Greece and the writings of the Upanishadic sage Yajnavalkya. From Athens’ Agora to the sacred temples of Benares to California suburbia, English halls of learning, and the remote Himalayan peaks, every scene pulses with life, danger, and possibility. The chill of mountain air, the crush of city crowds, the hush of meditation, and the long, often painful afternoons of childhood are all palpable. A warning: the author does not

shy away from explicitness. By exposing desire, shame, and vulnerability without restraint, Mani makes the story intimate and unforgettable.

Ali’s fascination with Mount Kailash begins in childhood, when a family friend recounts the pilgrim’s dangers and wonders on a Benares verandah, surrounded by mango and plum trees, flocks of parrots, and their dog Krishna. The conversation sparks an early curiosity about faith, devotion, and the meaning of transcendence. Years later,

this curiosity deepens at university, where his geography professor Hans Finkelstein, a German émigré, brings the mountain to life through vivid lessons on plate tectonics and the formation of the Himalayas. Ali’s imagination transforms scientific lectures into cosmic visions, linking earthly upheavals to the grandeur of Kailash, while glimpses of local children in the photographs he studies remind him that spiritual aspiration often coexists with harsh realities.

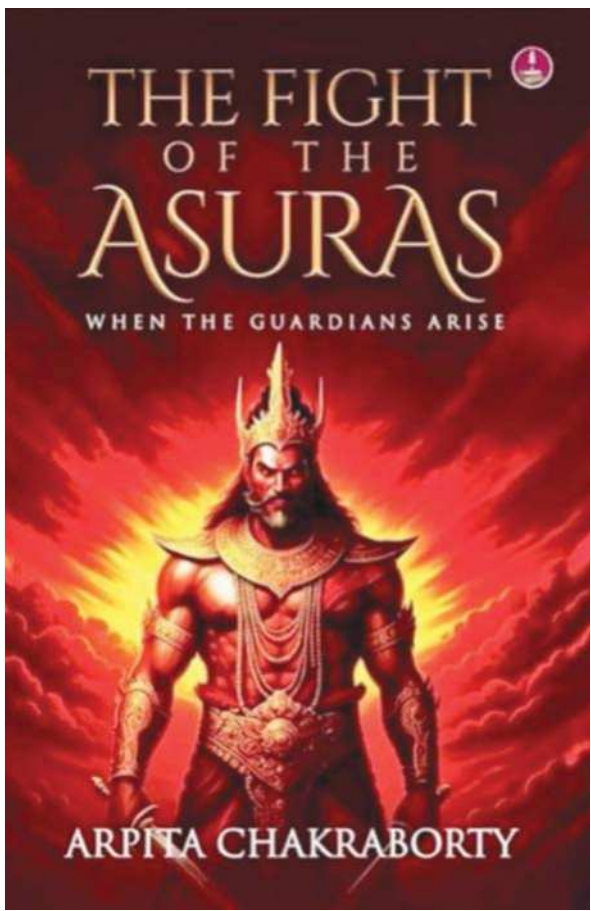
Inspired by his own pilgrimage to Buddhist sites in India and Nepal, Mani’s novel asks questions rarely addressed in contemporary fiction: Can love endure trauma, exile, and societal collapse? Can a man shaped by fear and loss still find connection? This is a story of loss, longing, and the extraordinary, unpredictable ways the human heart seeks and finds meaning.

Already popular in translation and audiobook form, ‘The Conquest of Kailash’ has been praised as “a moving and profoundly human work” by Reader’s favourite, while Amazon readers celebrate its “heartbreaking blend of philosophy, introspection, and travel” and its “deep, beautiful, and emotional” impact. There are a few passages where the philosophical digressions slow the narrative slightly, occasionally interrupting the otherwise immersive flow. Even so, it remains a rare and compelling literary achievement.

DR RUPALI SETHI

What if the fate of the universe rested on someone born from its darkest bloodline? That’s the question at the heart of ‘The Fight of The Asuras (When the Guardians Arise)’, a breathtaking tale that pulls you into the realm of magic, celestial warriors, and ancient shadows waiting to rise again. It’s a story of destiny and doubt, where every choice could tip the balance between salvation and ruin. Every once in a while, a story comes along that doesn’t just transport you into another world but makes you stop and reflect on your own. This is one such book — a sweeping epic set in a land of ancient magic and celestial warriors, yet at its core, it’s about something deeply human: the struggle between who we are, who we were born to be, and who we choose to become.

At its center stands Kalki, a guardian unlike any other. Descended from the Rakshasas — once divine ‘Suras’, now feared across the cosmos — he is both the savior and the threat, the protector and the cursed heir. His journey is haunted by a legacy that refuses to let go, making his struggle as internal as it is epic. When a celestial warrior named Chitrangada appears, she and Kalki become entangled in a fate-driven battle against a rising darkness. Dark secrets from Kalki’s past threaten their alliance. Guided by the



cosmos, Chitrangada’s duty is clear: stand beside him to preserve the balance of the universe. Yet clarity of purpose does not erase the doubts in her heart.

Their world pulses with life on every page. From the training halls of Eldoria Academy, where mortals and celestials are molded into protectors of the realm, to landscapes steeped in forgotten magic, the setting feels mythical and tangible.

It’s not just a backdrop; it’s an arena where destinies collide and secrets surface. What makes this novel so compelling is its focus on legacy and redemption. Do we inherit the mistakes of those who came before us, or can we forge our own path? This question drives Kalki’s journey and resonates with anyone who has ever wrestled with the weight of expectations — family, society, or even self-doubt.

‘The Fight of The Asuras’ blends mythology, destiny, and human struggle in a breathtaking saga of legacy, redemption, and celestial battles

That’s where the book connects most deeply: behind the celestial wars and ancient evils lies a universal human struggle.

The writing moves seamlessly between grand spectacle and quiet introspection. The battles are explosive, painted in cinematic strokes of light and shadow, but the quieter moments — Chitrangada wrestling with her doubts or Kalki confronting the weight of his lineage — leave the deepest mark.

‘The Fight Of The Asuras’ is more than just a fantastic story; it’s a spellbinding blend of mythology, destiny, and human struggle. With breathtaking battles and tender introspection, it explores legacy, love, and the choice between light and darkness. A must-read for fans of epic adventures who crave both grandeur and heart.

(The writer is a noted scholar of English and Hindi Literature.)