

The God Indra

In Hindu mythology, the god Indra “is viewed as the king of all the gods to whom most of the Vedic hymns are dedicated” (Jansen 66), and is regarded as the god of the Aryan people. Indra’s name is unlike most of the other Vedic gods, and does not have any particular connection with a natural phenomenon. For this reason, it is possible that Indra could have been an actual historic figure, a leader of the Aryan people who after the defeat of the indigenous people of India was deified (Embree 17).

The god Indra has come to take on many meanings in Indian culture. Indra is not only viewed as the king of the Vedic gods, but is widely recognized by most Sanskrit specialists and comparative mythologists as a god of the sky, the god of storms and lightning. Indra is viewed as the “personification of the thunderstorm” (Embree 17), with his weapon being a bolt of lightning. He is regarded secondly as the god of battles (the warrior-god), the protector of human beings, whose power and rule are directly connected to the life of mankind (Perry 125). Furthermore, he has come to represent the god cried out to for protection by men rushing into deadly combat (Embree 17).

In the *Rg Veda*, the most important deeds of Indra are celebrated. Among these deeds the most prominent is Indra’s fight against the evil spirits of the air, the demoniac rain stealers who are thought to have stopped the rain from reaching the earth. In the Vedas, Indra is viewed as the unconquerable hero and warrior, who is the defender of Aryan worshippers against their non-Aryan enemies. In India thunderstorms holds high significance, especially in Northern India among the gigantic mountains where rain is eagerly prayed for because of its beneficial effects. Rain/water in the Vedic thought was believed to be the highest heaven, thus signifying the importance of Indra among the Aryan people (Perry 133 – 134).

In the Vedas, Indra is closely associated to *soma*, an intoxicating plant that causes hallucinations. *Soma* was the primary ingredient used in Vedic rituals, and offerings of *soma* are often associated with Indra's character, which is often depicted as a drunken brawler. Various myths and legends have developed about Indra and his complex character. One of the most important is the story of him slaying Vrtra, a demon, the great enemy, who is often thought of as a dragon (Embree 17 -18, 21). Vrtra is viewed as the arch-demon among the rain-stealers (Perry 134). It is said when the earth dried up, Indra was offered the intoxicating *soma* plant. Under the influence of the plant, Indra fought against the demon drought, Vrtra (Jansen 66). Vrtra shut off the waters and the sun, imprisoning them in caves in the cloud-mountains. However, "commissioned by the gods to set the waters free" Indra appears on the scene (Perry 134). After a fierce battle, Indra was able to expel Vrtra with his weapons of thunder (*vajra*) and lightning. Thus releasing the life-giving forces, and saving the earth and all its inhabitants. From this myth it can also be gathered that Indra has come to represent the force against spirits of darkness. When Indra conquered the rain-hiding demons he also expelled the spirits who concealed the light. The black storm clouds that had once concealed the light of heaven were driven away by Indra, thus the heavenly radiance once again shone on earth (Perry 139). Many interpretations of this myth have arisen. It is suggested that the battle between Indra and Vrtra represents the renewal of the year, the ending of winter or the beginning of the monsoons. Other possibilities suggest it represents the conflict that arose between the Aryans and the Indus Valley civilization. However, in another sense it can stand for the chaos brought by Vrtra, "upon which Indra imposes form and order" (Embree 18).

Various deities appear in the *Rg Veda*, however, among these deities Indra and Agni (God of Fire) have the most hymns dedicated to them, each receiving around 200. This suggests

their importance and status among the Aryans (Rodrigues 26). While Indra is above all viewed as the god of victory in battle, he also plays a role for women. At a first glance this might seem irrelevant since women do not take part in battle, however, there are some isolated verses in the *Rg Veda* that provide some evidence that Indra played a role in women's lives. In epic literature, Indra is not only a god of battles but can also be viewed as a god of fertility, who can bestow children on women (Hopkins 242- 243). Within the wedding hymn, expectations and hopes of what Indra was suppose to do for newly married women appear. Verse 10.85.45 in the wedding hymns says, "You, O generous Indra, make this one rich in sons and fortune! Bestow ten sons upon her, make her husband the eleventh!" (Sohnen 68). As a God Indra, has the capacity to help a woman become pregnant and is an example of one of the "gods who can assure the birth of a male child" (Hopkins 244). Since women's positions within the family deal largely with the number of sons she bears it can be concluded that women may have addressed the wish to bear a son to Indra. The Apala-hymn (RV 8.91.4) suggests another connection between Indra and women. The verse states "(I ask) whether he will be able (to do it), whether he will (really) do it, whether he will make us more happy and prosperous; whether we who are disliked by our husbands will, through Indra, come together with them" (Sohnen 68). This particular verse demonstrates women's wishes directed to Indra to help them become desirable and attractive to their husbands, to help create bliss between them and their husbands, along with helping them to bear sons by their husband (Sohnen 70).

Iconographically, Indra has been represented in various ways. "He is not a giant of the mountains, as represented by some scholars, but rather a cosmic giant" (Hopkins 256). His greatness surpasses that of Varuna (Sky God) and encompasses the earth, the sky and beyond. He is the conception of an all-god, whose rule and will the other gods follow (Hopkins 256).

Indra is sometimes viewed riding the “royal elephant, which is often depicted with three trunks and/or four tusks” (Jansen 66). Indra’s attributes include four arms, and he is often presented alongside a bolt of lightning, however, he can also be depicted with a lance, sword, bow and arrow, spear, and a net and conch shell. However, this is not always how Indra is depicted; he can also be represented with two arms, with eyes covering his entire body (Jansen 66).

Over time Indra’s position weakened, and he became the “king of only the lesser gods and the lord of heaven (*svarga*) where the gods dwell” (Jansen 66). This can often be associated with the *sramana* movement, which was the beginning of meditative practices in India “which began to compete with sacrificial religion” (Rodrigues 190). With the rise of Epics and Puranas, a new assortment of deities began to arise, which displaced the gods of the Vedic Samhitas and reduced their significance. However, it did not erase the worship of Vedic deities from Hindu society altogether (Rodrigues 190).

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