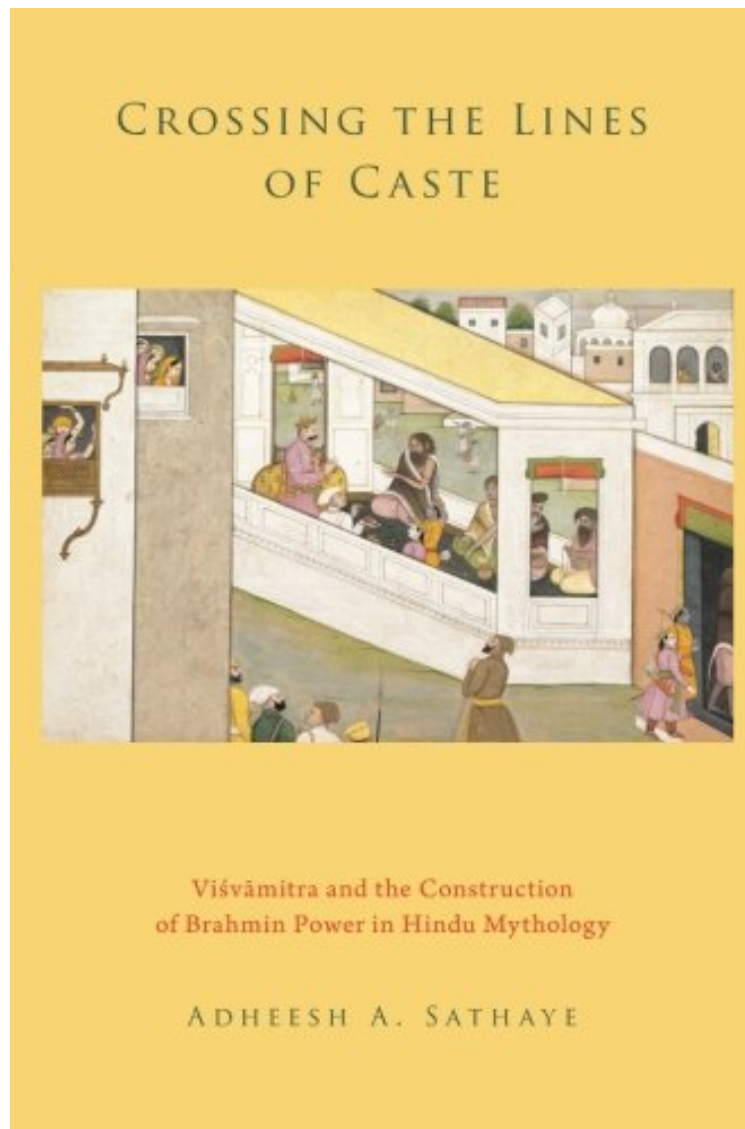


(Download pdf) Crossing the Lines of Caste: Visvamitra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology

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.

"[A] really superb book that is a model of what Indological scholarship can be. It makes a major contribution to the image of the brahmin from late Vedic literature up to the present day and also, whether intended or not, is exceptionally incisive on how myth can be reinterpreted and received by consecutive generations subsequent to its original composition and dissemination."--Journal of the American Oriental Society
"This book makes us appreciate how fortunate we are to have reached a point where a single young author can show command of texts from multiple periods, genres, and South Asian languages to present an inside story that never stops retelling itself from the Rig Veda into modern times. For a class, or for the general reader, I can think of no better introduction to the peccadillos of Hinduism." --Alf Hiltebeitel, Professor of Religion, George Washington University
About the Author
Adheesh A. Sathaye (PhD, UC Berkeley, 2005) is an Associate Professor of Sanskrit Literature and South Asian Folklore at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. He writes on Hindu mythology, Sanskrit drama, story literature, and the broader connections between performance, textual production, and traditional culture in South Asia.