

Indra - King of the Gods

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The tales of Indian mythology are very interesting and flavorful, involving several kathas (stories) and upakathas (byplays or subplots) of various Gods and Goddesses. What makes them even more entertaining is that these celestial beings are shown to be behaving and reacting in a very human manner. This helps us identify with them; eventually making us realize, by the clever use of symbolism, that good and bad both reside within us and that it is entirely up to us to fight the evil and let the good emerge from within us.

In this post, we bring you the life and times of a hero; a God who once tirelessly fought for the good of mankind; who went on to reach the helm of Godhead, but later, came to be considered as an antihero of sorts. Here is the story of the mighty Lord Indra, the King of the Devas.

The Tale of Indra

Lord Indra is an ancient Vedic deity. He is the King of Swarga (Heaven) and the Ruler of the Devas (Gods) in Hinduism. In Buddhism, he features as a guardian deity and in Jainism, as the king of the first heaven called Saudharmakalpa. He is a powerful character in Indian mythology and his story is often compared to those of Indo-European deities such as Zeus, Perun, Thor and Jupiter.

Indra features prominently throughout the Rigveda, the first of the Four Vedas. The God of Thunder and Lightning, he is known to have the power to invoke storms, rain and strong river currents. This commanding persona is believed to have slain the evil demon, Vritra, who aimed to destroy the peace and happiness among human beings on Earth. By killing the Asura, Indra established himself as a friend of mankind as a whole; also restoring peace, joy and sunshine on this planet.

Indra features in other Asian countries as well, including Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, China, Japan and so on.

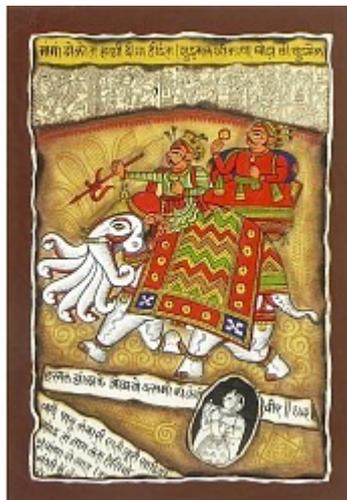
Indra in the Post-Vedic Era

In the post-Vedic era, however, Indra lost much of his prominence. Though still hailed as a mighty ruler, he started to be portrayed as an egoistic, drunken, hedonistic and adulterous being, who often comes into the limelight for all the wrong reasons.

According to Indian mythology, Indra behaved in this manner because he was always afraid and insecure that a wise, saintly and knowledgeable person would one day become more powerful than him and usurp his throne. So he disturbed monks and pious people and tried his best to pull the good people down.

Iconography

Indra is often portrayed as wielding his Vajra, or a thunderbolt. He rides a white elephant named Airavata. In Buddhism, the elephant is sometimes shown with three heads, while in Jainism; it could have up to five heads. Sometimes, a single elephant is shown with four tusks.



Indra on Seven Trunk Airavat

Indra's celestial abode is on a mountain near Sumeru (Mount Meru). He is portrayed to be living there, along with his divine wife, Indrani. Indra is often mentioned as the brother of Agni (the Sun God); another major Vedic deity.

Indra in Buddhism and Jainism

In Buddhism, Indra is referred to by several names, including and most importantly, Shakra. Herein, he is depicted very differently. He is more God-like, completely non-violent and is shown paying obeisance to Buddha. In fact, Indra and Surya (the Sun God) are shown to be guarding the entrance of a 1st Century Buddhist cave at Bhaja Caves, Maharashtra.

In this philosophy too, Indra rules over the Devas. Much like in Hinduism, he is a subject of ridicule here as well. He is shown as a mere figurehead here - a God that is trapped within the

Samsara (worldly) realm and suffers many births and rebirths to clear his past karmas.

In Jainism too, he is shown as constantly put through the Samsara realm of birth and death. He is often shown with his wife Indrani to celebrate auspicious incidents in his life. He is considered as a Jain Tirthankara, who, along with his wife, the Queen of Gods, ultimately fulfils his spiritual journey as a Jina.

Etymology

The meaning of the name "Indra" and its root are unclear. The following are some of the debated meanings of the name.

- **Ind-u** or 'rain drop': The One who conquered rain and brought it to earthlings.
- **Ind**: He who wields great power.
- **Idh or Ina**: The strong and powerful.
- **Indha**: The One who ignites the prana (vital forces) within. He who brings light and power
- **Idam-dra**: The One who first perceived the Brahman (the Supreme Being) within himself.
- Interestingly, the above meanings are similar-sounding to Indo-European terms, such as amer (Greek), nert (Old Irish), Ossetic nart and Sabine nero; all of which mostly mean "manly" or "heroic".

Other Indian names for Indra include Devendra, Vrsan, Vrtrahan, Meghavahana, Surendra, Swargapati, Vajrapani and Vaasava.

Origins

Though a very ancient deity, Indra's exact origins are not clear. Interestingly, he has often been associated with Thor of Nordic and Germanic mythologies. Both carry weapons and have control over lightning and thunder; both their weapons return to their respective owners after their use; both are associated with bulls at an earlier time in their lives; and both are heroes and protectors of mankind.

Historical facts indicate that Indira held a prominent place in northeastern Asia minor. Inscriptions on the Boghaz-koi clay tablets in Turkey, dated about 1400 BC, make mention of the deity. Evidence of Indra's existence is also found in Avestan pantheon. But here, he is considered to be a demon. These facts suggest that he was worshipped even back then.

According to the Rigveda (around 1700-1100 BC), Indra was considered as the highest God and the Supreme Being. He is referred to as Vrtrahan, or literally, "the slayer of the demon Vritra".

Indra and Vritra

The Rigveda mentions the serpent dragon Vritra, the main adversary of Indra. He, who is also known as Ahi, blocked the course of the rivers, to stop the water supply on Earth. Vritra held the water bodies captive, until the day he was killed by Indra. The latter destroyed all his 99 forts and then, liberated the imprisoned rivers.

Indra consumed a large volume of Soma (celestial drink), before going to face Vritra. The latter was extremely powerful and so, Indra needed to empower himself before the battle began. Tvashtri (the first-born creator of the universe, according to the Vedas) crafted a Vajrayudha (thunderbolt) and gave it to Indra.

Indra fought bravely and managed to injure the serpent demon several times. He too was bruised in the battle and yet, continued to fight valiantly. When he sensed the latter weakening a little, he picked him up and threw him toward Vritra's fortresses. The latter's fall crushed and destroyed the already shattered fortresses, pinning him under the debris; eventually killing him.

Puranic and Other Versions

Later legends give varied accounts of Indra and Vritra. According to King Yudhishtira's narration in the Mahabharata, Vritra won the battle and swallowed Indra. The Devas, however, forced him to vomit him out. The battle then continued, till Indra fled the battlefield. Lord Vishnu then asked Indra to promise that he would not attack the demon with anything made of metal, wood or stone. He further told him that he could use neither a dry nor a wet weapon; nor kill him during day or night. Vritra, the head of the Asuras, was a staunch devotee of Vishnu. However, his shortcoming was that he was too egoistic and not at all pious-minded. This is what eventually led to his downfall. After much deliberation and planning, Indra used the foam from the waves of the ocean and killed him at twilight.



Lord Vishnu

According to yet other legends, Vishnu advised Indra that he could kill Vritra only by a weapon made from the bones of a sage. This was a difficult goal to achieve, as not many rishis were willing to donate their bones. Vishnu then directed him to approach Rishi Dadhichi, who was happy to help for a good cause. The Devas collected all his bones and Indra created his Vajrayudha from them. The battle between the two lasted 360 days, after which Vritra was finally slain by Indra.

According to both the Vedic and the Puranic versions of the legend, the sin of Brahmanahatya (killing a Brahmin) chased Indra for years and forced him to go into hiding. Nahusha was asked to hold the position of the King of the Devas till he returned from his self-imposed exile.

Even though Indra is the King of the Devas, there is no clear evidence of the Gods being subordinate to him. All the Devas are shown as different aspects of the Brahman, with no superiority over or subordination to any other God.

Interestingly, the Vedas do not talk of Indra as a visible entity. He is considered to be the one that causes lightning, rains, storms and river currents. His myths range vastly from managing the rains, to helping the rivers flow, to warming the land by controlling the winter forces and so on.

Indra in the Post-Vedic Era

As mentioned earlier, Indra started losing his significance in the post-Vedic era. During this time, he evolved as minor Hindu deity. While he was depicted as the father of Vali in the Ramayana and of Arjuna in the Mahabharata, he came to be considered as a general annoyance and nuisance during this point in time. The main reason for this fall from grace could be attributed to the several negative stories and legends associated with him.

Let us now look at some of those stories in detail.

Indra Seduces Ahalya

Indra had a weakness for women. Though he had a lovely and devoted wife and the choicest of apsaras in his court, he still had a penchant for good-looking women and would not rest until he could lay his hands on the ones he fancied. One such woman was the devout and pious Ahalya, who is extolled as the first among the Sresthanaaris (five most chaste women).



Urvashi - Apsara in Indra's Court

Ahalya was the wife of Gautama Maharishi. She was created by Lord Brahma and was stunningly beautiful. Though much younger than sage Gautama, Brahma decided that he would be the best match for her. After marrying Gautama, Ahalya settled down in his ashrama (hermitage) in Mithila-upavana, a forest near Mithila. There, the couple practiced asceticism for many years.

The Bala Kanda of the Epic Ramayana narrate Ahalya's story in detail. Indra happened to see Ahalya and was completely taken in with her beauty. He patiently watched the couple for a few days, to know their daily routine. Then, one day, when Gautama left the house to have a dip in the river, Indra disguised himself as the sage and entered the hermitage. Overcome with lust, he proceeded to seduce her and have sexual intercourse with her.

According to one version, Ahalya saw through Indra's disguise. But never having had a sexual encounter with her husband, she gave in to the imposter, supposedly "out of curiosity". She is then believed to have requested Indra to protect her from Gautama's wrath. Later texts, including the Uttara Kanda of the Ramayana, absolve her of all guilt, portraying her as the victim of his clever seduction.

When Gautama returned from his bath and realized what had happened during his absence, he cursed Ahalya that she would permanently turn into stone. He also spotted Indra (who had taken the form of a cat) and cursed him that he would lose his testicles. According to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Gautama cursed Indra to bear a thousand vulvae, which would turn into eyes, when he worshipped the Sun God.

Realizing that she had been tricked by Indra, Ahalya burst into tears, fell at her husband's feet and told him how Indra had deceived her. Gautama relented, but could not take back his curse. He told her that she would be able to come back to her human form only on the day when a Mahatma (godly soul) would place his feet on her.

Many years later, Lord Rama, who was traveling into the forest, came to know of Ahalya's story. At that time, the young Rama was accompanied by his teacher, Vishwamitra and brother, Lakshmana. Feeling bad for this woman, he proceeded toward the ashrama and, going to the stone, placed his foot on it. The stone instantly fell away, bringing Ahalya back to life. Thus, Ahalya was liberated by Lord Shri Rama himself.



Rama Releases Ahalya
From Her Curse

Krishna Subdues Indra

The Bhagavata and the Puranas narrate a fascinating story about Lord Krishna subduing the egoistic Indra and teaching him a lesson. During Krishna's childhood, he was staying in beautiful Vrindavana, located in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh. This region is considered sacred even today and hundreds of thousands of devotees flock here each year to take their Lord's blessings.

As the story goes, the people of Braj were making great preparations for their upcoming annual offering to Indra. Little Krishna, watching all the hectic activity going on around him, questioned his father Nanda about the same. When he learnt what was going on, he firmly stated that all this pujas and rituals were unnecessary and that all the farmers should go back and carry on with their regular work in the fields. He kept reiterating that duty was above all else and that work was worship. Finally, he managed to convince the innocent farmers to abandon their puja session. Krishna was their favorite and they always agreed to what he had to say. So, leaving everything, they returned to their fields and cattle.

This angered the arrogant Indra. He immediately unleashed terrible rains, storms and floods on the village. Scared and helpless, the villagers ran to Krishna for help. Deciding to teach Indra a lesson, Krishna approached Govardhan, a hill situated near the town. He asked the villagers to follow him along with their families, cattle and other livestock.

Krishna then went near the foot of the hill and, with the little finger of his left hand, effortlessly lifted the entire hill. He then asked everyone to take shelter under the hill. The amazed villagers quickly huddled under the hill.



Krishna Lifts Govardhana Mountain to Save Vrindavan
from Torrential Rain

Seeing Krishna lift the mountain, Indra realized that he was no ordinary boy and that he was an avatara or Shri Maha Vishnu himself. Indra finally accepted defeat and called the clouds and rain back to him. A bright, cheerful sun shone down upon Vrindavana and all was well again. A smiling Krishna assured the villagers that they were now safe and asked them to head back to their respective houses. He then gently laid down Govardhana in its original location and position.

A humbled Indra approached Krishna and begged for forgiveness. The boy, actually being the Supreme Godhead, smiled benevolently at him and blessed him; also enlightening him on the tenets of Dharma (righteousness) and adherence to duty.

Govardhana, or Giriraj, as it is also called, is the sacred center of Braj and is considered as a natural form of Krishna. Even today, the Govardhana Puja is performed the day after Diwali, to commemorate Krishna's victory over Indra.

Indra Attacks Hanuman

Hanuman is a veritable superhero in Indian mythology. An ardent devotee of Lord Rama, he is one of the most pivotal figures in the Ramayana. This mighty and Chiranjeevi (immortal) son of Anjana and Kesari, who is also known as Vayuputra (Son of Vayu, the Wind-God) is also considered by some texts as a manifestation of Lord Shiva himself. There is an interesting story about the first ever meeting between Indra and Hanuman. The tale goes thus:

As a child, Hanuman was very mischievous and refused to sit quietly even for a minute. He was

ever curious and was always getting into some trouble for it. One day, he developed a strong fascination for the Sun. Believing it to be a ripe mango, he was tempted and wanted to eat it. Determined to get hold of the sun, Hanuman enlarged himself and, reaching upward, proceeded to its orbit. Once he got hold of the Sun, Hanuman tried to put him in his mouth.



Young Hanuman

In the meantime, Rahu, one of the Navagrahas (Nine Planets), was searching for the Sun himself. An eclipse was scheduled to happen at that particular time and Hanuman's prank was preventing it from taking place. Rahu chased Hanuman and tried to attack him. But the latter, being faster and more powerful, thrashed the Graha. Rahu then approached Indra and told him how the naughty little monkey had taken away the Sun and stopped the eclipse from taking place.

Enraged, Indra hurled his Vajrayudha at the little mischief-monger. The powerful weapon struck Hanuman in his jaw and he fell back down to the Earth and became unconscious. The impact of the Ayudha left a permanent mark on the left side of his chin.

On learning that Hanuman had been attacked, Vayu Deva got upset and went into seclusion, withdrawing all the air unto himself. Without air, all the beings on Earth started to asphyxiate. Realizing the extent of mayhem this could cause, Indra withdrew the effect of his Vajra. The Devas then got together to revive Hanuman and blessed him with multiple boons, in order to appease Vayu Deva. Impressed by this strength, intelligence and power, Indra too bestowed his grace on the monkey child.

Indra is Fearful of Losing His Throne

As mentioned earlier, Indra always had the fear that he would one day end up losing his throne to someone more pious and powerful. So insecure was he that he was willing to go to any lengths to stop earthlings and other beings from taking his position. He often disturbed the penance of sages and tested people to the limit, just to see them fail in their lives' mission. Here is one example of how he tried to break a sage's penance and bring him down from his

spiritual heights:

There was once a king named Kaushika. He was strong and wise and a mighty ruler. Loved by his subjects and feared by his enemies, his true glory unfolded not in his victory, but in his utter defeat and humiliation.

He and his armies were once hosted by sage Vasistha. Vasistha owned a divine cow, named Kamadhenu. As the name suggested, the cow had the ability to grant anything that its owner wanted. Now, Kaushika wanted Kamadhenu for himself. He asked Vasistha to give it to him, but the sage refused to do so. He then tried to take it by force. When he tried to attack Vasistha, the latter turned his massive army to ashes; thereby defeating him entirely.

Kaushika realized that he was no match for Vasistha's spiritual power. He knew that, in order to attain that kind of power, he would have to undertake great penance to please and appease the Devas. He gave up all his royal comforts and journeyed deep into the forest. There, he began his intense tapas (penance), which lasted several years.

As time passed, Kaushika got more spiritually powerful and Indra got more and more uncomfortable. Indra feared that, if the king continued at this pace, he would soon become mighty enough to take charge of Indraloka. So he devised a plan to distract Kaushika from his penance.

Indra sent one of his most beautiful apsaras (celestial dancers), Menaka, to tempt Kaushika and distract him from his tapas. Menaka came down to earth and started to sing and dance in front of the king. Initially, he resisted and gave her a good fight. He refused to look at her and continued on with his penance. She failed several times, but never gave up trying. One fine day, he finally gave in to her charms and fell deeply in love with her. Kaushika and Menaka lived happily in the forest for some time. In due course of time, they had a daughter named Shakuntala. Eventually, Kaushika became aware of Indra's plot and how Menaka was sent down only to distract him. Without second thought, he completely rejected Menaka and returned to his tapas with more fervor than ever before.



Vishwamitra Rejects Menaka
and Their Daughter

Kaushika started regaining his Siddhis (spiritual powers). Indra, again fearful of losing his throne, sent down Rambha, the Queen of apsaras to tempt him once again. Not one to be fooled again, Kaushika angrily rejected her and asked her to go back from the place she had come. He then reflected upon the past and he learned a lesson from his temper - that he had not yet learnt to master his own mind. He then understood that he was his own real enemy and that he should first learn to control himself.

Kaushika undertook even more severe penance to attain that state of control. Indra tried once more to break his will. The king of the Devas disguised himself as a beggar and asked for a little bit of food that the king had prepared for himself. The latter was just about to break a long fast and Indra was trying to see if he would commit the sin of refusing him food. To his dismay, the king, without hesitation, gave away all the food to him.

Finally having conquered himself, Kaushika returned to his tapas and rose exponentially in spirituality. Several years later, Lord Brahma appeared before him and gave him the title of Rajarishi (Royal Sage). Kaushika continued his tapas, till he received the title Maharishi (Great Sage) and then, finally, the most coveted Brahmarishi. He was then renamed sage Vishwamitra (the friend of the whole world).

The Symbolic Meaning of Indra

Hinduism often uses symbolisms of various sorts to simplify high philosophy and reach it to the masses at large. The story of Indra also has a much deeper meaning and symbolism and we have a lot to learn from it.

- During the Vedic era, Indra was depicted as a God of War, wielding the vajra. This could be perceived as our own nature, which enables us to summon courage and strength when we most need it. Incidentally, the lightning bolt is symbolic of the spiritual

energy lying dormant within each one of us. When used properly, it can translate into immense spiritual power.

- He is shown as a powerful deity, vanquishing the terrible Vritra. In actuality, it represents the dark forces within ourselves, which we need to realize and triumph over. When we dare to do that, we improve the quality of our own lives.
- Indra is often portrayed as being fearful, jealous, egoistic and insecure. In reality, his story is symbolic of our basic human nature and how we can become god-like if we try to gain control over our minds.
- Indra's vahana (vehicle) is Airavata, the White Elephant. While white stands for purity and piety, the elephant represents wisdom, courage and patience. These are the qualities one needs to fight one's own dark forces within.
- All the battles and negativity that Indra fights and triumphs over is eventually turns out for the good of mankind - it either helps in restoring order or recovers something sacred, which was lost to mankind during a bygone era. Likewise, all the tests that Indra puts people through, ultimately works out for their own spiritual good. It finally releases them from the vicious cycle of samsara and eliminates their bad karma.
- Indra mainly consumes the inebriating Soma only to gain more confidence in the battlefield. However, he also indulges in it for recreation. The latter is what actually gets him into trouble. This shows that, while it is alright to indulge in a bit of revelry once in a way, completely losing ourselves in that sort of lifestyle will only lead us to shame, defeat and downfall.

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