

Ancient Rishis of India - Part 2

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In our previous post, we brought you the first part of the article on the Ancient Rishis of India. This month, we bring you a list of some more ancient, powerful and influential sages of this great country.

Kanva

Maharishi Kanva was an ancient Rishi of the Treta Yuga, to whom some hymns of the Rig Veda are ascribed. One of the Angirases, he was also referred to as a son of Ghora. He is sometimes considered to be one of the Saptarishis (seven most powerful sages).

Kanva features prominently in Kalidasa's work, *Abhijnanashakuntalam*. He is the head of the ashrama (hermitage), which is the setting of the play's first few acts. He is also the protagonist, Shakuntala's, foster father. At the very beginning of the play, he is absent, as he is in penance, trying to please the Gods on Shakuntala's behalf. When he returns, he is delighted to know that King Dushyanta proposed to Shakuntala and so, sends her to his palace, accompanied by ascetics and seers.

Plot of the Play

The main female lead of *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, Shakuntala, is the daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and the apsara Menaka. Abandoned at birth by her parents, she is raised in the secluded hermitage of Sage Kanva and grows up to be a fine maiden.

Once, Kanva and the other elders in the ashrama left for a pilgrimage, leaving her alone there. At that time, King Dushyanta, the ruler of Hastinapura at the time, came hunting into the forest. While pursuing game, he chanced to come upon the hermitage. Captivated by Shakuntala's beauty, he courted her in royal style and married her secretly. He then had to return to his kingdom. But before leaving, he gave her his royal ring as a token of his love.



Shakuntala and Sage Kanva

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After his departure, Shakuntala was daydreaming about him and missed to notice Rishi Durvasa having arrived there. Angry, the latter cursed her that her lover would forget all about her existence. When she repented and apologized for her folly, he relented and told her that her lover would remember her when she showed him the signet ring he gave her.

By that time, Shakuntala realized that she was pregnant. She decided to go see Dushyanta and reunite with him. Unfortunately, as she crossed a river, the signet ring slipped off her finger. When she arrived at the palace, Dushyanta refused to recognize her and said that he had never ever met her. He had lost his memory of her, due to Durvasa's curse. A crestfallen Shakuntala then returned to the hermitage, where she gave birth to her son, Bharata.

Later, the ring was discovered by a fisherman inside the belly of a fish. He took it to Dushyanta, who immediately remembered all about Shakuntala and the times he spent with her. He went to the ashrama, told her all about what had transpired and brought her back to the palace along with their son.

Bharata went on to become a powerful Emperor and the ancestor of the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the great epic, Mahabharata. It is after him that India was named Bharat or "Bharatavarsha", the "Land of Bharata".

Other References

- Kanva Maharishi was the first grammarian of the Telugu language
- Kanva or Karnesh is also the name of a Vedic Shakha of the Shukla Yajur Veda

- Kanva or Karnesh is the name of several princes and founders of dynasties, as also of several authors
- The Kanvas are descendants of King Vasudeva Kanva of the 1st century BCE
- A class of spirit, against whom some hymns of the Atharva Veda are used as a charm, are called Kanvas
- Some families with the surname Kanva or Karnesh, living in the Pahasour village in Haryana, claim to be descendants of the Maharishi. Apart from Pahasour, there are Kanva families living in Bhadani village as well.

Maharishi Kanva Ashrama

Considering that Kanva was a part of Kalidasa's play, the question comes to mind whether he was a real person or just a mythological figure. While this matter is debatable, there is a beautiful Maharishi Kanva Ashrama, situated on the banks of River Malini in Uttarakhand.

Though one can find several other Kanva ashramas in India, this is believed to be the original place, where the ashrama was once established. The birthplace of Emperor Bharata, it is also said to be the locale where Chandrakiran Maharaj, a sage of the twentieth century, made his own base.

Another Maharishi Kanva Ashrama is situated on the banks of River Girna, outside village Kanalda, a little away from Jalgaon City in Maharashtra. Some versions of the legend narrate that it was here that Kanva had set up his ashrama and also the place where he found the abandoned baby Shakuntala.

Here, one can find some ancient unexplored caves. There's especially one cave, which is believed to have no end and is currently closed to the public by the Government.

Kapila

Kapila is the name given to different individuals in ancient and medieval texts, of which the best known is the founder of the Samkhya School of Hindu philosophy. Rishi Kapila of Samkhya fame is a Vedic sage, believed to have lived in the 6th or 7th century BCE. He is accredited as the author of the Samkhya-sutra, in which aphoristic sutras bring forth the dualistic philosophy of the school of thought. Kapila also influenced Buddhism in a big way.

Interestingly, several historical figureheads in Hinduism and Jainism, as well as mythical figures, pilgrimage sites and even an ancient breed of cows have been given the name Kapila. The most famous reference is to the great Rishi, with his student Asuri. These two

personalities are considered to be the first masters of the Samkhya school.

Beyond the Samkhya theories, Kapila also features in many dialogues of Hindu texts, explaining various other theories such as Ahimsa (non-violence) in the Mahabharata.

Iconography

The Agamas depict Rishi Kapila with a beard, seated in the padmasana pose, with closed eyes. He has a jata-mandala around the head, showing high shoulders, indicating his extreme control over breath. He is shown draped in deer skin, wearing yagnopavita, with a kamandalu kept near him. He has one hand placed in front of crossed legs and his feet are marked with lines resembling the outline of a lotus.

The Vaikhanasagama depicts Kapila in a different way. It places the Rishi as an avaranadevata and allocates the south-east corner of the first avarana to him. His image is kept facing the east and he is shown having eight arms, of which four on the right are in abhaya mudra. The other three carry the Chakra, Khadga and Hala. The remaining left hand rests on the hip in the katyavarlambita pose.

In Vedic Texts

- The Rig Veda describes Kapila as dasanam ekam kapilam. The Sata-jpitaka Series on the Shakhas of the Yajurveda make mention of a Kapila Shakha, situated in the Aryavarta. This implies that a Yajurveda school was named after a Kapila. The term "Kapileya", which means a "clan of Kapila", features in the Aitareya Brahmana. However, it does not talk about the original Kapila.
- In the Bhagavata Purana, Kapila relates to his mother the philosophy of yoga and theistic dualism. His Samkhyasutra is also described through Krishna to Uddhava in Book 11 of the Bhagavata Purana, in the passage which is better known as the Uddhava Gita.
- The Parisista of the Atharva Veda too makes mention of Kapila, Asuri and Panchasikha, in connection with a ritual for whom tarpana is to be offered.

In the Puranas

Rishi Kapila receives prominent mention in several Puranas as well. The following are some of the most important instances:

Kapila as the Sleeping Vishnu

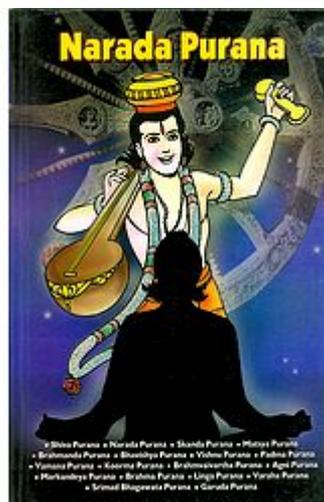
In the Brahma Purana, when the evil King Vena abandoned the Vedas and declared that he was the only creator of dharma. He had crossed all the limits of dharma and was eventually

destroyed and killed. Then, Kapila advised sages to churn Vena's thigh, from which came out Nishadas. From his right hand emerged Prithu, who made the earth a productive place, all over again. Kapila and the sages then went to Kapilasangama, a holy place where several rivers met.

The Purana also describes Kapila in the context of Sagara's 60,000 sons, who were looking for their Ashwamedha horse. They happened to disturb Vishnu, who was sleeping in the form of Kapila. He woke up and looked at them. The brilliance in his eyes burnt all but four of Sagara's sons to ashes. These four then carried forth the Sagara lineage.

As Vishnu's Reincarnation

The Narada Purana talks about two Kapilas; one being the incarnation of Brahma and the other, an incarnation of Vishnu. The Bhagavata, Brahmanda, Vishnu, Padma and Skanda Puranas; as also the Valmiki Ramayana; describe Rishi Kapila as an incarnation of Vishnu. According to the Padma and Skanda Puranas, he is Lord Vishnu himself, who descended on earth to disseminate true knowledge. The Bhagavata Purana refers to him as Vedagarbha Vishni. The name Kapila features as one of the Sahasranamas of Vishnu. In his commentary on the Samkhyasutra, Vijnanabhikshu describes Kapila as Vishnu.



Narada Purana

Book

As the Son of Kardama

Book 3 of the Bhagavata Purana says that Kapila was the son of Kardama Prajapati and his wife Devahuti. Kardama was born from Chaya, the very reflection of Brahma. Brahma asked

Kardama to procreate and so, the latter went to the banks of River Saraswati and practised penance to appease Vishnu. Vishnu appeared before him and told him that the son of Brahma would arrive there with his wife Shatarupa, in search of a groom for their daughter Devahuti. Vishnu asked Kardama to marry Devahuti and promised him that He Himself would be born as their son.

Besides Kapila, Kardama had nine daughters with Devahuti, namely, Kala, Anasuya, Shraddha, Havirbhu, Geeta, Kriya, Khyati, Arundhati and Shanti. They were married to Marichi, Atri, Angirasa, Pulatsya, Pulaha, Kritu, Vasishtha and Atharvana respectively.

As Son of Kashyapa

The Matsya Purana says that Kapila was the son of Kashyapa, from his wife Danu. He was one among their 100 sons.

As Son of Bharadwaja

The Brahma Purana and Harivamsa say that he was the son of Vitatha or Bharadwaja. However, there are no other sources that support this legend.

In the Dharmasutras and Other Scriptures

As Son of Prahlada

In the Baudhayana Dharmasutra, the Asura Kapila was the son of Prahlada. He was the one who went on to set up rules for ascetic life and also created the four Ashrama orders of Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyaasa. He further made rules for renouncement of the sacrifices and rituals in the Vedas.

The Mahabharata describes him as the sage who argued against sacrifices and was all for non-violence and stopping cruelty against animals. He firmly propagated the idea that those who sacrificed innocent animals for their benefit would finally experience a similar death.

Other References

- Pradyumna assumed the form of Kapila when he broke free from worldly desires
- Kapila is one of the seven Dikpalas
- The Jayakhya Samhita refers to Vishnu and Kapila, taking the forms of Narasimha and Varaha, in order to vanquish several demons appearing before them.
- In the Vamana Purana, the Yakshas were fathered by Kapila, with his consort Kesini, who came from the Khasa clan.

- Some Puranas even mention Kapila as a female, a daughter of Khasa and a Rakshasi, after whom came the name Kapileya gana. According to the Mahabharata, Kapila was also a daughter of Dakhsa who married Kashyapa and gave birth to the Brahmanas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas and Apsaras.
- Chapter VIII of the Jain Uttaradhyana-sutra mentions Kapila in verses titled Kaviliyam or "Kapila's verses". The Rishi is mentioned in several other Jain texts and scriptures as well, including Jnatadharmakatha, where Kapila was a contemporary of Krishna and Vasudeva of Dhatakikhanda.
- According to Buddhist literature, including works such as the Jataka Tales, the Buddha was Kapila in one of his previous lives. Buddhist art commonly depicts both Narayana and Kapila as kings within a Buddhist temple, along with other figures such as Amitabha, Maitreya and Vairocana. According to Chinese Buddhism, the Yaksha Kapila and fifteen daughters of Devas became patrons of China.

Kapila's Works

The following are works authored by Rishi Kapila. Many of which are lost now and some are available as unpublished manuscripts in libraries.

- Manvadi Shraddha
- Drishtantara Yoga, also named Siddhantasara
- Kapilanyayabhasha
- Kapila Purana
- Kapila Samhita
- Kapilasutra
- Kapila-Stotra
- Kapila Smriti
- Kapilopanishad
- Kapila Gita, also called Drishtantasara or Siddhantasara
- Kapila Pancharatra, also known as Maha Kapila Pancharatra

Kashyapa

Kashyapa is considered to be one of the Saptarishis in the Rig Veda, several scriptures and legends. In the colophon verse in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, he is listed as the most ancient Rishi. Kashyapa is a popular name, which refers to several different personalities in ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts and legends.

History

Kashyapa is also known as Kasyapa or Kacchapa, which means "turtle" in Sanskrit. This sage is accredited as the author of several hymns and verses in the Rig Veda. His family of students are also believed to be the authors of the second verse and several other hymns of the eighth and ninth mandala of the Rig Veda.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad mentions Rishi Kashyapa along with other ancient and powerful sages such as Atri, Vasishtha, Vishwamitra, Jamadagni, Bharadwaja and Gautama. He features in Patanjali's ancient Bhashya on the verses of Panini, in the Ramayana and Mahabharata and also in Puranic literature.

Family

Though Kashyapa features prominently in several Hindu scriptures, texts and legends, there is no one consistent tale about his birth and early life. Some legends exalt him as the father of all Gods, men and demons and some even say that he is the Kurma avatara of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu.

According to the Vishnu Purana, Kashyapa married the thirteen daughters of King Daksha, namely, Aditi, Diti, Kadru, Danu, Arishta, Surasa, Surabhi, Vinata, Tamra, Krodhavasha, Ira, Vishwa and Muni. The Vishnu Purana and the Vayu Purana give him the status of the father of the Devas, Asuras, Yakshas, Dravidas and all the other living creatures.

In one version, with Aditi, he fathered Surya (the Sun God) or alternatively Agni (the God of Fire) and the Adityas. In another version, Vamana (an avatara of Vishnu) is the child of Aditi and Kashyapa. The Rishi is also said to be the brother-in-law of Dharma and Adharma.

In Hindu Texts

Various Hindu texts give very different accounts of Rishi Kashyapa's life and time.

- According to the Ramayana, he was married to the eight daughters of Daksha, while in the Mahabharata and Vishnu Purana, he married all the thirteen daughters of Daksha. The daughters' names are also different in both the versions.
- Some legends describe him as the son of Marichi and a descendant of the Suryavansha (the Solar Dynasty). Yet others say that he was a descendant of Uttamapada, who married Daksha's daughters. Lesser heard legends state that he was a descendant of Hiranya Kashyapa.
- According to some legends, Kashyapa is believed to have drained the Kashmir valley, so as to make it utterly uninhabitable. This could probably correspond to a Buddhist

legend, where Manjushri drained Nepal and Tibet. Here, the concept of "draining" could mean removing the stagnant waters of ignorance and spreading knowledge and wisdom throughout the valley.

- The Sindh city of Multan in present-day Pakistan, also referred to as Mulasthana, was called Kashyapapura in some ancient legends. Some associate Kashyapa as River Indus in the Sindh region. Some other legends state that Kashyapa reclaimed that land from a huge lake and that his school was based there. The land was ultimately named after him as well. However, there is no official record to prove these and similar other theories.

Kashmir

It is believed that Kashmir, situated in the northern Himalayan region of India, got its name from Rishi Kashyapa. Some experts aver that this may have been the shortened version of "Kashyapa Mir" or the "lake of the sage Kashyapa". It could have also been derived from "Kashyapa Meru", or the "sacred mountains of Kashyapa".

Interestingly, in ancient Greek texts, this land has been linked to the expedition of Alexander the Great and had been called "Kasperia", probably a short form of "Kasyapamira". Further, the word "Kaspapyros", which appears in Greek geographer Hekataois text, traces the path of the Indus River from the mountains, where it drained in the sea. Kaspapyros may have been derived from "kasyapa-pur" or the "city of Kashyapa".

In Buddhist Texts

According to Buddhist Pali canonical texts such as Digha Nikaya and Tevijja Sutta, the Buddha used to have discussions with the Vedic scholars of his time. The Buddha named ten Rishis, calling them "early sages" and makers of the ancient verses that were collected and chanted during his era. Among these ancient sages is Kassapa, which is the Pali spelling of "Kashyapa".

Literary Works

Kashyapa is accredited as the author of innumerable texts in the medieval era. The following are some treatises named after the Rishi or attributed to him:

- Kashyapa Samhita, also called Vriddhajivakiya Tantra or Jivakiya Tantra, is a reference book on Ayurvedic paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology. Revised by Vatsya, this is a tutorial, jointly written by the sage and his student, Vriddhajivaka.
- Kashyapa Jnanakandah or his "book of wisdom", is a 9th century text, used in Vaishnavism.

- Kashyapa Dharmasutra, which is now lost, is supposed to be a very ancient text. Its existence is inferred from quotes and citations by ancient Indian scholars.
- Kashyapa Sangita, again a very old text, is now lost to us. This was supposed to be a treatise on music and is quoted by Shaivism and the Advaita scholar, Abhinavagupta. Here, Kashyapa explains the viniyoga (meaning and uses) of each rasa and bhava. Another music scholar named Hrdanyangama, mentions the Rishi's contributions to the theory of alankaras in Indian music.
- Kasyapasilpa, also referred to as Asumad Agama, Kaspiya or Silpasastra of Kasyapa, is a Sanskrit treatise on architecture, iconography and the decorative arts.

Lopamudra

Lopamudra, also known as Kaushitaki and Varaprada, was an ancient female philosopher. The wife of Rishi Agastya, she is believed to have lived during the Vedic period (1950 BC-1100 BC). Several hymns in the Rig Veda have been accredited to her authorship. Not only was she a Rishipatni, but she was also a yogini in her own right. She is believed to have visualized the "Panchadasi" mantra of the Sakta tradition of Hinduism.

Etymology

The name Lopamudra is derived from two words, namely, "lopa" (the loss) and "mudra" (beauty or signature feature). This implies the loss that animals and plants suffered by giving their distinctive features to her, when Agastya created her. Agastya is believed to have created Lopamudra and given her to the King of Vidarbha, who was in penance, seeking progeny. The Rishi created her with the intention of marrying her in the future.

In due course of time, Lopamudra grew to be a beautiful young woman. Agastya then approached the king and demanded his daughter's hand in marriage. Lopamudra agreed to wed him and left the palace to live with him in his ashrama.

After some time, however, she got tired of his austerities and penance. She started writing a hymn in the Rig Veda, asking for his love and attention. This hymn made him realize that he was neglecting his husbandly duties. He changed his ways and soon, the couple had a son named Dridhasyu, who later went on to become a poet.

Lopamudra, along with her husband, is also credited for spreading the fame of the Lalita Sahasranama (the thousand names of the Devi). It is further believed that Rishi Agastya learnt the same from Hayagriva, who is an avatara of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu.

Legend

There are three versions of the legend of Lopamudra. The first one features in the Rig Veda; the second in the Mahabharata and the third, in the Giridhara Ramayana. Let us now look at all these three legends.

In the Rig Veda

In the Rig Veda, there are hymns written by 27 Rishikas or female Rishis. This shows the tremendous influences female philosophers had at that time. These hymns can be categorized under three groups. The hymns in the first group were contributed by Rishikas only, such as Vishwavara and Apale. The second group comprises verses, out of which some have been written by Rishikas, particularly, Lopamudra and Shashiyasi, the wife of Taranta. The third group mostly deals with mythological characters and is a representation of theoretical qualities.

Lopamudra's hymn has six verses, which have her name tag and are dedicated to Goddess Rati, the consort of Kama or Manmata, the God of Love. Her hymns elaborate on the ties between a husband and wife. She is credited as the author of hymn number 179 of the Rig Veda.

The Rig Veda considers both Agastya and Lopamudra as "mantra drashta". She is also mentioned in the Yajur Veda and in the Agama Granthas as well. Here too, she is considered to be "Mantradrika" (well versed in the mantras).

In the Mahabharata

The Aranyaka Parva of the Mahabharata relates the story of Agastya and Lopamudra. The legend begins with the asura brothers, Illwala and Vatapi, who lived in Manismati. It is also believed that they originally came from Badami in Karnataka. Illwala requested a learned Brahmin to bless him with a son who would be as powerful as Indra. When this did not happen, he and his brother got annoyed with the Brahmin and started to harass him.

Vatapi would transform himself into a buffalo. After killing the buffalo, Illwala would serve the cooked meat to the Brahmins. After he forced the Brahmins to eat the same, he would ask his brother to come out of their stomachs. Vatapi would then assume his normal form and emerge from their stomachs; killing them in the process.

Agastya came to know about this. At that time, he had attained much power through penance and was on his way to heaven. On the way, he was surprised to see many souls hanging upside-down. When he asked them the reason for their plight, they said they were hoping that a son would be born to their descendant, so that they could get a release from their curse. They also

told him that they were his ancestors and that it was now time for him to get married and beget a son, so that he could free them and send them to heaven.

In another version, Agastya got a dream, where he encountered his ancestors suspended upside-down, hanging over a deep ravine.

Agastya Creates Lopamudra

Agastya then started creating a woman of rare beauty and intelligence. He took the best features from various creatures - he took the eyes of the doe, the grace of the panther, the slenderness of palm trees, the fragrance of the champaka flower and so on. He then gave the child to the King of Vidarbha to raise her.

Agastya Marries Lopamudra

When she came of age, he approached the king and asked for her hand in marriage. Fearing his curse if he denied the sage, the king gave his daughter in marriage to him. Lopamudra left the comforts of the palace and went to live in her husband's hermitage.

In the ashrama, Agastya remained cool and aloof from Lopamudra. Though she was beautiful and charming, he refused to be swayed by her. However, one day, he saw her swimming naked in a lake. Her beautiful figure and sensuousness attracted him. He also thought of the promise he had made to his ancestors, to beget a son.

He then wanted to make love to her. Lopamudra, however, kept a condition that she would sleep with him only if he gave her all the princely comforts and wealth that she was used to, prior to getting married.

He pleaded that he was an ascetic and would never be able to break the years of asceticism only to gain material wealth. She, however, was firm in her decision and argued that, using his great ascetic powers, he could gain anything in this world. In that way, she persuaded him to go in search of riches.

Agastya Acquires Riches

In his search for wealth, Agastya met three kings, Srutarvan, Vradhnaswa and Trasadasyu. They received him with great respect and requested him to state his wish. When he told them to give him a part of their wealth, they promised to give him the surplus they would have in their treasury, after serving their subjects. Feeling that it would not be adequate, the Rishi went to Illwala, the King of Asuras, who was very wealthy.

Illwala too was very respectful towards him and offered him and his entourage the leftover meat of his brother Vatapi, who had taken the form of a buffalo. While the others were scared to consume it, Agastya ate it without hesitation and then said, "Vatapi jeerno bhava", meaning, "may Vatapi be digested". After that, Illwala, as usual, called out to his brother to come out of Agastya's stomach. But the Rishi merely belched and only gas came out of his mouth. Illwala was grief-stricken at the loss of his brother Vatapi. However, he gave Agastya all the wealth that he desired, plus gold and silver coins and his golden chariot as well.

The sage came back home with all the wealth, thereby pleasing his wife. She eventually gave him a son called Drdhasyu. He was very knowledgeable in the Vedas and Upanishads. After his birth, Agastya performed the rites to release his ancestors of their curse.

In Giridhara Ramayana

In the Giridhara Ramayana, Agastya approached the King of Kanyakubja, seeking one of his many daughters' hand in marriage. The king promised him that he would do that when one of them came of age. A few years later, the sage returned with the same request. By then, the king had gotten all his daughters married. But fearing Agastya's curse, he dressed his son Lopamudra as a girl and presented him to the sage. Miraculously, Lopamudra was transformed into a woman after the wedding.

Other References

The Sri Vidya Mantra, dedicated to the Devi, has twelve variations. Each of them is credited to a devotee, which includes Lopmudra. The other devotees include Manu, Chandra, Kubera, Manmatha, Agastya, Surya, Indra, Skanda, Shiva and Krodhabattaraka (Durvasa). One of the versions, which was popular in South India around the 6th century AD, is called the Lopamudra Mantra. Though not practised anymore, it is also associated with some traditions in Kashmir.

River Kaveri in Karnataka is also referred to as Lopamudra. According to legend, Agastya kept Lopamudra confined in his Kamandalu or pot. During one of his sojourns, he met another woman, fell in love with her and started living with her. Knowing this, Lopamudra wept. Then, Lord Ganesha, who was passing by, heard her cries and released her from the pot she was confined in. She flowed out as the river Kaveri.

Markandeya

Markandeya is yet another ancient and powerful Rishi in Hinduism. There is an entire Markandeya Purana, entirely dedicated to him, which comprises a dialogue between the Rishi and a sage called Jaimini. The Bhagavata Purana too makes prominent mention of him. In the

Mahabharata, Markandeya is venerated as one of the greatest and most devout sages. He is a highly respected figure throughout all traditions and schools of thought in Hinduism.



Markandeya Purana

Book

Legend

One legend about Markandeya narrates how he was rescued by Kalantaka (Lord Shiva). The Lord protected him from the clutches of death, in the form of Yama.

According to this tale, the great sage Mrikandu and his wife Marudmati sought the blessings of Shiva. They were childless and were desperate to beget offspring. Shiva appeared before them and offered them the boon of a son, but gave them a choice. They had to choose between a righteous son, who would have a short life; or a mediocre child, who would live long. The couple chose the former and were blessed with Markandeya. The boy was an exemplary son in all ways, but was sadly destined to die at the tender age of 16.



Lord Shiva Sitting on Bull

Resin Statue

Like his parents, Markandeya too grew to become a great devotee of Shiva. Soon, he turned 16 and it was time for his departure from this mortal world. Even that day, he continued with his routine worship of the Shivalinga.

When the time of his death arrived, the messengers to death came to take him away. They, however, could not get anywhere near the boy, who was surrounded by a powerful aura of protection that Shiva himself had created around him. Then, Yama, the God of Death arrived there. He demanded Markandeya to surrender his life to him. The boy calmly and politely told him to wait, since he was in prayer.

Markandeya hugged the Shivalinga and continued to pray to his Lord. Sniggering at the boy's arrogance and ignorance, Yama threw his noose around the boy. Accidentally, it landed around the idol. Yama yanked at the idol, in an attempt to rope in the boy with it as well.

Suddenly, Shiva appeared before Yama in a rage and ordered him to go away and leave his devotee alone. He also said that the boy had his full blessings and would live forever. Yama defied the order, which further enraged Shiva. The Lord challenged him to battle and effortlessly defeated Yama, actually bringing him to the point of death. Shiva then revived Yama and let him go, on the condition that he would let Markandeya live forever. Thus, Shiva earned the name Kalantaka (Ender of Death).

It is believed that this event took place on the banks of Markanda River in Kurukshetra District. An ancient Markandeshwara Mahadeva Temple was built on the site. This temple has been rebuilt in modern times. Some believe that it took place in Thirukkadaiyur, Tamil Nadu.

In the Bhagavata Purana

The Bhagavata Purana relates another legend associated with Rishi Markandeya. As per this tale, once Markandeya visited Narayana Rishi and asked him for a boon. He prayed to the sage to show him his Maya (illusory powers), as Nara-Narayana are an incarnation of Sri Maha Vishnu. In order to fulfil Markandeya's wish, Sage Narayana appeared before him in the form of a child floating on a leaf, also declaring that he Time and Death.

Markandeya entered his mouth and saved himself from being drowned by the water surrounding the child. Inside the stomach, Markandeya discovered all the worlds, the seven regions and the seven oceans. Everything in the Universe was all there, including mountains, kingdoms, animals, birds, trees, flowers and fruit and all living beings. Astounded, he started to pray to Lord Vishnu.

Immediately, he came out of the child's stomach and exited from his mouth. Vishnu appeared before him and blessed him. Markandeya spent a thousand years with Vishnu and also composed the Bala Mukundashtakam.

Today, one can visit Markandeya Tirtha, the place where the Rishi wrote the Markandeya Purana. This is situated on a trekking route to the Yamunotri shrine in the Uttarakashi District of Uttarakhand.

According to the Sati Purana, a secret portion of the Markandeya Purana, Goddess Parvati also gave him a boon to write a treatise on Veena Charitra on her. This treatise is known as Durga Saptashati and is an important portion of the Purana. The Devi Mahatmya section of the Markandeya Purana is one of the most vital aspects of the Shakti tradition.

Parashara

Parashara was a Maharishi and the author of several ancient Hindu texts and treatises. He is credited as the author of the first Purana, the Vishnu Purana, before his son, Vyasa, rewrote it in its present form. Parashara hailed from an illustrious family. He was the grandson of Vasishtha and the son of Shakti Maharishi. Several texts mention the Rishi as one of the greatest authors/speakers of his time. He is also the third member of the Rishi Parampara of the Advaita Guru Parampara.



Vishnu Purana

Book

Some experts today believe that many of these texts were never written by Parashara himself, but by individuals who used his name on those texts, so that they would become important.

Family

According to the Vedas, Brahma created Rishi Vasishtha, who had a son by his wife Arundhati. They named him Shakti Maharishi. He in turn sired Parashara. With his wife Satyavati, Parashara sired Vyasa, who was the father of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, as mentioned in the Mahabharata.

Vyasa also had Ambika and Ambalika with his deceased brother's wives and Vidura through a maid of Ambika and Ambalika. Further, through his other wife, Jabali, he also sired Shuka. Thus, Parashara was the great-grandfather of both the warring parties of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, as per the Mahabharata.

Parashara is also the gotra for the ancestors and their offspring.

Life

As he lost his father at a young age, Parashara was raised by his grandfather Vasishtha. His father, Shakti Muni, was on a journey, while he encountered an angry Rakshasa. The Rakshasa had once been a king, but had been cursed by Rishi Vishwamitra to turn into a demon and feed on human flesh.

The demon came face-to-face with Shakti Muni and immediately devoured him. In the Vishnu Purana, Parashara narrates how angry he felt when he came to know about his father's untimely death. He then vowed that he would destroy and sacrifice the lives of Rakshasas and work for the extermination of the entire race as a whole.

Parashara then went about destroying thousands of demons and burnt them to ashes. When the Rakshasa race was just about to be wiped out, Vasishtha intervened and asked him to stop this needless violence and bloodshed.

Parashara obeyed his grandfather and, at the will of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, travelled across the country. In one such journeys, he stopped for the night in a little hamlet on the banks of River Yamuna. He was staying in the humble home of the fisherman-chieftain, Dusharaj. When it was dawn, Dusharaj asked his daughter, Matsyagandha (literally meaning, "one who smells of fish"), to ferry the sage to his next destination.

Sitting in the ferry, Parashara was attracted to this beautiful girl. With his spiritual powers, he created an island within the river and asked her to land the boat there. He also created a dense fog, which enveloped the entire river. Parashara then blessed her with a son, Krishna Dwaipayana, whose name literally meant, "the dark one who was born on the island".

Later, Parashara compiled the Vedic literatures and hence, came to be known as Vyasa; also, the 17th incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Parashara then granted Matsyagandha the boon that the finest fragrance would emanate from her person. After since, she came to be known as Satyavati or the "one with the pure fragrance".

After some time, Parashara left Satyavati in the care of Vyasa and then proceeded to perform his penance and austerities. Vyasa went on to become a Rishi and Satyavati returned to her father's house. In due course, she married Shantanu.

Maharishi Parashara had wounded his leg when he tried to fend off an attack on his ashrama. After that, he was known as the "limping sage". When a Maharishi of his stature leaves the mortal world, he merges back with an element or archetype. He was once walking through a dense forest, along with his students, when they were attacked by a pack of wolves. He was unable to run and escape due to old age and his lame leg. He breathed his last and merged into the wolves.

Texts

A number of texts and verses are attributed to Parashara. Here are a few:

- He is regarded as the seer of verses in the Rig Veda
- Parashara Smriti, also called Parashara Dharma Samhita, is a code of laws which are prescribed in the text, to be followed in the present Kali Yuga
- He is the speaker of the Vishnu Purana, which is considered to be the first Purana
- He is the speaker of the Brahad Parashara Horashastra, which is considered to be the foundational text of astrology. This dates back to the 7th or 8th century CE
- He is the speaker of the Vrikshaayurveda or the "science of life of trees"; one of the earliest treatises of botany. This was also considered to be the ancient botany primer for students of Traditional Indian Medicine
- He is attributed to the Krishi Parasaram, which is an ancient book dealing with agriculture and weeds

Parashurama

Parashurama is the sixth avatara of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu. Born as a Brahmin, he exhibited all the traits of a Kshatriya (warrior), such as aggression, expertise in warfare and valour. At the same time, he was also serene, prudent, wise and patient - traits usually exhibited by Brahmins and Rishis. Hence, is commonly regarded as a Brahmin Warrior.

Like all the other avataras of Vishnu, it was prophesied that he would appear at the time when

evil overwhelmed and destroyed all good on Earth. The Kshatriyas, with all their might and weapons, had begun to abuse their power. They took others' money by force and tyrannized them. Parashurama then manifested on Earth in order to correct the cosmic balance by destroying the wrongdoing Kshatriya warriors. He is also known as Rama Jamadagnya, Rama Bhargava and Veerarama in some Hindu texts.



Parashurama - Poster

Iconography

- The Vishnudharmottara Purana and the Rupamandana describe Parashurama as a man with matted locks. He has two hands; one carrying an axe.
- The Agni Purana depicts him with four hands, carrying his axe, bow, arrow and sword.
- The Bhagavata Purana describes him as having four hands, carrying his axe, bow and arrows and shield.
- Though hailed as a warrior, he is not usually portrayed in war scenes in Hindu temples. The Basohli Temple located in the Kathua District of Jammu and Kashmir is an exception.
- Usually, Parashurama is shown with two hands, the right one holding an axe, and being either in sitting or standing position.

Legend

According to some legends, Parashurama was born in a Saraswat Brahmin family, to sage Jamadagni and his wife Renuka. It is believed that his birthplace is on top of Janapav Hills in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. Nearby there is a Shiva temple, where Parashurama is said to have worshipped Lord Shiva. The ashrama where he was born is called Jamadagni Ashrama, named after his father. It is situated near a kund (pond), which is now being developed by the State

Government.

Jamadagni had a celestial cow, called Surabhi. This cow gave the family all that they desired. Once, a king called Kartavirya Arjuna asked Jamadagni for the cow. The sage, however, refused to part with it. The King took it by force. When Parashurama heard about the incident, he challenged the King to battle. He had just his axe in his hand. A battle ensued, where he killed the king. He then killed all his challengers as well.

In other versions of the legend, after winning the battles, Parashurama returned Surabhi to his father and told him about the number of people he fought and killed. Jamadagni was upset and reprimanded him, saying that Brahmins should never kill a king. He also asked his son to atone for his sins by going on a pilgrimage.

Parashurama left the hermitage for some years. After he returned, he was told that his father was killed by warriors seeking revenge. He again picked up his axe and killed several warriors in retaliation. In the end, he gave up fighting, put down his axe and took up Yoga and meditation.

In Kannada folklore, especially in devotional songs sung by Devadasis, he is often referred to as the son of Yellamma.

The Parashurama avatara is known for violence, revenge and retaliation. The main purpose of the avatara seems to be to educate people on the futility of krodha (anger), himsa (violence) and the need for repentance.

Parashurama Creates Kerala

There are interesting legends connecting Parashurama with the geographical and cultural origins of Kerala. One such is the sage's retrieval of Kerala from below the sea. According to this tale, he threw his battle axe into the sea. As a result, the beautiful, green land of Kerala arose from below it, thus reclaiming it from the waters.

In the Treta Yuga, Parashurama retrieved the submerged land from Varuna, the God of the Oceans and Bhoomidevi, the Goddess of Earth. From Gokarna, he travelled to Kanyakumari, where he threw his axe northward across the ocean. At the place where the axe landed, the land came up and became Parashurama Kshetra. It was a piece of land situated between Gokarna and Kanyakumari.

According to some Puranas, it was Parashurama who planted Brahmins and Nayakas in 64

regions of Kerala from the Chera and Pandya regions. Kerala is also sometimes known as Parashurama Kshetram, that is, the "Land of Parashurama".

As per one legend, Parashurama once went to meet Shiva. On the way, however, he was blocked by Ganesha, the Elephant-Headed Lord. Angry, the sage threw his axe at him. Ganesha, knowing that the axe had been given to him by Shiva himself, allowed it to cut off one of his tusks.

In the Ramayana

As per the Ramayana, Parashurama came to the betrothal ceremony of Rama to Princess Sita. Rama was the only one who had successfully strung the bow of Shiva (which was given to King Janaka by Parashurama) and thus, had won her hand in marriage. In the process of stringing the bow, Rama actually broke it into two, producing a tremendous noise, which reached the ears of Parashurama.

Recognising the bow's resonance as the one gifted by him, Parashurama rushed to Janaka's palace. The Kshatriyas, on seeing him, were afraid to confront him. However, Sita approached the Rishi and respectfully fell at his feet. Blessing her, he turned to confront Rama, the one who destroyed Shiva's bow.

Parashurama had learnt archery from Lord Shiva himself. Further, his anger was fuelled by the fact that a Kshatriya Prince had broken Shiva's priceless bow. He proceeded to lift his axe to attack Rama, but could not do so. Their eyes met and instantly, he recognized Rama for what he truly was - another avatara of Vishnu. Parashurama smiled and retreated back to his abode.



Ram, Vashishth with Parashuram

Kalamkari Painting on Canvas

In the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata describes Parashurama as an angry Brahmin, who, with his axe, killed innumerable Kshatriyas, because they were abusing their powers. In some versions, he even beheaded his own mother, on the orders of his father. She had lustful thoughts on seeing a young couple frolicking in the water. Jamadagni wanted her to pay for this sin. After Parashurama brought her head to his father, he asked for the reward that her life be restored and everything come back to normal. His father agreed and blessed him. Ever since, Parashurama was filled with sorrow, repented the violence and proceeded to go for a long pilgrimage.

The Rishi plays an important role in the Mahabharata. He mentored Bhishma, Drona and Karna, teaching them weaponry and helping the key warriors in both the sides, during the Great War of Kurukshetra.

Thus, Parashurama is an avatara that co-exists the avatars of Rama and Krishna.

Texts

- According to most Hindu texts, Parashurama is the fifth son of Renuka and Jamadagni.
- In Chapter 6 of the Devi Bhagavata Purana, he was born from the thigh and emanated intense light, which would blind all warriors. They would then repent their evil ways and promise to lead a life adhering to the rules of dharma. Their eyesight would then be restored by Parashurama, who would then grant them the boons they desired.
- Chapter 4 of the Vishnu Purana says that once, Richika prepared a meal for two women - one simple and another, with ingredients, which would cause a woman to conceive a son with warrior-like powers. The second meal was accidentally consumed by Renuka and she eventually gave birth to Parashurama.
- According to Chapter 2 of the Vayu Purana, he was born after his mother, Renuka, ate a sacrificial offering made to Rudra (Shiva) and Vishnu. This also ended up giving him the dual character of Kshatriya and Brahmin.
- According to the Bhagavata Purana, Parashurama retired in the Mahendra Mountains. He is the only avatara of Vishnu who never dies, never returns to merging back with Sri Maha Vishnu and constantly lives in meditative retirement.

Parashurama Kshetras

- There is more than one interpretation of the term "Parashurama Kshetra". The ancient Saptakonkana region is referred to as Parashuramakshetra. The region between Vapi

and Tapi, in South Gujarat, was blessed by the Rishi. Hence, it is called "Parshuram Ni Bhoomi".

- The Konkan region is also considered as Parashurama Kshetra.
- Parshuram Kund, a Hindu pilgrimage site in Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh, is dedicated to the Warrior Sage. Thousands of devotees throng this pond to take a holy dip, especially on Makar Sankranti day. This is believed to wash away all their sins.

Pulastya

Rishi Pulastya was one of the ten Prajapatis or mind-born sons of Lord Brahma. His name, in Sanskrit, literally means "the one with straight or smooth hair". He was also one of the Saptarishis in the first Manvantara. According to the Mahabharata, Pulastya sired the Rakshasas and the Kinnaras.

References to Pulastya can be found in several epics and scriptures of Hinduism. He receives prominent mention in the Atharva Veda, the Pravara texts, the Manu-smriti and the Mahabharata as well. According to Shivageeta, Pulastya is also the name of Lord Shiva.

Family

Pulastya was the one through whom some of the Puranas were communicated to mankind. He received the Vishnu Purana from Brahma and taught it to Parashara, who then made it known to mankind. Rishi Pulastya was married to Havirbhoo, one of the daughters of Rishi Kardama. The sage was the father of Vishrava and Maharishi Agastya. Vishrava or Vishravas was the father of Ravana, Kubera and all the Yakshas. Through his wife Kaikesi, Vishrava sired Ravana, Shurpanakha, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana. By another wife, Ilavida, he had a son named Kubera, who went on to become the Demon-God of Wealth.



Kubera - Brass Statue

In Hindu Mythology

- Once, Ravana was imprisoned by King Kartavirya Arjuna. Pulastya wanted to save Ravana at all costs and hence, intervened in the issue, in order to get him released from prison.
- Rishi Pulatsya inspired Parashara to compose the famous Vishnu Purana.
- Bhishma, the Grand Old Man of the Mahabharata; also the grandsire of the Pandavas and the Kauravas; learnt about the greatness of several places of pilgrimage, from Sage Pulastya.

In the Ramakien

In the Thai National Epic, Ramakien, Pulatsya is referred to as Latsatian. He was the second King of Lanka and the father of Thotsakan.

Archaeology

A famous granite statue of a king in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, was initially thought to be that of King Parakramabahu the Great. Some experts now believe that this might be the statue of Rishi Pulastya. However, this idea has been refuted by others, who argue that there are no other statues, paintings or carvings of the sage anywhere else in Sri Lanka.

Pulastya Pulhashrama

Pulastya Pulhashrama is located at the Pachhai of Myagdi District in Nepal and is one of the holiest sites of pilgrimage for Hindus across the world. In fact, this entire area is known as Siddhi Peeth, as several powerful Rishis had lived, meditated and attained enlightenment in this place.

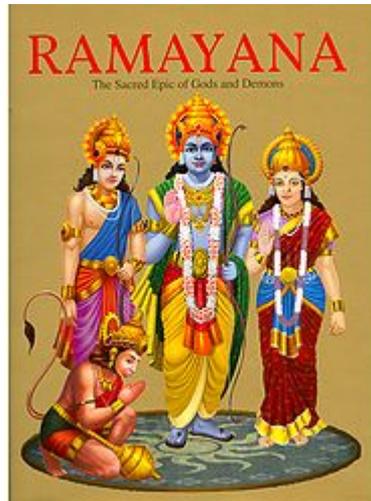
The Srimad Bhagavata Purana mentions that three powerful Rishis, namely, Pulaha, Pulastya and Vishrava meditated in this very location. They were all great devotees of Lord Shiva. It is also believed that Ravana was born and brought up in this region. Interestingly, both Pulaha and Pulastya were the sons of Lord Brahma and Vishrava was the son of the latter.

Valmiki

Valmiki is venerated as the harbinger-poet in Sanskrit literature. The Ramayana is attributed to him. In fact, he has penned the original version of the Ramayana, called the Valmiki Ramayana. This is the most popular version as well.

Valmiki is considered the Adi Kavi or the first poet, as he is the author of the Ramayana, the

very first epic poem. The Valmiki Ramayana consists of 24,000 shlokas and 7 kandas (cantos), including the Uttara Kanda.



Ramayana

Comic Book

This Ramayana comprises about 480,002 words. That is a quarter of the length of the Mahabharata and about four times the length of the Iliad. Though dated variously from 500 BCE to 100 BCE, it is impossible to date accurately, as it has undergone a process of changes, interpolations and redactions ever since.

According to popular belief, Rama met Valmiki during his exile and interacted with him. Rishi Valmiki also gave shelter to Sita in his own hermitage, when Rama abandoned her. Their twin sons, Lava and Kusha, were born in his own ashrama. The sage taught the young ones the Ramayana, who sang the divine story in Ayodhya during the Ashwamedha Yagna. In fact, Lava and Kusha were the first disciples to whom he taught the epic poem. Hearing this, King Rama wanted to know who they were. He summoned the boys to his palace, where they sang the song again. He then realized that these godlike children were his own and then returned to Valmiki's hermitage to bring Sita back home.

Early Life

Valmiki was born as Agni Sharma in a Brahmin family, to Pracheta (also known as Sumali) of Bhrigu Gotra. As per legend, he once met the great Sage Narada and had a discussion with him about his duties. On the latter's advice, Agni began to perform penance, constantly chanting the word "Mara", which actually meant, "kill".

As he went on chanting over many years, the word transformed to "Rama", the seventh avatara

of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu. Huge anthills formed around Agni, thus giving him the name Valmiki (meaning, "anthill"). Agni was then rechristened as Valmiki. He learnt the scriptures from Narada and went on to become one of the most powerful Rishis, revered by one and all around.

A Bandit Transforms into a Maharishi

As per popular legend, Valmiki was originally a common highway bandit, Ratnakara, who transformed into a Maharishi, by changing his evil ways overnight and placing unwavering faith in his Guru.

Ratnakara earned his living by ambushing unsuspecting travellers and stealing their wealth. He was utterly fearless and had no remorse about his actions. One day, he happened to meet Devarishi Narada. He saw Narada walking along the path, merrily singing the Lord's name. When Narada saw the bandit approaching him, he was unaffected and continued singing Vishnu's praises.

This infuriated Ratnakara. He told Narada who he was and said that the latter should be afraid of him, as he could potentially cause him harm. Narada, however, remained peaceful and told him that it was Ratnakara who should be afraid, as he would have earned much negative karma through his deeds and would definitely go to hell after his death.

Narada also told Ratnakara that, although his family was ready to share all the wealth and jewellery that he earned by wrongful means, they would never be willing to share his sins. The latter returned home and asked his family if they would share his sins, but they flatly refused, saying that his sins were up to him to endure.

Finally understanding the truth of life, Ratnakara asked Narada for forgiveness and requested him to become his Guru. The divine sage taught him the mantra for salvation. Knowing that his sins would prevent him from taking the name of God as it was, he advised the bandit to keep chanting "mara-mara". This, continuously repeated, would create the name "Rama-Rama".

Ratnakara followed Narada's advice and proceeded to chant the mantra. He ignored all his bodily requirements and would chant all day long, not even stopping for eating, drinking water or sleeping. Soon, termites built a huge hill around him and ate up his body completely. He thus earned the name Valmiki. Valmiki kept chanting for many years, after which he ultimately attained salvation.

Ratnakara had so much faith in Narada that he never asked him the meaning of "mara-mara"

and why he had asked him to keep repeating it. He merely followed his Guru's instructions. This shraddha (focus) and bhakti (devotion) towards his Guru finally helped him reach his goal of attaining mukti; finally making him the author of the Ramayana. Thus, this story shows that anyone can attain godhead when they completely surrender to the advice of their Guru.

Valmiki's First Shloka

Valmiki was once walking towards River Ganges for his daily ablutions. His disciple, Bharadwaja, was carrying his clothes. On the way, they came across the Tamasa Stream. Valmiki looked at it and elated at how clear it was. He said to his disciple that the stream was like the mind of a good man. He then decided to bathe there that day.

When he went looking for the right place to step into the stream, he saw a crane couple mating. Valmiki thrilled in the fact that even the birds were happy in that location. Suddenly, an arrow hit the male bird and he died on the spot. Filled with sorrow, its mate shouted in agony and she too died of the shock.

Valmiki was highly grieved by the pitiful sight. Looking around to find the one that had shot the bird, he spotted a hunter with a bow and arrows nearby. Enraged, Valmiki cried out:

"Ma nisada pratistha tvamagamah sasvatih samah
Yat kruanchamithunadekam avadhih kamamohitam"

Meaning...

"You will find no rest for long years of eternity
For you killed an unsuspecting bird in love"

Coming spontaneously from his grief and rage, this is considered to be Valmiki's first Shloka in Sanskrit literature. Later, he went on to compose the entire Ramayana with the blessings of Brahma. Interestingly, the epic poem was composed in the same meter as that of the shloka. That is again why the shloka is revered as the first shloka in Hindu literature itself.

Valmiki as an Incarnation of Brahma

According to the Vishnudharmottara Purana, Valmiki was born in the Treta Yuga, as an incarnation of Lord Brahma himself. Hence, the Purana says that those who are desirous of earning knowledge should worship Maharishi Valmiki.

It is believed that the sage later reincarnated as Tulsidas, who composed the Ramcharitamanas, which is the Awadhi-Hindi version of the Ramayana.

Temples

- Thiruvanmiyur, an area in Chennai, is believed to have derived its name from Rishi Valmiki. It is said that it was originally Tiru-Valmiki-Oor (the place/town of Valmiki). Here, one can find a temple dedicated to the worship of Valmiki. This temple is supposedly 1,300 years old.
- The Shree Valmiki Mata Maha Samsthana in Rajanahalli, Karnataka, is also quite famous.

Vasishtha

Vasishtha is one of the most ancient and most revered Vedic Rishis. One of the Saptarishis, he is accredited as the author of Mandala 7 of the Rig Veda. Vasishtha and his family receive mention in the Rigvedic mandalas and several other Vedic texts. He is considered to be the first sage of the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy by Adi Shankara. In Sanskrit, Vasishtha, also spelled as Vashishtha, means "most excellent, best or richest".

Yoga Vasishtha, Vasishtha Purana and some versions of the Agni Purana and Vishnu Purana are attributed to him. He also plays a vital role in many mythological stories and is believed to be in possession of Kamadhenu, the Divine Cow and Nandini, her calf, who could grant any wish their owners sought. He is famous for his long-lasting feud with Rishi Vishwamitra.



Kamadhenu

Brass Statue

The Rig Veda describes Vasishtha as a scholar who travelled across the Indus River to establish his school. Married to Arundhati, he was also called Arundhati Nath. He is said to have lived on the banks of the Ganga in present-day Uttarakhand. Later, this place is believed to have been the abode of Sage Vyasa, along with the Pandavas.

Vasishtha is described as a sage with long flowing hair, which is neatly tied into a bun and coiled with a tuft to the right. Further, he has a beard, a handlebar moustache and a tilak on his forehead.

Texts

- Vasishtha Samhita is a medieval Yoga text. There is an Agama too, with the same name.
- Vasishtha Dharmasutra is one of the few dharma-related treatises, which still survives to date. It forms an independent text and other parts of the Kalpasutra are missing.
- Yoga Vasishtha is a syncretic medieval text, which discusses Vedanta and Yoga philosophies. Written in the form of a dialogue between the Rishi and Rama, it deals about Yoga and its principles, the nature of life, human suffering, freewill, choices presented to human beings, human creative power and spiritual liberation, among other things. These teachings are structured as stories and fables, with a philosophical approach that is similar to Advaita Vedanta.
- Rishi Vasishtha is accredited as the author of the Agni Purana.
- The Vishnu Purana is attributed to the Rishi, along with Rishi Pulastya. He is also said to have written many other Vedic hymns and is believed to be the arranger of Vedas during the Dwapara Yuga.

Legend

As per one mythological legend, Vasishtha once wanted to commit suicide by falling into River Saraswati. However, the river wanted to stop him and so, it split itself into hundreds of shallow channels. Some experts believe that the story has its roots in the braiding process of the Sutlej or Satluj River, as it is alternatively spelt.

Rivalry with Vishwamitra

Vasishtha is known for his long-lasting feud with Vishwamitra. The King Vishwamitra coveted the former's divine cow, Nandini. When the sage refused, he challenged him to a battle. Vasishtha destroyed the king's entire army and sons as well. Vishwamitra then acquired weapons from Lord Shiva and burnt down his hermitage and sons. But Vasishtha was unperturbed and still managed to overwhelm Vishwamitra's weapons.

Then Vishwamitra undertook severe penance for thousands of years and became a Brahmarishi. After attaining the high spiritual state, he understood the futility of the feud and the violence and finally reconciled with Vasishtha.

Disciples

Maharishi Vasishtha was best known as the teacher of King Ikshvaku's clan. He also taught Manu, the progenitor of the Kshatriyas and Ikshvaku's father. He had several other illustrious disciples, including Nahusha, Rantideva, Bhishma and so on.

Discovery of the Bust of Vasishtha

A copper casting of the human head of what seemed like Rishi Vasishtha was discovered in 1958 in Delhi. This bust has been dated to around 3700 BCE. This piece is called "Vasishth head", because the features, hairstyle, tilak and other features resemble the description of the sage.

Strangely, this Vasishth head was not found in any archaeological site, but in the open market in Delhi, where it was sent to be remelted. Further, the head has an inscription of "Narayana", which may imply that it was created in a much later millennium.

Vasishtha Temples

- There is an ashrama dedicated to Rishi Vasishtha in Guwahati, India. This is situated close to the Assam-Meghalaya border and is a major tourist attraction in the area.
- The Vashishth Temple, situated in Vasishth Village, Himachal Pradesh, also brings in scores of tourists and devotees every year.
- Vasishth Cave is a cave on the banks of the Ganges at Shivpuri, about 18 kilometers from Rishikesh. Locals believe that it was the winter abode of the sage. It houses a Shiva temple. Nearby is the Arundhati Cave as well.
- Guru Vasishth is the primary deity at the Arattupuzha Temple in Thrissur District of Kerala. Here, he is known as Arattupuzha Sree Dharmasastha. The famous Arattupuzha Pooram is an annual celebration, where Sri Rama comes from the Thriprayar Temple to pay respects to his Guru at the Arattupuzha Temple.

In Buddhism

In Buddhist Pali canonical texts such as Digha Nikaya, Tevija Sutta relates a discussion between the Buddha and Vedic scholars of his time. Among the ten rishis that Buddha talks about, Vasettha (the Pali spelling of Vasishtha) is one of them.

Vishvamisra

Brahmarishi Vishvamisra is one of the most respected and celebrated Rishis of ancient India. A divine being of sorts, he is also accredited as the author of most of Mandala 3 of the Rig Veda, as also the most sacred Gayatri Mantra. The Puranas talk of only 24 Rishis since the beginning of time, who have understood the actual meaning of and have wielded the power of the Gayatri Mantra. Vishvamisra is considered to be the first among them; the last being Yajnavalkya. The story of Vishvamisra also features in the Valmiki Ramayana.

Life

Brahmarishi Vishvamisra was originally a king, called Kaushika. A descendant of Kusha, he belonged to the Amavasu Dynasty. So he was first the Chandravanshi King of Kanyakubja. He was a valiant warrior and the great-grandson of Kusha (not the son of Rama). Gaadhi was his illustrious son and an equally capable ruler. Vishvamisra was his son. In the Valmiki Ramayana, prose 51 of Bala Kanda starts with his tale. Vishvamisra ruled over his kingdom for many thousands of years.

The story of the sage appears in several Puranas, but vary from the Ramayana. Vishnu Purana and Harivamsa talk about his birth and early life. As per the Vishnu Purana, Kushanabha married a damsel belonging to the Purukutsa Dynasty. They were descendants of the Ikshvaku King Trasadasyu. In due course of time, they had a son named Gaadhi, who had a daughter named Satyavati (not the Satyavati of Mahabharata).

When she came of age, Satyavati was married to an old man called Ruchika, who was foremost among the Bhrigu race. Ruchika wanted a son with great qualities and so, he gave Satyavati a charu (sacrificial offering), which he had especially prepared in order to fulfil his dreams. Additionally, he gave Satyavati's mother another charu, to make her conceive a son with the qualities of a Kshatriya, at her request. However, Satyavati's mother secretly told her daughter to exchange charus with her. Eventually, Satyavati's mother gave birth to Vishvamisra and Satyavati gave birth to Jamadagni, the father of Parasurama. He showed all the qualities of a great warrior, right from a very young age.

Feud with Vasishtha

As per legend, Vishvamisra once cursed King Harishchandra to become a crane. Vasishtha also accompanied him by becoming a bird himself. This created ill-will among the two Rishis. Further, several other instances fuelled their feud. In many cases, Brahma himself had to interfere to diffuse the tension between them.

According to another version, Vasishtha once destroyed the entire army of Vishvamitra just by using his spiritual powers, by breathing the syllable of "Aum". Vishvamitra then undertook severe penance for years, in order to appease Shiva. The Lord bestowed upon him the knowledge of celestial weaponry.

Filled with arrogance, he then went to Vasishtha's ashrama and started using all those powerful weapons to destroy the Maharishi. He succeeded in killing the Rishi's thousand sons, but could do nothing to him.

Enraged by all this, Vasishtha brought out his Brahmada, a wooden stick imbued with the power of Brahma. It overwhelmed all of Vishvamitra's weapons, including his Brahmastra. He then proceeded to attack Vishvamitra. However, the Devas intervened to calm him down. Vishvamitra was humiliated and had to turn back. A calm Vasishtha returned to his hermitage to resume his meditation and other duties.

Vishvamitra and Menaka

A beautiful apsara, Menaka, was born during the Samudra Manthan episode (churning of the Ocean of Milk). She was one of the most beautiful apsaras, with a sharp mind and innate talent. She, however, was lonely and desired a family.

At this time, Vishvamitra was most powerful and even tried to create another heaven. This frightened the Devas, who felt he would usurp their position. So, they sent Menaka to earth, in order to lure him and break his penance. Menaka succeeded in seducing him. As soon as he laid eyes on her, he was filled with passion and lust and wanted her to be with him. Menaka herself fell deeply in love with Vishvamitra. They had a baby girl, Shakuntala, who later grew up in Sage Kanva's ashrama.

Years later, Vishvamitra came to know about Menaka's original intentions of coming down to earth and meeting him. Feeling betrayed, he merely cursed her to be separated from him forever. He had also genuinely loved her and so, he could never hurt her in any way. A heartbroken Menaka went back to Indra's court and the Rishi returned to his penance and austerities.



Menaka with Vishwamitra and Shakuntala

Raja Ravi Varma Painting Reprint

Rise to Rajarishi

After Menaka left, Vishwamitra went to the highest mountain of the Himalayas to perform even more severe penance for over 1000 years. He stopped eating or drinking water and even reduced his breathing to the minimum possible level.

Indra became even more insecure and decided to test him once again. He took the form of a poor Brahmin, begging for food. At that time, Kaushika was just about to break his fast of many years, by eating some rice. Kaushika instantly gave him his food and resumed his meditation. Thus, he finally mastered all his five senses.

After several thousand years of penance, Kaushika's yogic power was at its peak. At this point, Lord Brahma manifested before him and named him a Brahmarishi. He also got the name, Vishwamitra, which means, "friend of the whole world".

Vishwamitra then went to meet Vasishtha. Initially, when he greeted the latter with some pride, the former merely blessed him. Suddenly, all the pride left his heart and he became a clean and pure Brahmarishi. When Vishwamitra turned to leave, Vasishtha too realized the change that had occurred in him. He immediately proceeded to greet him warmly. Vishwamitra too embraced Vasishtha, thereby instantly ending their long feud.

Creating the Trisanku Swarga

Vishwamitra is famous for creating his own version of Swarga (Heaven), called the Trisanku Swarga. The proud King Trisanku once asked his Guru, Vasishtha, to send him to heaven in his

own body. The Guru responded that one cannot ascend to heaven without leaving one's mortal body. The King then asked the Sage's hundred sons to send him to heaven. The sons took offense and cursed him to become a Chandala. Trisanku was instantly transformed into a person with a body smeared with ash, clothed in black and wearing iron jewellery.

His palace guards, friends, relatives and subjects could not recognize him and he was thrown out of his own kingdom. Walking a distance, he came upon Vishvamitra, who agreed to help him.

The Rishi organized a big sacrificial ritual to appease the Devas, begging of them to accept Trisanku into heaven. But no Deva responded. Angry, the sage used his mystic powers and ordered Trisanku to rise to heaven. Lo and behold! Trisanku began to ascend till he reached heaven. There, he was pushed back down by Indra.

Enraged by this, Vishvamitra created a whole other Universe, including another Brahma, for Trisanku. He had just completed creating his Universe, when Brihaspati ordered him to stop. Trisanku, however, did not fully transcend to the other universe through the Swarga that was created for him. So he remained in a fixed, upside-down position in the sky and was transformed into a constellation, which is now famous as the Crux.

In the process of creating the Trisanku Swarga, the Rishi had used up all his powers. So he had to start again to attain the status of Brahmarishi.

In the Ramayana

In the Ramayana, Vishvamitra is the Guru of Rama (the seventh avatara of Lord Vishnu), the Prince of Ayodhya and his brother, Lakshmana. He gave them the knowledge of Devastras (divine weaponry) and guides to help them kill powerful asuras (demons), such as Tataka, Maricha and Subahu. He also led them to the Swayamvara ceremony of Sita, where Rama broke the bow of Shiva, thus winning her hand in marriage.

Gotra

Brahmins belonging to the Kaushika or Vishvamitra Gotra are descendants of the Brahmarishi. This is one of the main gotras among Brahmins.

Worship

There is a temple dedicated to the worship of Vishvamitra called Sri Aabathsahaayeshwarar, in Alangudi, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

Vyasa

Vyasa, literally meaning, "Compiler", is the author of the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, and the Vedas and Puranas as well. He is also known as Veda Vyasa; the one who classified the Vedas; and Krishna Dvaipayana; talking about his dark complexion and the place where he was born.

The festival of Guru Purnima, also called Vyasa Purnima, is dedicated to him. It is believed that he was born on this day and it was also the day he divided the Vedas. Vyasa is considered to be one of the seven Chirajivins (long-lived or immortal), who will live on till the end of this yuga.

Life

Vyasa first makes his appearance as the compiler of the Mahabharata and also plays a major role in the epic itself. It is said that he was the expansion of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu himself. Even the Vishnu Sahasranama makes mention of it. It is said that Vishnu manifested in the Dwaparayuga to make Vedic knowledge available to all, in the form of the written word.

Vyasa was the son of Satyavati, the adopted daughter of the fisherman Dusharaj. He was born on an island in the river Yamuna. Due to his dark skin tone, he was named Krishna. Additionally, because he was born in an island, they called him Dwaipayana.

As per legend, Vyasa, in his previous life, was the Sage Apantaratamas, who was born when Vishnu uttered the syllable "Bhu". Since birth, he was totally devoted to Vishnu and naturally had the knowledge of the Vedas, the Dharmashastras and the Upanishads within himself. At Vishnu's orders, he was reborn as Vyasa.

Maharishi Vyasa's biological father was Sage Parashara. Prior to his birth, Parashara had performed penance to please Shiva. Shiva granted him the boon that Parashara's son would be a Brahmarishi, equal to Vasishtha in all aspects; and would be famous for his extensive knowledge.

Parashara begot Vyasa with Satyavati. Miraculously, she gave birth to the baby as soon as she conceived it. Vyasa immediately turned into an adult and left, promising his mother that he would be there for her whenever she needed him.

Vyasa then acquired his knowledge from the four Kumaras, Narada and Lord Brahma himself.

He is believed to have lived on the banks of the Ganga, in present-day Uttarakhand. Incidentally, this was also the abode of Vasishtha and the Pandavas, when they were in exile.

In the Mahabharata

According to the Mahabharata, once Satyawati, a fisherwoman, ferried Parashara in her boat. He was in a hurry to attend a yagna and she helped him reach his destination. So he gave her a mantra, which would help her beget a son, who would have all the best qualities. Satyawati immediately recited the mantra and begot Vyasa. Shocked, she decided to keep it a secret and never even told King Shantanu, who she married later.

After several years, Shantanu and Satyawati had two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Chitrangada was killed by Gandharvas in a fight and Vichitravirya was naturally physically weak. Satyawati asked Bhishma to look for a bride for Vichitravirya. Bhishma attended the Swayamvara conducted by the King of Kashi and defeated all the other participants. He then abducted Amba, Ambika and Ambalika.

Amba was already in love with the Prince of Shalya. So Bhishma allowed her to go to him. However, Shalya rejected her. She came back and asked Bhishma to marry her. But he had taken a vow of Brahmacharya (celibacy) and so, could not marry her. She then vowed that she would kill Bhishma.

Vichitravirya collapsed and died during his wedding ceremony. Satyawati, aware that there was no one else to take the clan forward, revealed to Bhishma the secret of Vyasa's birth and requested him to bring her son to Hastinapura.

Vyasa was filled with such a blinding aura, that Ambika, upon seeing him, shut her eyes. This resulted in their child, Dhritarashtra, being born blind. Ambalika turned pale on meeting Vyasa. This resulted in their child, Pandu, being born pale. Then Ambika sent her maid to meet Vyasa. As the maid was calm and serene, they had a healthy child named Vidura.

Vyasa had another son, Shuka, by his wife Pinjala (Vatika), the daughter of Sage Jabali. Shuka appears as a spiritual guide to the Kuru Princes.

Veda Vyasa

Since Vyasa took on the task of splitting and categorizing the primordial Veda into four canonical collections, thus forming the four Vedas, he is known as "Veda Vyasa". As per the Vishnu Purana, the Universe is actually a cyclical phenomenon that is in a constant state of evolution and dissolution. Each cycle is presided over by a number of Manus, one for each of

the Manvantaras; each of which has four ages or Yugas. The Dwapara Yuga is the third Yuga. The Vishnu Purana states that in every third Yuga, Vishnu, in the form of Vyasa, manifests in order to serve mankind. He divides the Vedas into many portions and makes it fourfold, so that it becomes easy for mankind to understand and apply them in their lives.

The Vedas have been thus arranged twenty-eight times by great Rishis and consequently, twenty-eight Vyasas have passed away. The first distribution was made by Lord Brahma himself. The second one to arrange the Vedas was Prajapati. The Purana also says that the next one to arrange the Vedas will be Guru Drona's son, Ashwatthama.

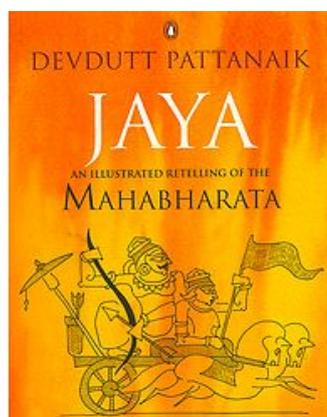
Works

The Mahabharata

Maharishi Vyasa is traditionally known to have chronicled the Mahabharata and also plays a vital role in it. He is believed to have meditated and authored it at the banks of River Beas (Vipasa) in Punjab. In order to complete this great feat, the Rishi asked Lord Ganesha to help him with writing the text. Ganesha agreed, on the condition that Vyasa should not stop the narration at any point. The latter set a counter-condition that Ganesha should first understand the verses, before proceeding to transcribe them.

This way, the Rishi narrated the entire Mahabharata at a stretch, plus all the Upanishads and the 18 Puranas. Ganesha broke one of his tusks and used it as a pen to write down all that was dictated to him.

The Jaya (literally meaning "victory"), the very essence of the Mahabharata, is a dialogue between Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya, his advisor and charioteer. The latter is given a boon to see the Great War of Kurukshetra as it happens. He narrates all the events that take place through the 18 days of war. Dhritarashtra sometimes asks questions, laments sometimes and fears the destruction that the war would eventually cause to his family.



Jaya - An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata

Book

Initially, Sanjaya gave a description of the various continents of the Earth and the numerous planets in the Universe. Then he focused on India, giving detailed lists of the innumerable kingdoms, provinces, cities, towns, villages, rivers, tribes and so on, of Bharata Varsha (ancient India). He then described the military formations undertaken by both the Pandava and Kaurava armies every day, also listing the details of the deaths of each person in the battlefield.

The Jaya comprises 18 chapters, which constitute the sacred Bhagavad Gita. It deals with subjects such as history, geography, warfare, morality and much more. The final version of his work is the Mahabharata. It is structured as a narrative to an assembly of Rishis, who in the forest of Naimisha, had attended a 12-year yagna known as Saunaka, also known as Kulapati.

Puranas

Vyasa is believed to be the author of the 18 Puranas, which are works that cover a massive range of topics including history and myths. His son Shuka is the narrator of the Bhagavata Purana.

Brahma Sutras

The Brahma Sutras are attributed to Badarayana. These are the very essence of Hindu philosophy, that is, Vedanta. Vaishnava Acharyas consider that Badarayana was actually Vyasa. He is known as Badarayana, since he had his ashrama in Badari Kshetram. Some experts, however, say that they were two different individuals.

Yoga Bhashya

Vyasa is accredited as the author of the Yoga Bhashya, a commentary on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

There may have been more than one Vyasa and his name may have been used to give credibility to various texts. However, the fact remains that he is still attributed to compiling, categorizing and writing much of this ancient Hindu literature.

In Sikhism

In Brahm Avtar, one of the compositions in the Dasam Granth, Guru Gobind Singh mentions Rishi Vyas as the fifth avatara of Brahma himself. Guru Gobind Singh wrote about the Rishi's numerous compositions, even talking about some great Kings such as Manu, Bharath, Dilip, Raghu and so on. He also attributed to Vyasa the entire treasure-trove of Vedic knowledge

Worship

There is a grand temple of Sri Veda Vyasa at his birthplace, Kalpi, in Uttar Pradesh. This temple is known as Shri Bal Vyas Mandir. Srimad Sudhindra Teerth Swamiji, the former Guru of Sri Kashi Math Samsthan, had the vision to build this temple in 1998. It is now managed by the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin (GSB) community, who belong to this Samsthan. It is now not only a sacred place of worship, but also a popular tourist destination.

Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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