



Crossing the Lines of Caste: Visvamitra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology

Adheesh A. Sathaye

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What does it mean to be a Brahmin, and what could it mean to become one? Over the years, intellectuals and dogmatists have offered plenty of answers to the first question, but the latter presents a cultural puzzle, since normative Brahminical ideology deems it impossible for an ordinary individual to change caste without first undergoing death and rebirth.

There is, however, one notable figure in the Hindu mythological tradition who is said to have transformed himself from a king into a Brahmin by amassing great ascetic power, or *tapas*: the ornery sage Visvamitra. Through texts composed in Sanskrit and vernacular languages, oral performances, and visual media, *Crossing the Lines of Caste* examines the rich mosaic of legends about Visvamitra found across the Hindu mythological tradition. It offers a comprehensive historical analysis of how the "storyworlds" conjured up through these various tellings have served to adapt, upgrade, and reinforce the social identity of real-world Brahmin communities, from the ancient Vedic past up to the hypermodern present.

Using a performance-centered approach to situate the production of the Visvamitra legends within specific historical contexts, *Crossing the Lines of Caste* reveals how and why mythological culture has played an active, dialogical role in the construction of Brahmin social power over the last three thousand years.

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