VASIŚṬHA: RELIGIOUS PERSONALITY
AND VEDIC CULTURE

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The Vasiśṭha material in the Rgveda is among the most intriguing and complex of any found in the Family Books. Traditional analyses of these hymns have focused on several issues: the early configuration of Vasiśṭha’s rivalry with the priest Viśvāmitra, the historical details of the dāsarājñā battle and Vasiśṭha’s role in Sudās’ victory, and the mythological ramifications of the story of his divine birth. These investigations have attempted, primarily, to do two things: first, to piece together and clarify the descriptive details of the traditional accounts and, second, to relate these accounts to the increasingly complex mythico-historical system as it evolved during the Vedic and Hindu periods. There have been, however, only a few attempts to examine the development of Vasiśṭha, himself a religious personality, or to evaluate his religious contributions to Vedic culture.

Of the more recent discussions of Vasiśṭha and Aryan culture, that of K. R. Potdar describes the tradition of the Vasiśṭha family as one which values, most often, what is conservative and theologically normative in nature. Potdar points out, for instance, that in shaping early Indian culture the Vasiśṭha family encouraged “purity of behavior and means...[over against] end[s],” a “partiality for truthfulness,” and a consequent firm belief “that [because] gods were on the side of truth” “the devotional approach” to the gods was optimal. Consonant with this emphasis on upright (and perhaps conformist) behavior, Potdar interprets the Vasiśṭhas as a family which values “the fairness of... [the] family name remaining untarnished,” “the continuity of the family line and family traditions” and a general sense of the optimism and happiness of family life which could in turn give rise, perhaps out of a sense of noblesse oblige, to “the idea of sharing [one’s own] prosperity with a liberal mind and hand with other members of the society.”

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Potdar’s vision of the Vasiṣṭhas as shaping an ethical and social elitism (a vision of considerable merit when taken in the context of the familial contention and scurry for social status rife in ancient India) is complemented by Dandekar’s work: first, Vasiṣṭha’s delineation of the classical doctrine of bhakti in the seventh mandala hymns to Varuṇa attributed to him and, second, his pivotal efforts in the shaping of a compromise between an early Varuṇa-cult and a newer Indra-cult. Dandekar points out that the bhakti hymns of the Vasiṣṭha cycle are important for two reasons: first, they undermine “the long out-dated theory regarding the doctrine of bhakti having been originally borrowed from some non-Indian [sic] sources” and, second, they show “most of the essential characteristics of the classical doctrine of bhakti.” According to Dandekar it was out of this experience of bhakti that Vasiṣṭha became essential in the conciliation of the Indra- and Varuṇa-cults and especially in “averting a schism in the Vedic community” by demonstrating “that Varuṇa and Indra were not antagonistic to each other but...essentially complementary. ‘Indra conquers and Varuṇa rules.’”

These two types of analyses, of the contribution of the Vasiṣṭha family (1961) and of the original ancestor (1969), are important for their clarification of the history of the early religion. They do not, however, go far enough and could be easily extended by the methodological concerns of psychohistory, whose insights have considerable bearing on our assessment of the person Vasiṣṭha and the function of his story as a central religious narrative within the tradition. Although a traditional (Eriksonian) psychohistory of Vasiṣṭha is impossible because of the paucity of source material, and may be somewhat inappropriate given the traditional Hindu concerns for anonymity and ahistoricity, insights from psychohistorical literature may be helpful in the on-going development of Vasiṣṭha studies.

Personality and Culture

The field now called psychohistory is relatively new as a self-conscious methodology and as it delineates an interdisciplinary territory that is both consonant with and yet sufficiently independent of other related fields to warrant its own journals and professional