

Ancient Rishis of India - Part 1

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India is a highly spiritual land, which houses several Rishis, mendicants and Godmen. Hindu mythology prominently features Rishis, their wives and their families in several stories. In fact, many of these Rishis actually played the role of catalysts, helping Devas, Asuras, divine beings and earthlings release their karma, thus bringing good, joy and peace back into their lives.

Even today, we can find rishis meditating in the secret crevices of the Himalayas and some hidden caves of the Gangotri and Yamunotri. These sages have chosen to move away from the maddening crowd of civilization and moved to those remote areas in order to attain ultimate peace, mukti and, finally, moksha or liberation, during this lifetime.

In this month's article, we bring you a feature on some of the most ancient Rishis of India. While most of them are males, there are a few female yoginis and sages who are equally, if not more powerful. There are several hundreds of rishis that we can talk about. In this two-part series, we bring you the stories of some of the most important and most ancient sages of this land.

Agastya

Agastya was a much-revered Vedic sage, who was famous for his reclusive nature. He was a great scholar and was knowledgeable in multiple languages. He and his wife, Lopamudra, are the celebrated authors of hymns in the Rigveda and other Vedic literature. He is also venerated in Puranic literature of Shaktism and Vaishnavism.

Agastya prominently features in several ancient Hindu scriptures and tales, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. He is one of the Saptarishis, that is, the seven most revered sages in the Shaivite tradition. He invented the early grammar of the Tamil language, Agattiyam and also played a vital role in the development of Tamraparniyam medicine and spirituality in Sri Lanka and South India.

Images of Rishi Agastya can be found even today in ancient sculptures and reliefs of Hindu temples throughout India and South East Asia. He is attributed to be the author of several Sanskrit texts such as the Agastya Gita, Agastya Samhita and the Dvaidha-Nirnaya Tantra. Incidentally, he is the principal figure and Guru in the ancient Javanese text, Agastyaparva. He is additionally referred to as Mana, Kalasaja, Kumbhaja, Kumbhayoni and Maitravaruni.

Birth and Life

The origins of Rishi Agastya are mythical. He has no human parent and his birth is the result of a yagna, which was performed by Varuna, the Rain God, and Mitra. The Apsara Urvashi

appeared in the same yagna. When she emanated from the yagnakunda, her extreme beauty and sexuality excited them and made them ejaculate. Their semen fell into the mud pitcher, which became the womb in which the fetus of Agastya developed and grew. He was finally born from this jar, along with his twin sage Vasishtha. This type of birth gave him the name, "Kumbhayoni".



Urvashi

Reprint of Ravi Varma Painting

Agastya led a deeply ascetic life and educated himself. Though not born of Brahmin parents, he was always considered a Brahmin, due to his vast knowledge. Some experts believe that Agastya may actually have been a migrant Aryan, whose ideas influenced the South. Others think he was a native non-Aryan Dravidian, who influenced the North.

Marriage

According to some legends, Agastya proposed to Lopamudra, a princess of Vidarbha. Her parents were unwilling to bless the engagement, as they were concerned about her future life with a mendicant. However, she accepted him as her husband, saying that his ascetic life was her actual wealth.

Some other versions state that Lopamudra married him on the condition that he would provide her with basic comforts. This forced him to return to society and earn some wealth.

They had a son named Drdhasyu, also called Idhmavaha. The Mahabharata talks about him as the boy who learnt the Vedas by listening to his parents while he was still in his mother's womb. He came into the world reciting these hymns.

Agastya Ashrama

Agastya had a hermitage, but different stories give different locations. Two legends state it was in Northwest Maharashtra, on the banks of River Godavari, in the small towns of Agastyapuri and Akole. Others mention locations such as Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh, Satpura Range in Madhya Pradesh, Agastyamuni village near Rudraprayag and various places in South India, such as Tirunelveli, Pothiyal Hills and Thanjavur.

In Literature

The Vedas

Agastya is mentioned in all the four Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads, Puranas and the epics. He is the author of the Rigveda and ran a Vedic Gurukul school as well. His hymns are known for their verbal play, similes, puns and the imagery they induce within their spiritual message.

His poetry is notable for two main themes; the conflict between the Gods and Maruts; and the discussions between him and his wife about the human struggle between monastic solitude versus the pursuit of samsara or material life.

Ramayana

In several chapters, the Ramayana describes him as residing on the banks of River Godavari. He and Lopamudra are also said to live in the Dandaka Forest, on the slopes of the Vindhya mountains. Rama praises the sage as the one who can achieve that which even Gods find impossible. He is also described as the one who uses his Dharma powers to kill the demons Vatapi and Ilwala.

The epic portrays him as short and of heavy build, having the weight of Kailasa and Mount Meru and the power of Shiva. He warned Rama and Sita about the evil Ravana and also gave the former a divine bow.

Mahabharata

This epic describes the sage as having great powers of ingestion and digestion. He stops the Vindhya mountains from growing and lowers them to kill the demons mentioned above. The Vana Parva narrates the story of marriage between Lopamudra and Agastya, as also the war between Indra and Vritra. When the latter hid beneath the sea, Agastya drank up all the water in the ocean, thus revealing the Asura to the Gods.

Puranas

The Matsya Purana, the Padma Purana and several others list the sage as one of the seven Saptarishis. The Puranas talk in detail about his life, times and descendants. He is mentioned with great respect in all the major Hindu traditions of Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism.



Matsya Purana

Book

Tamil Texts

Rishi Agastya is considered as the father of the Tamil language and the compiler of the first Tamil grammar text, called Agattiyam. He is a hero in Tamil Nadu and features in numerous Tamil texts. While in North India, he is respected for spreading Vedic tradition; in South India, he is associated with promoting Tamil, and spreading irrigation and agriculture.

The Tirumantiram describes him as a sage who came from the North and settled in the Southern Pothigain mountains, as Shiva himself had asked him to do so. According to the Skanda Purana, the entire world congregated at the Himalayas to witness the wedding between Shiva and Parvati. This caused the earth to tip on one side. So, Agastya shifted to the South in order to balance the weight of the earth.

Siddhar

He is considered to be the first Siddhar; the one to accomplish and succeed. He is the first master, who perfected his knowledge of the natural and spiritual worlds.

He is also regarded as the founder and patron saint of southern kalaripayat (the martial art of Kerala), silambam (a weapon-based martial art) and varmam (an ancient science of healing various diseases).

Buddhist Texts

Agastya appears as early as in the 1st millennium CE in Buddhist texts. He is described as the sage who learnt Tamil and Sanskrit grammar and poetics from Avalokitan or Avalokiteshwara. He also features in the Jataka Tales, Jataka-Mala by Aryasura and appears as a carved relief in Borobudur, the earliest medieval era Mahayana Buddhist temple.

Javanese and South Asian Literature

The sage was particularly popular in Java, Indonesia, till Islam spread there. He is also found in Cambodia, Vietnam and other regions.

Agastya Samhita

Also called the Sankara Samhita, this is a section embedded in the Skanda Purana. It is a dialogue between Skanda and Agastya.

Temples

The Sri Agasthiyar Temple in Papanasam, Tirunelveli and the Sri Lobamudra Samedha Agasthiyar Temple in Madurai are the most popular Agastya Temples in Tamil Nadu. His shrine at the Pothigai Hill is mentioned in both Ilango Adigal's Silappatikaram and Chithalai Chatanar's Manimekhalai epics.

The sage features prominently in statues and reliefs in many early medieval temples of North India too. Some of them are the Dasavatara temple in Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, the Mallikarjuna Temple in Karnataka and the Parvati Temple in Sandur.

Arundhati

Arundhati is the wife of Sage Vasishtha, again one of the Saptarishis. Though a Rishi patni (wife of a Rishi), she is also given the status of a sage and a yogini of high caliber. In fact, many

consider her to be at par with the Saptarishis themselves. She is identified with the morning star and also with the star Alcor, which forms a double star with Mizar, which is commonly identified as Rishi Vasishtha.

Vedic and Puranic literature extol her as the epitome of purity, chastity, wifely devotion and conjugal bliss. Post-Puranic texts and poems in Sanskrit and Hindi describe her as "chaste and revered", inspiring, worthy of imitation and with a character that cannot be flawed. In Hinduism, one can find several ritual practices, especially during marriage ceremonies, which are associated with Arundhati.

Birth and Life

Arundhati's birth and life story are mentioned in several Hindu scriptures. The Shiva Purana and Bhagavata Purana mention about her birth. The instructions given by Brahma to her is mentioned in the Uttara Kanda of the Ramcharitmanas. The unending rivalry between the sages Vasishtha and Vishwamitra, which ultimately led to the untimely death of her hundred sons, is described in the Balakanda of Valmiki's Ramayana.

According to the Bhagavata Purana, Arundhati was the eighth among the nine daughters of Kardama and Devahuti. She is described as the great-grandmother of Vyasa. Besides, the Shiva Purana states that she was Sandhya, the manasa-putri (mind-born daughter) of Lord Brahma himself. On the orders of Vasishtha, Sandhya pleased Shiva by undertaking penance, in order to purify herself from passion. Shiva asked her to jump into Medhatithi's fire. In that birth, she was born as Medhatithi's daughter. She later married Vasishtha.



Brahma

Temple Mural Reprint

Some other Puranas describe her as the daughter of Kashyapa and sister of Narada and Parvata. Here, she was offered in marriage to Vasishtha by Narada Muni.

In the Scriptures

The Mahabharata and several Brahmanas talk about her sons, including Shakti and grandson, Parashara. The Ramayana, Ramcharitmanas and Vinayaka Patrika narrate the story of the times when she met with Sita and Rama. Further, the sixth canto of the Kumarasambhava, penned by Mahakavi Kalidasa, describes her role in convincing Shiva to marry Parvati. Such is the greatness of this ascetic.

The Mahabharata describes Arundhati as a yogini who used to give lengthy spiritual discourses

to even the Saptarishis. Swaha, the wife of Agni, would assume the form of the wives of the other six Rishis, but she could never take Arundhati's form.

Legend has it that once, it did not rain at all for twelve long years. The Saptarishis were suffering with no roots and fruits to eat. Being powerful sages, that is all they would ever eat. Seeing their plight, Arundhati decided to undertake severe penance in order to please Shiva. Her immense devotion, purity and piety please the Lord, who showered rain and a rich growth of crop on the land, thus bringing an end to their suffering.

According to the Valmiki Ramayana, she was cursed by Rishi Vishwamitra that she would lose all her hundred sons. She then bore a son called Shakti and later, one more named Suyagya. The latter studied with Rama at Vasishtha's hermitage. Some other sources relate that she had eight sons, including Shakti and Chitraketu.

In Marriage Rituals

In one of the Hindu marriage rituals, especially in South Indian marriages, after performing the Saptapadi (taking the seven steps), the groom shows the bride the double stars of Vasishtha and Arundhati. This symbolizes the newly-wed couple looking up to the older pair as the most ideal couple, symbolizing perfect marital harmony, fulfilment and loyalty.

Other References

- On the second bright day of the lunar month of Chaitra, women in certain regions of India observe a daylong fast, praying for the longevity of their marital life.
- Since the Arundhati star is only faintly visible in the sky, it is believed that someone nearing death will not be able to see it. Due to its faintness, the Arundhati star used to be shown in steps, first showing the brighter star, then coming to this relatively fainter star.
- A maxim in Sanskrit, called the Arundhatidarsananyayah, is used in the context of inferring the unknown from that which is known.
- The epic Hindi poem, Arundhati, composed by Jagadguru Ramabhadracharya in 1994, describes in detail the life and times of Arundhati.

Anasuya

Anasuya, also called Anusuya, literally means "the one free from envy and jealousy". She was the wife of the ancient Rishi Atri. Yet another influential figure in Indian mythology and philosophy, she attained the status of one of the most holy sages of the land.

In the Ramayana, she is described as living with her husband in their small hermitage in the southern periphery of the Chitrakuta Forest. Very devout and pious, she practiced austerity and was always devoted and loyal to her husband. Her purity allowed her to attain several supernatural powers during her lifetime.

During their exile, Sita and Rama visited their ashram. Anasuya was the perfect hostess to them; most attentive and affectionate towards them. She gave Sita an ointment, which would maintain her beauty forever.

Born to Sage Kardama and his wife Devahuti, Anasuya was the mother of Dattatreya, the saint-avatara of the Trimurti themselves, that is, the reincarnation of the joint powers of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara (Shiva). She also was the mother of Sage Durvasa (avatara of Shiva), Chandraatri (avatara of Brahma) and Chandra Deva (the Moon God). Sage Kapila was her brother and teacher as well.

Anasuya and Atri

The Bhagavata Purana mentions the story of Anasuya and Rishi Atri. Sage Kardama married Devahuti, daughter of Swayambhu Manu. They had ten children; one son by name Kapila (who was actually Lord Vishnu's avatara) and nine daughters. Anasuya was one among the daughters. Each of the daughters was married to a powerful Rishi and Anasuya was given away in marriage to Rishi Atri.

The Trinity Tests Anasuya

Hearing Sage Narada praise Anasuya in his hymns and verses, the consorts of the Divine Trinity, namely, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, wanted to learn the quality of pavitrata (purity) from her. They requested their husbands for permission to visit Anasuya in human form.



Trimurti - Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar
Batik Painting

The Trinity went to her in the disguise of sages and requested her for bhiksha (alms). Seeing them with the immense motherly love she had in her heart instantly turned the Trinity into small children.

The day went by and the consorts of the Trinity waited for their husbands, wondering what took them so long to return home. Finally, the Goddesses travelled to Anasuya's cottage and discovered that their husbands had transformed into children. The Devis then revealed their true form and requested Anasuya to bring their consorts back to their original forms.

One version of this legend states that the Trinity merged into one, thus becoming one child with three heads.

Anasuya and Atri's Offspring

A Brahmin named Kaushik from Pratishtan used to regularly visit a prostitute. He continued with this in spite of being a Brahmin and also having a devoted wife at home. With time, he was afflicted with leprosy, after which the prostitute stopped visiting him. This forced him to return to his wife, who still genuinely loved him and cared for him. Though his wife looked after his every need, Kaushik still longed for the affections of the prostitute. One day, he asked his wife to take him to her.

In the meantime, a sage named Mandavya had been impaled by a criminal and was lying on a spike in the forest. While passing through that forest with his wife, Kaushik accidentally tripped

on the sage, who cursed him that he would die before the next sunrise. Kaushik's wife, being a pure pativrata (completely devoted and loyal to her husband), managed to stop the sunrise, with the power of love.

This created havoc in the heavens. The Gods went to Brahma, asking for help. Brahma, in turn, went to Anasuya, asking her to convince Kaushik's wife to allow the sunrise to happen naturally. Anasuya did as she was told. She not only brought back the sunrise, but also brought Kaushik back to life. Pleased with Anasuya, Brahma was later born to her as Chandraatri.

Later, Rahu once masked the Sun, thus cloaking the whole world in darkness. The powerful Sage Atri wrested the Sun out of Rahu's hands, thereby restoring light to the world. Pleased with this, Shiva and Vishnu were born to Atri and Anasuya as Durvasa and Dattatreya respectively.

According to yet another legend, Rishi Atri performed severe penance on Kula Mountain. So severe were his austerities, that it set the whole world on fire. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were impressed with his devotion and spiritual powers and told him to ask for a boon. Atri immediately asked that the Trinity should be born to him as his children. In the Brahma Purana, Atri asked for three sons and one daughter, Shubhatreyi.

Sati Anusuya Ashrama

The Sati Anusuya Ashrama is situated in Chitrakoot, Madhya Pradesh. It is located further upstream Mandakini River, 16 kilometers from the main town. Set amidst the thick forest area there, it is believed that Sage Atri and Anusuya lived here, along with their three sons.

Valmiki's Ramayana narrates that, once, there was no rain in Chitrakuta for ten years. Severe famine hit the area, leaving nothing to eat or drink for the animals and birds that lived there. Sati Anusuya then performed intensive austerities and finally got River Mandakini down to earth. Immediately, there was lush greenery everywhere, thus removing the suffering of the animals, birds and human beings residing there.

At present, Sati Anusuya Ashrama still continues to retain its extremely peaceful and serene atmosphere, along with various streams from the hills converging and forming the Mandakini River. It is believed that it was in this very place that Anusuya explained to Sita the importance of Satitva (unflinching devotion to one's husband).

The dense forests of Dandaka start from this point onwards. It is said that this region was once ruled by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka. Ravana had appointed powerful Rakshasas like Khara and Viradha to rule this place. At that time, it was supposed to have been heavily infested by the terror of those mighty Rakshasas. But now, it is far removed from all that and only peace and serenity rule the locale.

In Culture

The tale of Anusuya has been recreated in several films, documentaries and plays in different languages. Two Telugu films, both titled Sati Anusuya, which were made in 1957 and 1971, went on to become very popular during their time.

Atri

Atri or Attri is an ancient Vedic Rishi, who is associated with the composition of numerous hymns to Agni, Indra and other Vedic deities. One of the Saptarishis of Hinduism, he is the one most mentioned in the Rigveda. In his honour, the fifth Mandala (book) of the Rigveda is called the Atri Mandala. The eighty-seven hymns in it are all attributed to him and his descendants.

Rishi Atri also receives prominent mention in the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Life

According to legend, Atri was married to the afore-mentioned Anasuya Devi, who herself was a powerful yogini and is considered to be one of the seven female pativratas. They had three sons, namely, Dattatreya, Durvasa and Chandra. Atri is the last among the saptarishis and is believed to have originated from the tongue.

Atri was once instructed by a divine voice to undertake penance. He readily agreed and proceeded with his severe austerities. Pleased by his devotion, the Divine Trinity appeared before him and granted him any boon that he wished for. Atri immediately asked that all the three deities should be born to him as his children.

Atri is not only mentioned in the Rigveda, but is also associated with various epochs and ages, especially, with the Treta Yuga, during the Ramayana. The Ramayana mentions instances where Atri and Anasuya host Rama and Sita at their humble ashrama and also offer spiritual advice to them. The couple is also attributed to bringing River Ganga down to earth. This is mentioned in the Shiva Purana.

Contribution to the Rigveda

Rishi Atri had several sons and disciples, who also contributed to the compilation of the Rigveda and other ancient Vedic texts and scriptures. Mandala 5 comprises 87 hymns in total, which are dedicated mainly to Agni and Indra. However, they also offer obeisance to Visvedevas (all the Gods), the Maruts, the twin deities of Mitra-Varuna and the Asvins. Two of the hymns are dedicated to Ushas (the Dawn) and to Savitr.

Most of the hymns are attributed to the Atreyas, or the clan of Atri. It is unclear when exactly these hymns were composed, but it is likely it happened in the north-western region of India, somewhere between c. 1500-1200 BCE.

The Rigveda hymns composed by Atri and his disciples are known for their melodic structure as well as for the spiritual ideas embedded in them, in the form of riddles. The hymns include the use of literary beauties; lexical, syntactic, morphological and verb play; thus, taking full advantage of the utter beauty and flexibility of the Sanskrit language.

Complex in their structure, the verses are famous for their elegant placing and presentation of natural phenomena via the medium of metaphors, transference of speech and so on.

In the Ramayana

As mentioned earlier, the Ramayana talks about the times when Lord Rama and his wife Sita visited Atri and Anasuya and spent time with them in their hermitage. Atri's hut, located in the picturesque Chitrakoota, is described as being the most serene location for an ashrama; situated near a lake, and filled with divine music; the calm water of the lake filled with green water leaves and flowers; visited by cranes, fisherbirds, swans, geese, tortoises and so on.

In the Puranas

Various medieval Puranas mention a number of sages called Atri. The legends associated with each one vastly differs from each other, thus, causing inconsistencies and much diversity. Hence, it is unclear if these legends and tales mention the same person, or to different people, who either had the same name, or exhibited similar qualities of the original Atri.

Cultural Influence

The Vaikhanasas are a sub-sect of the Vaishnavas, found in South India near Tirupati. They credit their theology to four Rishis, namely, Atri, Marichi, Bhrigu and Kashyapa. One of the most ancient and significant texts in this tradition is the Atri Samhita, which still survives in fragments of manuscripts.

The Atri Samhita aims to educate the Brahmins of the Vaikhanasas on the rules of conduct of the tradition. Among other aspects such as spiritual living, dharma and yoga, the text discusses matters including self-restraint, charity and compassion.

To date, the Vaikhanasas continue to be an important community in South India, strictly adhering to their culture, tradition and rituals.

Ashtavakra

Ashtavakra is yet another ancient and powerful Vedic sage. His name literally means "eight bends", thus describing the eight physical handicaps that he was born with. His maternal grandfather was the great Rishi Aruni and both his parents had been Vedic students at Aruni's school. Ashtavakra too studied in the school and then went on to become one of the greatest Rishis of Hinduism.

Ashtavakra is the author of the text Ashtavakra Gita, also known as Ashtavakra Samhita. This is a treatise on Brahman, Atman and Advaita (monism).

Birth and Life

Very little is known about the life and times of Ashtavakra, except for the records found in the Puranas and the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These legends narrate that sage Aruni, mentioned in the Chandogya Upanishad, ran an ashrama, where he taught the Vedas.

One of his students was Kahoda. Aruni's daughter, Sujata, also learnt there. Sujata went on to marry Kahoda. In due course of time, she got pregnant. During her pregnancy, the foetus inside her heard the chanting of the Vedas and learnt the correct recitation while still inside the womb.

According to another legend, Ashtavakra's father was reciting the Vedas, but happened to err in intonation in one particular place. The foetus corrected his father. This enraged the latter, who cursed him to be born crooked, with eight deformities in his body. Thus, he was born as Ashtavakra.

Once, Ashtavakra's father, Kahoda, went to visit Janaka, the King of Videha. They were very poor and Kahoda was hoping to earn some money from the King. There, he participated in a scientific debate with Vandin. Sadly, he lost the debate and was drowned in water. When Kahoda's wife heard about her husband's drowning, she was inconsolable. She, however, hid it from her child.

When Ashtavakra grew up, he came to know about his own father's curse and how he was consequently born with eight deformities. He then asked his mother to accompany him to witness the great King Janaka's yagna (sacrificial fire ritual), which was to happen soon. When they reached there, he was stopped from entering inside, as only learned Brahmanas were allowed inside.

Ashtavakra was then only ten years old. However, he amazed everyone around with his proficiency, knowledge and the words he used. He was then allowed to enter and then challenged Vandin for debate. After a long session, he finally defeated Vandin. The victorious

boy asked the king to drown all the Brahmanas present there, in order to avenge his father's death.

Vandin explained to him that he was actually one of the sons of Varuna (the God of Rain) and that Kahoda's death was part of a sacrificial ritual that he had had to undertake at that time. He returned Kahoda to Ashtavakra and took permission from Janaka to return to the sea.

Kahoda, impressed with his son's capabilities, cured him of his crookedness and deformities.

Ashtavakra Gita

Rishi Ashtavakra's text, Ashtavakra Gita, examines the metaphysical nature of existence and the actual meaning of individual freedom. It states that there is only One Supreme Reality or Brahman and that the entire creation is oneness and the manifestation of this One Reality. The treatise also says that everything and everyone is interconnected and that all are part of that one Self or Atman (Soul).

Some experts believe that the Ashtavakra Gita was most likely composed after the Bhagavad Gita, but before the start of the common era.

In Scriptures

Ramayana

The Yuddha Kanda of the Valmiki Ramayana makes mention of Ashtavakra. King Dasaratha came to visit Rama from heaven, after the war. He was proud of his son's victory over Lankapati Ravana and praised Rama that he was as great and virtuous like the Brahmin Kahoda. He also said that he was proud that, like Kahoda, he too felt redeemed by his son's (Rama's) greatness.

In the Aranya Kanda of Adhyatma Ramayana, the demon Kabandha narrates his life story to Rama and Lakshmana. In his previous birth, he was a Gandharva, who was cursed by Ashtavakra, to be born as a demon. Seeing the sage, he had laughed at his deformities, thus earning the curse. When the Gandharva repented for his sin, Ashtavakra relented and told him that he would be released from his curse by Rama, in the Treta Yuga.

Mahabharata

The Vana Parva of the Mahabharata describes the legend of Ashtavakra in great detail. After losing everything in the ill-fated game of dice against the Kauravas, the five Pandava Princes, along with Draupadi, went on exile for twelve long years. While on their pilgrimage, they met Sage Lomasa, who narrated to them the story of the great Sage Ashtavakra.

His legend is described over three chapters of the Vana Parva. Several aspects of his philosophy and maxims are recited herein.

Puranas

Ashtavakra and Shvetaketu, another grandson of Sage Aruni, made their way to King Janaka's palace. The former first faced the gatekeeper, who was bent upon keeping the young boy out. After convincing him that he was well-versed in the scriptures and philosophy, he was finally let in.

Janaka then tested Ashtavakra with complex questions, which the latter answered effortlessly. He then made the boy face Vandin. Vandin and Ashtavakra started the debate, with the former starting off. They alternately composed six extempore verses on the numbers one to twelve.

After that, Vandin could compose only half a verse on the number thirteen. Ashtavakra completed the verse by composing the second half, thereby winning the debate.

This debate was full of cryptic connotations, hidden meanings and enigmas and high philosophical principles, cleverly hidden within ordinary-sounding verses, ranging from the numbers one to thirteen.

In the Arts

- Ashtavakra is one of the characters who features in the first act of the Sanskrit play Uttara-Ramacharitam, composed by Bhavabhuti in the 8th century.
- The 571st volume of the famous Amar Chitra Katha comic book series, published in 2005, is titled Dhruva and Ashtavakra. The second half of this volume brings us the story of the great Rishi.
- A unique puppet play on Ashtavakra was staged by the Dhaatu Artist Group at the Ranga Shankara theater in Bangalore in 2010.

Bharadwaj

Bharadwaj, also referred to as Bharadvaj and Brajaspatya, was one of the greatest ancient Rishis of Hinduism. One of the Saptarishis, he was a renowned scholar, economist and physician as well. His made immense contributions to ancient Indian literature, mainly to the Puranas and the Rig Veda. He also played a vital role in giving an insight into the Indian society in existence back then.

Rishi Bharadwaj was the father of the great warrior and teacher of the Mahabharata, Dronacharya, who was the instructor to both the Pandavas and the Kauravas. He was also the grandfather of the immortal Ashwatthama, also one of the greatest warriors of his time.

Bharadwaj also receives mention in the Charaka Samhita, an ancient Indian medical text. He is generally considered to be the "Father of Ayurveda". He and his students are associated with authoring the sixth book of the Rig Veda.

Life

Rishi Bharadwaj's full name in Vedic texts is Bharadwaj Brahaspatya. The last name refers to his father, Vedic sage Brihaspati. His mother was Mamata, the wife of Utathya Rishi, who was the elder brother of Brihaspati. In later Puranic legends, he is mentioned as the son of Rishi Atri.

According to Charaka Samhita, the sage learnt medical sciences from Lord Indra. He beseeched Indra, saying that poor health was destroying the lives of several humans on earth and that he wanted to help heal them. Indra then gave him the knowledge on medical sciences and treatment. Interestingly, the word "Bharadwaj" is a combination of "bhara(d)" and "vaja(m)", which together, in Sanskrit, mean "bringing and nourishment".

Rishi Bharadwaj is considered to be the initiator of the Bharadwaja Gotra of the Brahmin community. This is the third in the row of the Pravara Rishis (Angirasa, Barhaspatya, Bharadwaja) and is the first of the Bharadwaja Gotris.

Texts and Treatises

Bharadwaj had 55 students and his entire family of disciples were the traditional poets of King Marutta of the Vedic Era. Innumerable treatises composed in the ancient and medieval era are reverentially named after the great sage. Some of them include the following:

- Dhanur-Veda is an Upaveda treatise on archery. This is credited to Rishi Bharadwaj
- Bharadwaj Samhita, a Pancharatra text
- Bharadvaj Srautasutra or Grhyasutra, a text that talks about rituals and rites of passage from the 1st millennium BCE
- Bharadwaj's theories on medicine and causal phenomena is described in Charaka Samhita. He is credited with several practical ideal and theories in the traditional Indian Ayurvedic system.
- Neeti Shastra, a treatise on ethics and practical conduct
- Bharadvaja-Siksha, an ancient Sanskrit text on phonetics

Legends

According to a legend, Rishi Bharadwaj was married to Susheela and had a son named Garga and a daughter named Devavarshini. Another legend states that he had two daughters, Ilavida and Katyayani. They married Vishrava and Yajnavalkya respectively.

The Vishnu Purana narrates that he had a brief relationship with an apsara named Ghritachi. Together, they had a child who grew up to become the great Dronacharya. Bharadwaj is therefore closely linked with two very important characters of the Mahabharata, namely, Dronacharya and Ashwatthama. The Mahabharata says that Bharadwaj trained Drona in the use of weapons.

In the Ramayana

According to the Ramayana, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana met Bharadwaj in his ashrama at the very start of their fourteen-year exile period. The Rishi asked them to stay with him, but they were insistent on traveling deep into the forest, to Chitrakoota, which was three kosla away from the ashrama.

The Rishi gave them the exact directions to reach Chitrakoota. Later, Rama's younger brother, Bharata, along with Sumantha, was also received at the sage ashrama. After a brief stay, Bharata went into the forest in search of his brothers and sister-in-law.

The Rishi reappears several more times in the epic. Incidentally, the Bharadwaj mentioned in the Ramayana is different from the Vedic sage mentioned in Panini's Ashtadhyayi.

In Buddhism

In Buddhist Pali canonical texts such as Digha Nikaya, Tevija Sutta talks about a discussion between Buddha and the Vedic scholars who were his contemporaries. Buddha named ten Rishis, calling them "early sages" and the creators of verses that had been collected and chanted in his era. One of the them included Rishi Bharadwaj.

These ten sages the Buddha talked about are Atthaka (may have been Atri or Ashtavakra), Vamaka, Vamadeva, Vessamitta (Vishwamitra), Yamataggi, Angirasa, Bharadvaja, Vasettha (Vasishtha), Kassapa (Kashyapa) and Bhagu (Bhrigu).

Bhrigu

Maharshi Bhrigu was one of the Saptarishis and one of the several Prajapatis created by Lord Brahma as well, for the facilitation and maintenance of creation. According to Manusmriti, Bhrigu was a contemporary of Manu, the Hindu progenitor of humanity. He lived during the same time as Manu did.

The very first compiler of predictive astrology, also the author of Bhrigu Samhita, Rishi Bhrigu

is considered to be a manasa-putra (mind-born son) of Brahma. The name Bhargava is used to refer to the descendants of the clan of Bhrigu.

The sage's ashrama was situated on the banks of Vadhusar River, a tributary of Drishadwati River, close to Dhosi Hill in the ancient Vedic state of Brahmavarta. As of the present, this is located on the border of Haryana and Rajasthan. Like Manu, Bhrigu too made great contributions to the Manusmriti, which mainly comprised the contents of sermons to saints in the state of Brahmavarta, after the great floods in the region, almost 10,000 years ago.

Family

Bhrigu was married to Khyati, one of the several daughters of King Daksha. He had two sons named Dhata and Vidhata and one daughter, Lakshmi. Lakshmi married Vishnu (Lord Narayana himself).

He had another son with Kavyamata (Usana). He is better known than Bhrigu himself. This son is none other than Shukracharya, the great Sage and the Guru of the Asuras (demons). Sage Bhrigu is said to have two more sons - Sage Chyavana, with Puloma and the folk hero, Mrikanda as well. The Skanda Purana narrates that Rishi Bhrigu migrated to Bhrigukutch, modern Bharuch, situated along the banks of Narmada River in Gujarat, leaving behind Chyavana at Dhosi Hill.

One of Rishi Bhrigu's descendants was sage Jamadagni, who in turn was the father of Parashurama, who is also one of the avatars of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu himself. Such is the illustrious lineage of the great Maharishi Bhrigu.

Legend

There is an interesting legend about Sage Bhrigu testing the Divine Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. One day, several great sages gathered at the banks of River Sarasvati to participate in a Maha Yagya. Bhrigu was present as well and, at the time, was filled with ahamkara (arrogance and ego), due to his immense knowledge and powers.

The Trinity then had to decide who among them was the most eminent among them, so that they could be the Master of the Yagna. The sages discussed amongst each other, but no one could decide who among the deities was the most suitable candidate.

Finally, it was decided that Bhrigu would test the three Devas and then make a decision as to who was the pre-eminent one. Being ignored by Brahma and Shiva, Bhrigu visited Vishnu in his abode, Vaikuntha. Vishnu and his consort, Lakshmi, were in conversation with each other. When the former missed noticing him, Bhrigu felt most insulted and kicked Vishnu in the chest, in order to seek his attention.



Lakshmi and Vishnu
Brass Statue

Vishnu calmly looked up at Bhrgu and smilingly welcomed him. The latter, who realized his great folly, was instantly humbled. He deeply repented his arrogant behaviour and promised the Lord to give up his egoistical ways for all time. Vishnu too graciously forgave the Sage and blessed him.

Khedbrahma in Gujarat is associated with Brahma and this legend of Bhrgu testing the Trinity.

Bhrgu Samhita

After the incident of testing the Trinity, Bhrgu decided to pen his famous book on astrology, the Bhrgu Samhita. He collected birth charts and wrote down full-life predictions; finally compiling them together as Bhrgu Samhita. This is said to be one of the first books of its kind in the field of astrology.

In Scriptures

Maharishi Bhrgu receives prominent mention in several ancient scripture. Shiva Purana and Vayu Purana describe him as being present during the great yagna conducted by Daksha Prajapati, his father-in-law.

This was the ill-fated yagna, where Sati, Daksha's daughter and Shiva's wife, immolated herself. Daksha had never liked Shiva and, when Sati (an aspect of Parvati) married him without his consent, he was upset beyond words. Hence, he decided not to invite Sati and Shiva for his yagna. In spite of Shiva telling her not to go to the event, Sati for the yagna.

When she reached the venue, Daksha insulted her for coming there without invitation. He also hurled abuses at Shiva for being unkempt and not civil and dignified enough for his family. Unable to bear the humiliation, Sati jumped into the yagnakunda (sacrificial fire) and gave up her life.

When Shiva came to know of the happenings there, he was furious, arrived at the yagnasthala (venue), destroyed everything in great rage and finally, picked up Sati's lifeless body and left from there.

The afore-mentioned Puranas talk about how Maharishi Bhrgu continued to offer support to Daksha's yagna, in spite of being warned that, conducting the event without inviting Shiva

would mean inviting trouble; potentially causing major catastrophe for everyone present there.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Sri Krishna says that, among sages, Bhrigu is representative of the grandeur of God.

Places Associated with Bhrigu

Maharishi Bhrigu's ashrama, called "Deepotsaka", was situated at the base of Dhosi Hill. It was from here that he migrated to Bharuch. His son Chyavana, known for Chyavanprash; a traditional Indian Ayurvedic jam-like preparation, meant to promote general health, vitality and immunity. He too had his ashrama at Dhosi Hill.

Besides Dhosi Hill, Bhrigu is also worshipped at Bharuch, Swamimalai, Tirumala, Ballia, Nanguneri, Mannargudi and Thiruneermalai. There is an ashrama for him in Maruderi, in the Kanchipuram District of Tamil Nadu.

Maharishi Bhrigu lastly migrated to Bhuinj, Satara, in the State of Maharashtra, where he took Samadhi. His ashrama, as well his daughter Lakshmi's temple, is also situated there. His son Chyavana's ashrama and samadhithala are also located on Chyavaneshwar Hill in Bhuinj.

Dadhichi

Dadhichi, also known as Dadhyanga or Dadhyancha, is an ancient and very powerful Rishi, mostly known for sacrificing his own life, so that the Devas could make a weapon called "vajra" (thunderbolt) from his bones. The Devas urgently needed a potent weapon that could help them in their fight against the Asuras. By crafting the vajrayudha from Dadhichi's bones, they could easily overcome the demon Vritra and win their fight, thereby reclaiming Devaloka or heaven.

Rishi Dadhichi receives prominent mention in the Rigveda, Bhagavata Purana, Srimad Devi Bhagavatam and the in the Puranas as well. He is believed to have penned the "Narayana Kavacham", a famous hymn in South India.

Etymology

Dadhyancha or Dadhyanga is a conjunction of two Sanskrit words, "Dadhya" (curd) and "anch" (body part). Thus, this means "body parts taking strength from curd".

After defeating Vritra, the personification of drought, the Devas could also release water to earthlings, who were suffering for long. Through his immense sacrifice, Rishi Dadhichi became one of the most revered sages of Hinduism.

Dadhichi was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. After Shiva was separated from Sati, he went to a forest to meditate in seclusion. The annual festival of Mahashivaratri marks the first time he reappeared to his devotees, including Rishi Dadhichi, who, along with his disciples, was offering prayers to their Lord.

Family

In the Bhagavad Purana, Dadhichi was born to Sage Atharvana and his wife, Chitti. Atharvana is believed to be the author of the Atharva Veda, the fourth Veda. Chitti was the daughter of Sage Kardam. The Dadheech Brahmins, a sect of Brahmins found in Rajasthan, are the descendants of Sage Dadhichi.

Dadhichi married Swarcha and they had a son named Pippalada. The son himself became a Rishi and was later associated with the Pippalada school of Hinduism. He is also known for creating the Prasna Upanishad.

Dadhichi had established an ashrama in Misridh, in Naimisharanya, near Lucknow. All the Puranas talk about Naimisharanya as his ashrama, which is still in existence. In fact, the location of the Sabarmati Ashrama in Ahmedabad is also one of his ancient ashrama sites. It is largely believed that the Rishi stayed near Sabarmati River for some time and then set up his ashrama there.

There is also a legend about Dahod, which states that he once meditated at the banks of Dudhimati River in Dahod. Interestingly, Dhudhimati is the name of his sister, on whose name a 4th century temple exists in Naguar, Rajasthan. This temple is known as the Dadhimati Mata Temple.

Legends

Dadhichi is associated with several legends. Here are some of the most popular ones:

Ashwashira - One with the Horse's Head

Dadhichi was said to be a master of Brahmagyana or Madhu Vidya, an ancient Vedic spiritual art. This enabled him to attain immortality. Indra, fearing that this could make his position unstable, disliked the Rishi and wanted to destroy him and his powers.

Indra also disliked the Ashwini twins (Gods of Medicines) and did not like the fact that they wanted to learn Brahmagyana. He swore that he would behead the one who taught it to them. However, the Ashwini twins were bent upon learning the art from Dadhichi and made a plan to protect the Rishi from Indra.

They first learnt the art from the sage and then beheaded him. After that, they preserved the head and replaced the original head with that of a horse. Indra came there and beheaded the horse-headed sage and left in a huff. The Ashwini twins then reattached Dadhichi's original head to his body and brought him back to life, with the same Mahagyana that he had taught them.

In this way, the sage also came to be known as Ashwashira or the One with the Horse's Head. Sometimes, he is even portrayed this way.

Defeating Kshuva and Indra

Once, Dadhichi met a king called Kshuva. The latter was a staunch devotee of Vishnu. The two got into a debate on superiority of Kings over Brahmins and vice-versa. As the argument heated up, Dadhichi punched the king and the latter attacked him with a thunderbolt. The injured sage was treated by Shukracharya.

Dadhichi then did severe penance to appease Lord Shiva, who granted him three boons; he could never be humiliated, he could never be killed and his bones would become as hard as a diamond.

Dadhichi returned to Kshuva and, this time, defeated him. When Kshuva went to Vishnu asking for help, the latter tried to trick the Rishi. Dadhichi discovered this ploy and attacked with the Trishula. Seeing this, all the Devas fled the scene, except for Vishnu, who stayed put, knowing that Shiva's weapon would never cause him any harm.

In spite of this temporary hostility, Dadhichi never showed disrespect for the Devas or for

Vishnu. When he was told by the Devas that Vishnu wanted him to donate his bones to kill Vritra, he immediately consented to the same.

Indra and Vritra - the Legend of the Vajrayudha

Indra, the King of the Devas, was once driven out of Devaloka by an evil asura named Vritra. This asura had a boon, which made him invulnerable to any known weapon. Drunk in his power and might, he also stole all the water in the world and kept it for his own use and for that of his demon kin. This led to all the earthlings suffering for lack of water and food.

Indra, who had lost all hope of retrieving his kingdom and his power, sought the help of Vishnu. The latter told Indra that only weapons made from thunder-containing the diamond bones of Sage Dadhichi could kill the asura.

Indra and the other Devas then approached the Rishi, who had once been beheaded by Indra himself. The sage received them respectfully and immediately acceded to the Devas' request. He, however, said that he wished to go on a pilgrimage to all the holy rivers before he gave up his life.

Knowing that they did not have much that much time, Indra brought the water of all the holy rivers together at Naimisharanya, thereby fulfilling the Rishi's wishes in an instant. The sage then went into samadhi, releasing the life force from his body. The Celestial Cow, Kamadhenu, licked his body till she could remove the flesh from his bones. The Devas then gathered all the bones and fashioned various weapons from them. They made the Vajrayudha (thunderbolt weapon) from his spine, which was used to kill Vritra.

After Vritra's fall, Indra reclaimed his rule of Devaloka and also released all the trapped water to the earthlings, thereby ending their long period of suffering.

There's another version of this legend. Once, Dadhichi was asked to safeguard the weapons of the Devas, as they were unable to prevent the asuras from taking them. The rishi agreed to their bidding and kept them safe in his custody. Finally, tiring of the job, he dissolved them in sacred water, which he drank.

The Devas returned and asked for the weapons, so that they may defeat Vritra and his army with them. A dismayed Dadhichi told them what he had done and said they could no longer be retrieved, because he had consumed them in the form of water. The only way now to get the weapons back would be to use his bones and make weapons out of them instead.

Dadhichi readily agreed and sacrificed his life for the cause of higher good. The Devas then made the Vajrayudha from his spine, which was used to slay Vritra.

Other Legends

- There are various other legends about Rishi Dadhichi. He was supposedly the first one to leave Daksha's Yagna when he realized that Shiva had not been invited due to spite.
- The mantra incantation to Devi Hinglaj is attributed to the sage. In order to save some Kshatriya children from being killed by Parashurama, Dadhichi hid them inside the shrine of Hinglaj and created the mantra to protect them from Parashurama's wrath.

Current Influence

Dadhichi's life story is symbolic of the fact that no sacrifice is too great if it will help the innocent from unending suffering. This has inspired the Param Vir Chakra, which is India's

highest military award for gallantry. This is most often awarded posthumously to soldiers who exhibited great selflessness and exceptional courage in battle.

Durvasa

In the Puranas, Durvasa, also known as Durvasas, was an ancient Rishi - the son of Atri and Anasuya. Known for his extremely short temper and tendency to curse, he was always received with great reverence by humans, devas and asuras alike.

Interestingly, Durvasa has one temple dedicated to him - the Rishi Durvasa Temple in Haryana.

Birth

The Brahmanda Purana states that Brahma and Shiva once got into an argument. So violent was Shiva's rage, that, as a result, the devas fled from him in fear. His consort, Parvati, complained that now it was becoming impossible to get along with him. Realizing how much disharmony his anger was causing, Shiva decided to deposit it into Anasuya. A child was born from this anger. This child was none other than Durvasa.

Samudra Manthan

According to the Vishnu Purana, Vayu Purana and Padma Purana, a curse that Durvasa laid on Indra was the indirect reason for the Samudra Manthan (Churning of the Ocean) episode. The Srimad Bhagavatam and Agni Purana also mention his involvement in it.

In the Vishnu Purana, Durvasa was once wandering the earth in a state of ecstasy, due to a vow he was observing. At that time, a Vidyadhari (nymph) passed by. He demanded her to give him the heavenly wreath of flowers she was wearing. She immediately gave it to him. He took it and wore it on his brow.

Then, resuming his journey, he came upon Indra riding his elephant, Airavata. He threw the garland at Indra, who caught it and placed it around Airavata's head. Irritated by the fragrance, the elephant threw it to the ground with its trunk. Enraged to see his gift treated so badly, Durvasa cursed Indra that he would be cast down from his position as the ruler of the three worlds. Indra begged him for forgiveness, but the rishi refused to retract his curse.

Indra and the Devas were immediately stripped of their powers, lustre and strength. Seizing this opportunity, the asuras, led by Bali, waged war against the Devas. The latter were routed and ran to Brahma for help. Brahma advised them to seek refuge in Vishnu.

Vishnu, in turn, advised them to call a truce with the asuras and work together to churn the mighty Ocean of Milk, so that the Amrita (divine nectar) could be obtained from it. Seeing the Amrita come out from the Ocean, the Asuras took it for themselves. Vishnu then took the Mohini avatara and, on the pretext of helping serve them the nectar, took it away and fed it to the Devas. The Devas immediately got back their strength and power and defeated the asuras.

Meeting Ambarisha

According to the Bhagavata Purana, King Ambarisha was a great devotee of Vishnu. He performed a yagna with such great fervour that the Lord was pleased and blessed him with the Sudarshana Chakra, which would act as his shield of protection.

Ambarisha then took the Ekadashi and Dvadashi Vrata for a year. After that time period, he took up a final fast of 3 days and nights to conclude the ritual. As the moment for breaking his fast neared, Durvasa arrived there. Ambarisha received him respectfully. Durvasa asked him to

wait until he finished his holy bath in River Yamuna.

Though the time to break the fast had approached, the King could not break his fast, as Durvasa had not yet returned from his bath. Ambarisha did not know what to do. It was imperative that he break the fast to fulfill his vow, but it would be impolite to eat before serving his guest. Finally, he decided to break his fast by taking a sip of water and waited for Durvasa's arrival.

Feeling that Ambarisha had insulted him by consuming the water, Durvasa created a demon, from a strand of his own hair, to kill him. Immediately, Narayana's Sudarshana Chakra came to the rescue and killed the demon. After that, it started chasing Durvasa, who ran to Brahma and Shiva for help.

Both the Gods expressed their inability to save him from Vishnu's wrath and asked the Rishi to approach him instead. Durvasa then ran to Vishnu and pleaded for pardon. The latter also refused to help, saying that he was powerless against Ambarisha's purity and devotion and suggested the sage to beg forgiveness of the King himself.

Durvasa returned to Ambarisha, who prayed to Vishnu to recall the Sudarshana Chakra and save the sage, thus humbling the latter.

Durvasa and Shakuntala

In the *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, penned by Mahakavi Kalidasa, Shakuntala, the main female lead, was once daydreaming about her lover, King Dushyanta. She was so lost in thought that she missed seeing Durvasa arrive there. Enraged, he cursed her that her lover would forget her. Horrified, she tried to mollify the Rishi, who softened the curse, saying that Dushyanta would remember her when he saw the ring he had gifted her.



Shakuntala Pines for King Dushyanta

Poster

Sure enough, Dushyanta forgot all about her and remembered everything only when he saw the ring, much later after she had lost it. Finally, the two lovers reconciled and lived together happily ever after, along with their son, Bharata.

In the Ramayana

In the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Durvasa once came to Rama's doorstep. Seeing Lakshmana guarding the door, he demanded to meet him. At that time, Rama was in a private

conversation with Yama, disguised as a mendicant. Rama had told Lakshmana that this was confidential and that no one was to be allowed inside his quarters while the discussion was on. Yama said that anyone who tried to trespass would have to be executed.

So Lakshmana politely asked the sage to wait till Rama finished his meeting. The angry sage threatened to curse all of Ayodhya if he was not let in immediately. A frightened Lakshmana decided to interrupt the meeting and inform his brother about the sage's arrival. Rama quickly concluded his meeting and received the sage with due respect. Durvasa asked Rama to be fed and the latter immediately called for food. After that, the satisfied sage went on his way.

Now, Rama was filled with sorrow, as he had to execute Lakshmana for having interrupted the meeting. He had promised that to Yama and could not go back on his word. On Vasishtha's advice, he then asked Lakshmana to leave him for good, as this would be equivalent to death, as far as he was concerned. So the younger brother went to the banks of River Sarayu and resolved to give up his life by drowning there.

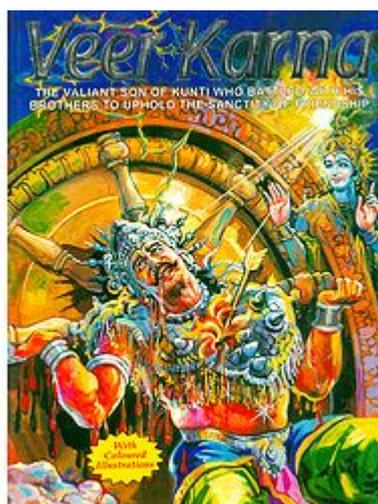
In the Mahabharata

Blessing Kunti

Durvasa was also known for granting boons to those who pleased him. This is evident in an episode with Kunti, the wife of Pandu and the mother of the Pandava Princes. When Kunti was a young girl, she lived with her adopted father, Kuntibhoja. When he visited them one day, the King asked his young daughter to take care of the sage.

Kunti patiently served him, putting up with all his demands during the sage's stay with them. Durvasa was very pleased with her devotion and service towards him. He rewarded her by teaching her the Atharva Veda mantras, which enables a woman to invoke any Deva of her choice and beget a child from him. After that, he left the place.

Curious to see if the boon worked, Kunti called upon Surya Deva, the Sun God, and immediately bore her first son, Karna. Fearing the fate of an unwed mother, she placed him in a basket and let it float down a river. Karna was eventually found by charioteer Adhiratha, who raised him as his own. He went on to become one of the greatest warriors and a sworn enemy of the Pandavas.



Veer Karna - The Valiant Son of Kunti

Book

Durvasa and Draupadi

Once, while bathing in the river, Durvasa's clothes got carried away by the currents. Seeing this, Draupadi, the Pandavas' wife, gave him her own clothes. Durvasa blessed her by saying that she would never lack clothes at any time she really was in need of them.

This blessing worked like a miracle, during the Draupadi vastraharana episode. After letting the Pandavas lose everything in the game of dice, the Kauravas asked Draupadi to be brought in to the Sabha, in order to strip her of her clothing and dignity. However, try as they might, they were unable to do so, as Lord Krishna's grace kept draping reams and reams of clothing around her, even as Dusshasana continued to pull out yard after yard of clothing from her body.

In another episode, during the Pandavas' exile, Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava prince, managed to please Durvasa. So the latter offered him any boon he wished. Duryodhana, wanting the sage to curse the Pandavas, asked him to visit them in the forest. Durvasa and his disciples went to the Pandavas' hermitage in the forest, demanding lunch. The Pandavas had just finished their meal and there was no food left. The Pandavas were anxious that they would enrage the sage, thus earning his curse.

While the entourage went for their bath, Draupadi prayed to Krishna for help. Krishna immediately appeared before her, asking for food. She said she had no food left, but found a lone grain of rice and a small piece of vegetable stuck to the akshayapatra. He partook of that and announced that he was satisfied with the meal. This satiated the sage's hunger too, as that of his disciples' as well. Krishna was the Supreme Being and satisfying his hunger would satisfy the whole world. Durvasa and his pupils silently left after their bath and did not trouble the Pandavas again.

Narayana as Swaminarayana

According to the Swaminarayana sect, Narayana was reborn as Saint Swaminarayana because of Durvasa's curse. After Krishna's passing, Uddhava went to Badrinath, the abode of Nara-Narayana. He kept listening to the latter's discourses there. Once, in the middle of a discourse, Durvasa arrived there from Kailasa. But no one noticed him, as they were engrossed in the discourse.

The sage waited for about half an hour, yet no one welcomed him. He felt insulted and cursed the entire assembly, that all of them would be born as humans and suffer insults in the same way. Nara-Narayana's parents, Lord Dharma and Goddess Bhakti tried to pacify Durvasa, who then softened his curse, saying that Narayana would be reborn as Dharma and Bhakti's son and would free them all from the clutches of evil.

The couple eventually had a son named Ghanshyam, who went on to be known as Swaminarayana. This story is mentioned only in the Swaminarayana legends and does not feature anywhere else in traditional Hindu legends.



Swaminarayan Picture on Wooden
Key Hanger with 4 Hooks - Wall Hanging

Gautama

One of the Saptarishis, Gautama Maharishi was an ancient Rigvedic sage, who also finds mention in Buddhism and Jainism. The Rig Veda mentions the Maharishi in several of its suktas or hymns. He is also credited with discovering the mantras (mantra-drashtaa) and also authoring many hymns in Mandala. There is a hymn called Bhadra in the Sama Veda, which is also ascribed to Gautama. The Brahmanda Purana states that one of the sub-branches of the Raanaayani branch of Sama Veda was initiated by the Maharishi.

Family

Gautama was the son of Rahugana, belonging to the lineage of Angirasa. He was married to Ahalya or Ahilya, the manasa-putri (mind-born daughter) of Lord Brahma himself. The Puranas relate the story of how Gautama won her hand by circumambulating Kamadhenu (the divine cow), in order to fulfill the stipulation of Brahma, that whoever would go around the whole of the earth first, would be the one to marry Ahalya. The chief priest of King Janaka of Mithila, named Shatananda, was the son of Gautama and Ahalya.



Kamadhenu
Brass Statue

The sage was the progenitor of the paternal Gautama gotra lineage as well. Gautama and Bharadvaja share a common ancestry, as they both descended from Angirasa. Hence, they are sometimes clubbed together under the name Angirasa. Some of Gautama's famous disciples include Praachina-yoga, Shaandilya, Gargya and Bharadvaja.

Gautama and Ahalya

According to the Ramayana, Maharishi Gautama once went to take bath in River Ganga, early in the morning. In the meantime, Indra, the King of the Devas, had been eyeing Ahalya for quite a while now. She was one of the most beautiful women ever. He was fascinated with her beauty and wanted her for himself.

While Gautama left for his bath, Indra took the form of the sage and made love to Ahalya. As he was escaping after committing the cowardly act, he was caught by Gautama, who was returning to the ashrama after his bath.

Seeing what had happened, the enraged Rishi cursed both Indra and Ahalya. He told Ahalya that, if she had truly had been a pativrata, she would have immediately known that the person who had made love to her was an impostor and not her husband.

He cursed Indra a thousand rebirths (Sahasrayoni) and Ahalya to be converted into stone and stay that way forever. Later, taking pity on their plight, the Rishi converted both these curses into boons. Indra's various cycles of births were reduced to one and he came to be known as Sahasraaksha (the One with Thousand Eyes). As for Ahalya, Gautama assured her that she would be brought back to her original human form the moment Lord Rama placed his feet on her.

During the Treta Yuga, Lord Sri Rama visited the ashrama. His foot touched the stone and Ahalya was immediately released from the curse. She reunited with Gautama and they live happily forever after.

In the Scriptures

According to the Devi Bhagavatam, River Godavari was so named because of its association with Maharishi Gautama. The sage had two sons, Vamadeva and Nodhas, both of who discovered the mantras.

One of the Dharmasutras is referred to as Gautama Dharmasutra. However, this has not been written by the Maharishi. Aksapada Gotama is the 6th century BCE founder of the Nyaya school of Hindu philosophy.

Gautama's sixty-year long penance is mentioned in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. The Narada Purana relates the story of a 12-year famine affecting the area, during which Gautama fed all the Rishis in the region and saved them from suffering.

Author of the Earliest Dharma-Sutra

Maharishi Gautama was the author of the Dharma-Sutra, known as Gautama Dharma Sutra. It is considered to be the earliest Dharmasutra, containing 28 chapters with 1000 aphorisms.

Almost all aspects of observances of the Hindu dharma, including the four ashramas; the forty sanskaras; the four varnas; royal duties of rulers; punishments to be meted out for various offences and crimes; rituals to be carried out during and after funerals; do's and don'ts of food consumption; dharmas to be carried out by women; the rules of praayaschitta or penitence and atonement of sins; rules of succession of property and so on; are discussed in this Dharmasutra.

In this sense, Gautama's Dharma Shastra may be considered the oldest law book of the world, as far as Hinduism; especially Brahminism; is concerned.

In Buddhism and Jainism

Interestingly, Buddhist Pali canon texts traces the Buddha's paternal lineage to Gautama and Angirasa. That is why he is known as Gautama Buddha. Jainism, on the other hand, traces tirthankara Indrabhuti Gautama's paternal lineage to Gautama as well.

Jamadagni

Jamadagni or Jamdagni is one of the Saptarishis in the seventh, current Manvantara. The father of Parashurama (the sixth avatara of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu), he was the descendant of Sage Bhrigu. Rishi Jamadagni had five children with wife Renuka. The youngest among them was Lord Parashurama. The sage was very highly knowledgeable and was well-versed in the scriptures and the art of weaponry, with no formal training.

Birth and Life

"Jamadagni" literally means "consuming fire". He was born to Sage Richika and Satyavati, the daughter of Kshatriya King Gaadhi. During his childhood, he studied hard and achieved mastery on the Vedas. He then learnt the science of weapons all by himself, in spite of having no one to train him. His father had tried to guide him a little, though not much. The Aushanasa Dhanurveda, which is now not available to us, is essentially a conversation between Jamadagni and Ushanas or Shukracharya, on the dharma and vidhis of warfare.

When he came of age, Jamadagni went to King Prasenjit of the Suryavansha or Solar Dynasty and asked his daughter, Renuka's hand, in marriage. Eventually, they were married and they had five sons, Viswa, Vasu, Brihudyanu, Brutwakanwa and Bhadrarama, who later came to be known by the name of Parashurama.

In the Mahabharata

According to the Mahabharata, Jamadagni once got annoyed with Surya Deva for creating too much heat. The warrior-sage then shot several arrows in the sky, terrifying Surya. The latter then appeared before the sage, in the form of a Brahmin, and gave him two inventions, to help him deal with the heat. These two inventions, sandals and an umbrella, are still very much of use to mankind and helps protect them against the impact of the Sun.

Parashurama Beheads Renuka

Renuka was a very devoted wife and a powerful pativrata as well. Such was her chastity, that she used to fetch water from the nearby river in a pot made of unbaked clay. She did this every single day and the pot would hold together by the sheer power of her unwavering devotion towards her husband, Jamadagni.

One day while she was at the river, a group of Gandharvas were passing by in the sky above, in their chariot. Gandharvas are said to be very attractive beings - anyone would be riveted by their glow and handsome looks. She looked up at them and was filled with desire for just one fleeting moment. At that very moment, the unbaked clay pot that she was carrying dissolved in the water. Realizing her folly and afraid to go back to her husband, Renuka waited at the river bank.

In the meantime, Jamadagni was wondering why his wife had not returned home yet. Through his siddhi (spiritual power), he understood what had taken place and was filled with rage. He called his eldest son and told him what happened, also telling him to execute Renuka. The horror-stricken son immediately refused to kill his own mother. Jamadagni then asked all his sons, one by one, and they all refused to murder their mother. Getting even more angry, he turned them all to stone.

Finally, his youngest son, Parashurama, was the only one left. Ever-obedient, he immediately agreed to do his father's bidding. He went to the river bank where his mother was seated, approached her and beheaded her.



Parashurama

Poster

Pleased with his son's devotion, Jamadagni told Parashurama to ask for two boons. The latter asked that his mother's life be restored and that his brothers also to be turned back to their original human form. Jamadagni granted the boons. His mother was brought back to life, without having any memory of her death (as requested by Parashurama) and the brothers too came back to normal.

The entire purpose of this leela by Parashurama was to demonstrate the dharma and the rightful duties of a son towards his parents.

Death

Jamadagni was once visited by the Haihaya King, Kartavirya Arjuna, to whom he served a feast, using the powers of Kamadhenu, his divine cow. Seeing the cow, the king wanted it for himself. When the Rishi refused, the king forcefully took Kamadhenu with him, challenging Jamadagni to take her back if he could. The sage could have easily waged war and won, by he did not want to do so.

When Parashurama came to know about this, he flew into a rage. He single-handedly fought and killed Kartavirya Arjuna and his entire army and retrieved Kamadhenu. Later, three sons of the king killed Jamadagni to avenge their father's death. They first stabbed the Rishi twenty-one times and then beheaded him.

Parashurama killed all the three brothers and retrieved the head of his father for his cremation. He then committed genocide on the entire Kshatriya (warrior) clan throughout the world for the next twenty-one generations, in order to avenge the twenty-one times that his father was stabbed.

In Buddhism

In the Buddhist Vinaya Pitaka section of the Mahayagga, the Buddha states that Jamadagni was one of the greatest Rishis, who verily embodied the Vedas themselves.

Jaratkaru

Rishi Jaratkaru was the husband of the serpent-Goddess Manasa and the father of their son, Astika. He features as a secondary character in the legends of Manasa and Astika.

Jaratkaru is described as a great sage, very knowledgeable and one that practiced severe asceticism. He had wanted to remain celibate, but he had to marry Manasa on the insistence of his dead ancestors, who were doomed to descend to hell if he did not have any progeny. Unfortunately, the couple was never able to connect at an emotional level and, eventually, the ill-fated marriage failed.

The sage finally abandoned Manasa and left to lead his own life. However, he impregnated her before leaving her forever. In due course of time, Manasa gave birth to Astika, in his absence.

Very little is known about Jaratkaru's life before he met and married Manasa, or even after abandoning her.

In the Scriptures

The Mahabharata, Devi Bhagavata Purana and the Brahma Vaivarta Purana talk about Jaratkaru in connection with the legend of Manasa and Astika. In the Adi Parva of the Mahabharata, the Astika Parva section narrates the tale of Astika twice. He also features in folk tales, related to the worship of the snake-Goddess.

The Mahabharata further states that Jaratkaru was born in the lineage of the Yayavara Brahmins and was their only heir. The name "Jaratkaru" is a combination of two words - "jara" meaning "consumption" and "karu" meaning "monstrous". The sage had a huge frame, which he reduced (consumed) by undertaking fasts, penance and austerities.

Having undertaken so much penance and for so long, the Rishi was believed to be as powerful as a Prajapati. He is also revered for being a scholar of the Vedas and its branches.

Legend

Jaratkaru wandered the entire world and visited various pilgrimage centres and sacred rivers. There were times when he renounced food and sleep and survived only on air. After many years of journeying, he once saw his emaciated ancestors hanging upside-down with their heads in a hole, which led to hell. They were tied to flimsy grass ropes, which were steadily being chewed by rats.

The ancestors abused Jaratkaru for being an ascetic and ending his lineage of the Yayavaras. They begged him to marry and beget children, so that his clan could be taken ahead and they could finally attain heaven as well.

At the time, Jaratkaru was old himself and had no idea of marrying. However, seeing the plight of his deceased elders, he agreed to marry on the conditions that she should be a virgin with the same name as his and should be given as alms to him by her own family, notwithstanding his own poverty.

After giving his predecessors the promise, he moved ahead on his journey. According to a second Mahabharata version of this legend, he added two additional conditions for his future wife - that the namesake woman should marry him on her own free will, without any force, and that he would never support his wife in any way.

Though he travelled far and wide, he did not find a bride who suited the above-mentioned conditions. Unaffected, he carried on with his wanderings. When he entered a thick forest, he suddenly recalled the promise he had made to his ancestors and prayed to them three times to bring his bride to him. In a second version of the legend, he was frustrated when his efforts to search for a suitable bride failed. He cried out loud in anger and sorrow over all his failed attempts to find the best wife for himself.

Jaratkaru Weds Manasa

In the meantime, Vasuki, the King of Nagas (serpents) was awaiting the arrival of the Rishi. As per Brahma's instructions, Vasuki had planned the wedding of his younger sister, Manasa, with Jaratkaru. He was doing this in order to counter a curse given by Kadru, the Mother of Snakes. She had said that the entire clan of snakes would be burnt at the yagna of Janamejaya, the Kuru King and the son of Parikshit. Brahma had predicted that the son of Jaratkaru and Manasa would stop the sacrifice and also rescue the serpents. Vasuki was aware that the sage was now ready to marry and so he appointed more serpents to keep an eye on Jaratkaru's movements and report back to him about his whereabouts.

Vasuki then offered his sister Manasa to the sage, who accepted it after making sure that all his conditions were met. The former also promised to support his sister, so that the sage did not have any responsibility on that front either.

After the marriage, Jaratkaru lived along with the serpents, in their abode. He warned Manasa that, if she ever displeased him, he would abandon and go away. Though not entirely happy with the state of affairs, Manasa managed to put up with her eccentric husband. In due course of time, she discovered that she was pregnant with his child.

According to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Manasa was the daughter of Sage Kashyapa, who was the one who got her engaged to Jaratkaru. In this version, the marriage was never consummated and Jaratkaru refused to even as much as touch her or sleep next to her.

Jaratkaru Abandons Manasa

Soon after impregnating his wife, the tired sage slept on his wife's lap. As sunset neared and it was time for evening worship, Manasa was in a dilemma as to whether she should wake her husband or let him sleep peacefully. It was obligatory for Jaratkaru, as a Rishi, to conduct all evening poojas and other rites and rituals as per their vidhi.

She then weighed out her options and then chose to wake him up. She whispered in his ears, asking him to get up, so that he could perform his ablutions and light the lamp. He was enraged at having been disturbed out of sleep and told her that the sun would not dare to set before he performed his daily rituals.

He then ignored all her pleas for forgiveness and forsake her. Before he left, Manasa told him about the actual purpose of their marriage - as to how the birth of their son was the most important mission of this relationship. She also asked him to wait till that purpose was fulfilled.

Jaratkaru assured her that their son would be born as it was ordained and that he would indeed emerge to become Saviour of the Serpents. He said that the son would be righteous learned and much respected in their society. So saying, the Rishi left the place, never to look back or return to his family.

According to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Jaratkaru overslept and missed the time of his morning rituals. He got agitated and threatened to banish Manasa to hell for her irresponsible act of not waking him up on time. Surya Deva then stepped in and tried to placate the sage, but he had already decided to forsake her.

Then Brahma arrived on the scene and warned Jaratkaru that it would be inappropriate to abandon his wife, unless he gave her a child. The sage touched Manasa's abdomen and thus, instantly impregnated her. He departed soon after, promising her that she would give birth to a son who would become a renowned sage himself.

Not much is known about Jaratkaru after his exit from Manasa's abode. She eventually gave birth to Astika, who fulfilled his life's mission. He stopped Janamejaya's yagna and rescued all the serpents that the king planned to sacrifice into the fire.

As Jaratkaru had fulfilled his duty of procreating and producing the next generation, his ancestors could escape the hell they were in and entered the doors of heaven. The Mahabharata narrates that after living a long life, Jaratkaru too died and attained heaven.

Footnote

This is the first part of our article on the Ancient Rishis of India. We hope you enjoyed your read. Look out for more in our next issue, which will bring you interesting tales and life histories of several other saints and sages.

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