

Rsis of Ancient Indian Tradition

Rsis are unique figures in Indian culture with a distinct status. Their role in Indian culture in both ancient and modern times is significant. Despite their importance to Indian tradition, the topic of the *rsis* has not been explored in the literature to as great an extent as many other topics within the study of Indian religious tradition. Much of the literature that exists lacks academic objectivity, which can lead to bias, limiting the usefulness of those sources. Even so, the amount of scriptural material dealing with *rsis* is overwhelming, as are the seemingly endless categories and classifications within the broad designation of *rsi*, and as a result this study will only briefly explore the legends and traditions of the *rsis*.

To satisfactorily define the *rsis* is a fairly daunting task in itself, given the wide variety of descriptions and scriptures associated with them. Mitchiner describes a *rsi* as “one who seeks to bring about change, a transformation both of himself and also of his environment” (246). This definition is broad, and by no means comprehensive. Some of the *rsis*’ means of implementing change must be described in order to understand Mitchiner’s definition. First, and perhaps foremost, the *rsis* are said to be composers of Vedic hymns, or rather, those to whom Vedic hymns are shown by means of divine revelation (Mitchiner 172). According to Mitchiner, *rsis* are said to have composed all ten books (*mandalas*) of the *Rgveda* and various Dharma Sastras (books of law and duty,) among other things (172-176). The *rsis* also performed the distinct (albeit closely related) role as teachers, passing on the knowledge revealed to them. While the Vedas emphasize *rsis* as seers, the Epics and Puranas emphasize *rsis* as teachers (182). Pandey (2-3) notes a distinction between categories of *rsis*, namely between *saksatkritadharma* (direct

seers of hymns) and *asaksatkritadharmā* (those who could not directly perceive divine truth.) *Rsis* of both categories, however, are said to have observed other important traditions as well.

The *rsis*' position as seers of hymns is linked to their traditions of sacrifice, as many hymns are said to have been "seen" during the performance of sacrifice (Mitchiner 177). By offering sacrifice (*yajna*), the main goal is said to have been "*svarga-loka*" (paradise) and '*brahmaloka*' (eternal residence of the god Brahma)" (Pandey 158). It is by reaching such a realm that the foremost Seven *Rsis* are said to have become stars in the sky (Mitchiner 249). Other aims of sacrifice also included the acquisition of sons, wealth and cattle, but not all sacrifices performed by *rsis* were in pursuit of personal gain. Some literature tells of *rsis* performing sacrificial rituals for kings and their families, fulfilling the role of family priests (*purohitas*) (Mitchiner 178). Mitchiner points out that in most cases "men are urged to perform the same sacrifice in order to fulfill the same aim" (178), whether that aim is obtaining heaven or obtaining earthly goals (178-180).

Another *rsi* tradition was that of asceticism (*tapas*.) The word *tapas* is derived from the Sanskrit *tap*, basically meaning heat, and *tapas* has come to mean "the basic idea of inwardly heating oneself, through the performance of various religious and ascetic practices" (Mitchiner 187). In the *Atharvaveda* it is said that through the practise of severe austerities, one could acquire supernatural abilities (Pandey 187). These powers (*siddhis*) are said to have been wide ranging. Through severe practices of *tapas*, one could acquire the ability to fly, to fulfill one's desires, and to escape old age and even death (Mitchiner 206). *Siddhis* were not the only goal of *tapas*, however. In the Vedas, immediate goals were often sought, such as wealth or victory over

enemies, however the goals of *tapas* could also be more abstract, for example the “destruction of past sins and deeds (*karma*) (Mitchiner 201). Pandey (187-188) outlines several ascetic practices that *rsis* are said to have engaged in including: sitting “motionless like wood” (187) for extended periods, laying on various beds designed to cause pain and following strict diets. *Rsis* reportedly chose isolated locations (often called hermitages) to practice *tapas* in order to be “free from the disturbances and distractions of the world around” (Mitchiner 190). Hermitages were often located in forested or mountainous areas, especially in the Himalayas around the sources of the river Ganga, or in the pine forests of the southern slopes of the Himalayas, which remain a popular location for modern ascetics (190). Some *rsis* maintained hermitages and dwelled there for extensive periods, and became known as *asramavasis* or hermitage dwellers (Pandey, 5).

Another common method of practicing *tapas* is by abstaining from sexual activity, or more specifically by avoiding the spilling of semen. *Rsis* practicing total celibacy were referred to as *urdhvaretas* (having the seed drawn upward) and are held in high regard (Mitchiner 233). There are several tales in which the gods (or Indra, specifically,) seeing the power that the *rsis* acquired through *tapas* as a threat to their (or his) status or well being, sent beautiful water nymphs (*asparas*) to seduce them. Some tales tell of *rsis* succumbing to the temptation of the *asparas*, while others are said to have prevailed and subsequently used their supernatural abilities to curse the *asparas* (234-235). Interestingly, by some accounts all *rsis* are said to have married, which is seemingly at odds with their status as celibate ascetics. It has been said that only after Siva, the ideal ascetic, made clear his intention to marry Parvati, that the foremost Seven *Rsis* became unashamed of marriage (235-236). Marriage, or at least the performance of sexual

intercourse, however, is essential to many accounts, which claim the *rsis* as the progenitors of all creation (Pandey 241, Mitchiner 248).

Having described the *rsis* without extensive breadth or detail, it is already clear that they occupy a large and enigmatic place in Indian scriptural history. They are legendary for their roles as seers and revealers, teachers, devout ascetics, celestial bodies, celibate *urdhvaretas* and (perhaps most interestingly) progenitors of all existence. They are difficult to define, largely because of their dynamic roles in Indian religion. However, it is their dynamic nature that has made them so integral to the scriptures in which they play such a broad role.

Bibliography

Mitchiner, John E. (1982) *Traditions of the Seven Rsis*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Pandey, Chandra Bhanu (1987) *Risis in Ancient India*. Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan.

Related Readings

The following is a brief list of readings pertaining, at least in some aspects, to the material discussed in the work above. For more comprehensive research, one might be advised to look into various scriptural texts through which *rsi* tradition has been maintained. It is scriptural texts such as the Vedas, the Puranas, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* that provide the greatest wealth of knowledge on the legends and traditions associated with *rsis*.

Brent, Peter (1972) *Godmen of India*. New York: Quadrangle Books.

Doniger, Wendy (1993) *Purana perennis*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.

MacDonell, Arthur Anthony (2004) *History of Vedic Mythology*. New Delhi: Sanjay Prakashan.

Oldenberg, Hermann (1988) *The Religion of the Veda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Sullivan, Bruce M. (1999) *Seer of the Fifth Veda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Related Topics

Presented here is a brief list of topics that one who is interested in *rsi* tradition might also enjoy researching:

Topics within the study of *rsis*:

- The Seven *Rsis*
- Brahmana lineages (*gotras*) claiming descent from *rsis*
- Legendary *Rsi* authorship of scriptural texts

Topics related to the study of *rsis*:

- Traditions and culture of *gurus*
- Vedic sacrificial rituals and practices
- Indian ascetic traditions
- Puranic mythology

Related Websites

The websites provided in the following list pertain not to *rsis* specifically, but rather provide valuable resources on Hindu tradition in general. While not necessarily academically defensible, these pages provide a wealth of information for casual study and reference:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/index.shtml>

<http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religionet/er/hinduism>

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/index.shtml>

<http://www.uni-giessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism.htm>

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