

ASURAS

Early civilizations from around the world demonstrate that since antiquity there has been a fascination with the relationship between good and evil. This dual nature is apparent in the early Vedic literature contained within the Hindu tradition. The Vedic texts are believed to have been in composition around 5000 BCE; however, some scholars speculate that the texts had been written even earlier (Brown 1965: 23). One of the more prominent sections of the Vedic texts is the Rg Veda; a compilation of praises made to various deities who are to this day, worshipped by the Hindu people. There are many deities that are venerated by those who follow the Hindu tradition; some more eminent than others. The Hindu deities are divided into two opposing branches in the Rg Veda; the Asuras and Devas.

The Asuras are defined as being powerful titans or demons and are considered to be the gods of the primeval world and the predecessors of the Devas (Kuiper 112). In general, the Asuras are associated with the underworld and represent the malevolent nature of the Hindu tradition (Bodewitz 213). In most western religions the idea of the demon is in direct relation to all that is evil in the world, and much folklore is written about them. In Hinduism, despite the Asuras being composed of demons; they also possess the potential to create the truly wondrous, including life itself (Srinivasan 546). This ambivalent character of the Asuras is, on a small scale, a manifestation of the Hindu tradition as a whole.

An influential representative of the Asuras is the mighty demon Vrtra. In the Rg Veda, Vrtra is portrayed as being a three headed serpent, and thus all dragons or worms slain by heroes of Aryan mythology are seen as the embodiments of Vrtra (Wake 375). Vrtra is perceived to dwell above earth in the clouds, and when there is a draught, it is said that the Asuras are in rebellion against the Devas (Wake 375).

In contrast to the Asuras are the Devas. The term Deva stems from the old Indo-European word for Celestial gods (Kuiper 112). Included in the Devas are some of the deities such as Varuna and Indra (Embree 12). Many scholars insist that the Devas are the 'sons' of the primordial Asuras, and that there was a split that caused the formation of the two opposing forces. The Devas can be considered the more 'honourable' gods in comparison the Asuras who are thought to dwell in the underworld. Although there is a division amongst the Hindu deities, the two sectors overlap considerably. In the tale of the Battle between Indra and Vrtra, the two represent the Devas and the Asuras respectively. However there are many other characters that end up swapping sides mid battle such as Agni, Varuna, and Soma who desert the Asuras in favour of the Devas (Brown 101).

One of the more revered Devas is Indra. The Rg Veda contains approximately 1000 hymns dedicated to him. Indra is the god of storms and lightening and is also considered to be the king of the gods (see Rodrigues 487). When the Hindu people are facing a battle it is often Indra whom they revere. Indra is closely related to the intoxicating drink known as Soma; portrayed as 'drunk'. Indra is the key representative of the Devas, for it is him who destroys Vrtra and frees the water that was trapped in the clouds.

The Battles that ensue between good and evil are apparent in many if not all of the worldly religions. It is this battle that keeps the forces aligned and produces a harmonic peace that we humans try to maintain. Across the earth there is many versions of the battle that is extremely similar to the one fought between Indra and Vrtra in Hinduism. For instance, the legend of Indra and Vrtra is reproduced in Latin mythology as that of Hercules and Cacus (Wake 376).

Bibliography

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