

## **CONCEPT OF ṚṢIS AND ṚṢIKULAS IN VEDIC LITERATURE**

**By**

**Mithuna A**

*Research Scholar, Centre for Sanskrit Vedic-Studies, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit,  
Kalady, Kerala, India.*

### **Abstract**

*In Vedic treatises, the seers or Ṛṣis are described as of variant types. They are considered as Mantradrāṣṭā, Purohita, Kavi, Guru and Muni. The Ṛṣis are classified into different categories. They are Brahmarṣi, Devarṣi, Maharṣi, Paramarṣi, Śrutarṣi, Kāṇḍarṣi and Rājarṣi. The Vedic Ṛṣis are part of the ancient world order of sages connected to the Gods and to the Great Spirit or supreme Brahman beyond time and space. The Gotras of these Ṛṣis are also famous. There are different Ṛṣikulas in Vedic literature. This paper discusses about Vedic Ṛṣis and the different categories to which they belong. It also studies about Vedic Ṛṣis clan focusing on the prominent Gotras of the time.*

**Keywords:** prominent ṛṣis, ṛṣikulas, vedic period

### **Ṛṣis**

The word Ṛṣi may be defined in the Vedic context as the composer or seers of Vedic hymns. They are also called the Mantrakṛt or Mantradrāṣṭā. *Rgvedasaṃhita* gives the word meaning of Ṛṣis as Mantradrāṣṭā, Atindriyārthadrāṣṭā, Sarvadrāṣṭā etc.

The word Ṛṣi is derived from the root Ṛṣ having the meaning “movement”. Ṛṣis according to the *Nirukta*, means the rays of the sun and these are said to be seven in number. By extension of meaning of the term it came to be applied to the Ṛṣis or seers. Just as the

sun's rays spread everywhere and disclose the existence of all the beings, the seer or the Ṛṣis are able to perceive everything. Again the *Śatapatha brāhmaṇa* considers the Ṛṣis as breaths and derives the word Ṛṣi.

“Imāveva Gotamabharadvāja vaya meva Gotamoyaṃ Bharadvāja Imāveva Viśvāmitrajamadagni Ayameva Viśvā mitroyam Jamadagnirimāveva Vasi ṣṭha Kaśyapāvayameva Vasiṣṭhoyaṃ Kaśyapo vāgevātriṛvācā hayam namadyate Andhiḥ vai nāmaitady adattṛiriti sarvasyāttā bhavati sarvamasyāttā bhavati Sarvasyānnaṃ

bhavati ya evam veda”  
(Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 1180).

The five human senses such as eyes, nose, ears, skin and tongue are known as the Ṛṣis, which is an opening path to the supreme goal of life.

Purāṇas mention seven categories of the Ṛṣis. They are Brahmarṣi, Devarṣi, Maharṣi, Paramarṣi, Kāṇḍarṣi, Śrutarṣi and Rājarṣi. Vasiṣṭha, Agastya and Bharadvāja are the Brahmarṣis. The Devarṣis are Kaṇva and Mārkaṇḍeya. Vyāsa is example of Maharṣi. Paramarṣi is Bela. Kāṇḍarṣi is Jamadagni. Śrutarṣi is Śuśruta. The Rājarṣis are Janaka and Ṛtuparna. among them Brahmarṣi occupies the greatest position. Apart from them Viprarṣi is another group of Ṛṣis. The great saint Viśvamitra is included in this category.

In the Vedic Saṃhitas, at several places the word Ṛṣi is used as a synonym of the word Kavi. Śatapathabrāhmaṇa suggests that Kavi and Ṛṣi are the same.

‘Ete vai kavayo yadrṣyah’  
(Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 1180). The power and practices of Munis are found described in the Ṛgveda according to which they were probably a set of wandering ascetics devoted to

a primitive cult of Yoga. At one place Veda has mentioned Indra as friend of Munis. The Munis of the Ṛgveda are connected with the herbs and treatment of man than a sage. Upaniṣads describe a sage as steeped in the problem of the absolute.

The Sanskrit term Purohita for priest and the concept of priesthood or Purohitatva are certainly Pre-vedic. Priesthood is found in almost all civilization in the world. They were protectors of common man. Aitareyabrāhmaṇa states that Purohitas as half of the king (Arthur Berriedale Keith 726).

In ancient India, various types of teachers are found. They are Guru, Ācārya and Upādhyāya. The Guru is the person who, after performing various rites, gives instruction in the Veda. The Ācārya initiates a student through the Upanayana rite, and instruct any one possibly each Veda. The Upādhyāya is frequently called the first teacher along with a student’s father and mother. He is the secondary sort of teacher because he teaches only a portion of the Veda and claims a fee for his instructions.

The term Ṛṣi was originated from the ancient Hindu culture of the indus region. Ṛṣis were the scribes of the

large body of natural hymns and spiritual sciences known as the Vedas. The Vedic Ṛṣis are the part of the ancient world order of sages connected to the Gods and to the great spirit or supreme Brahman beyond time and space.

The Vedic Ṛṣi was not merely renunciated in the later monastic sense, though he had a world of transcending vision. He was also a culture maker or a world maker. The Ṛṣis were the great progenitors and guides of culture, not only in India but all over the world as the Ṛṣis order transcended all borders and boundaries. The Vedic Ṛṣis travelled and fostered new cultures wherever they went, tried to develop the natural potentials of everyone, not simply trying to impose a belief upon others. They were the emissaries of the spiritual Vedic civilization throughout the world. With their Yogic powers they could travel far and natural obstacles like rivers, mountains and seas could not obstruct them.

The Vedic sage desired a combination of winning intelligence with unimpaired and unsurpassable courage. There are prayers expressing the desire and anxiety never to fall in character and to shine in prowess

forever which shows the conviction of the Vedic people that one must strive for the good and avoid the evil path in life.

### **ṚṢIKULAS**

The Ṛṣikulas are the very foundation of Vedic civilization. The Vedic Ṛṣis are the great progenitors of the Vedic people, who trace their ancestry to them. All these Gotras are well represented in the people of India. The Ṛṣis founded great families, set up important social institutions and served as the main advisors to the king.

The Gotra or kula means a family. The names Gotra, Gaṇa, Vaṃśa, Varga, and Pakṣa are all used in the same sense. The number of families that had a right to figure in the Brāhmaṇic peerage of India was very considerable. The oldest priestly families were called Vaṃśas or Mūlagotras. It's later divided in to Pakṣas or group. Each group was further subdivided in to a number of Gotras. Their number had become very considerable.

*Manusmṛti* quoted the word kula:

‘Daśīkulaṃ tu bhuñjīta Viṃśī Pañca Kulāni ca

Grāmaṃ Grāmaśatādhyakṣa Saha srādhpatiḥ Puram’ (Ganganath Jha 119).

In the above hymn 'Kulam' means the quantity of the earth.

Four village's head together make one clan, twenty village's head together make five clans, hundred village's head together make one village and thousand village's head together make a 'Puram'. This is the way that each of them should control their own Clan.

Medhātithi gives details of Kula part village; know in some places as 'Haṭṭa' and in other as 'Uṣṭa'.

The *Śabdakalpadruma* give the meaning of kula:

‘Ācārau vinayo vidhyā pratiṣṭhā  
tīrthadarśnaṃ  
Niṣṭāvṛttistapodānaṃ navadhā kula  
lakṣanaṃ’ (Raja Radhakanta Deva  
19).

A Kula should have the features like Custom, Modesty, Pilgrimage, Hereditary work, Donation, Investiture, Strong faith, and Neatness.

Macdonell and Keith say that, as an uncompounded word, Kula does not occur before the period of the Brāhmaṇas. It denotes the home or house of the family itself, as connected with the home.

The use of the term Kula points clearly to a system of individual families, each,

no doubt, consisting of several members under the headship of the father or eldest brother, whose Kula the dwelling is. As distinct from Gotra, Kula seems to mean the family in the narrower sense of the members who still live in one house, the undivided family (Keith 171).

Kosambi discusses the Ṛṣikulas, the Gotra-kāra Ṛṣis are (1) Jamadagni (2) Bharadvāja (3) Gotama (4) Kaśyapa (5) Vasiṣṭha (6) Agastya (7) Atri (8) Viśvāmitra. Some measure of accord has been restored by taking Jamadagni as the descendant of Bhṛgu. Baradvāja and Gotama are then descendants of Āṅgiras. Kaśyapa, Vasiṣṭha and Agastya are taken to be descended from Marīci, and for no immediately apparent reason Viśvāmitra is made a descendant of Atri (Chattopadhyaya, Brajaduial and Kosambi (E.d) 100-101).

The genealogical lists of kulas are found in the Brāhmaṇas, Sūtras, Mahābharata, and Purāṇas. All Brāhmaṇic families who keep the sacred fires are supposed to decent from the seven Ṛṣis. These are Bhṛgu, Āṅgiras, Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, Kaśyapa, Atri and Agastya. The real ancestors, however are eight in number: Jamadagni, Gautama, Bharadvāja, Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, Kaśyapa, Atri, and

Agastya. The eight Gotra, which descend from these Ṛṣis, are again subdivided in to forty nine Gotras and these branches are still present and identity is found in the Vedic Saṃhitas, Brāhṇaṇas, Upaniṣads, Sūtras etc.

Vedic Saṃhita says that the individual members of the group were neither fully specified nor fully listed. Ṛgveda gives the list of seven Ṛṣis. There are Bharadvāja, Kāśyapa, Gotama, Atri, Viśvāmitra, Jamadagni and Vasiṣṭha. The Vedic hymns do, however, on occasions provide a prototype which is then expended upon in later texts to give a list of a seven Ṛṣis. One example of this is been seen in the case of passage in the Atharvaveda, (Nagasaransing 10) which speaks of the seven Ṛṣi as sitting on the edges of the bowl. This is subsequently quoted in the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, (Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3-4) together this time with a list of each of the seven Ṛṣis. The group of the seven Ṛṣis was well- known during the Vedic times. The individual identities of the members of this group were not yet fully formulated in the Vedic Saṃhitas.

Sūtras gives the list of seven Ṛṣis is Vasiṣṭha, Bharajvāja, Jamadagni, Gotama, Atri, Kāśyapa, and Viśvāmitra. These lists which are found in the Śrautasūtras in connection with the

Gotras and pravaras are organization of family lineages. Several Śrautasūtras gives the Gotras and Pravaras of these Ṛṣis. The resulting list of Ṛṣis Gotra and Pravaras are seven in number. But the Ṛṣis who are regarded as their founders are listed as Bhṛgu, Vasiṣṭha, Atri, Āṅgiras, Agastya, Kāśyapa, and Viśvāmitra (Pramod Bala Misra 1-9).

The Vedic tradition, from the Saṃhitas to Sūtras come to formulate a list of the seven Ṛṣis which is most commonly given in the order Vasiṣṭha, Bharajvāja, Jamadagni, Gotama, Atri, Kāśyapa and Viśvāmitra, in some context Agastya as the eighth Ṛṣi. This group is also found in the Epic contexts and in a far fewer number of Purāṇic contexts. According to scholars their importance as a group has been very greatly diminished by this period (Mitchner E. Jone 45).

Shrikan G Talagiri (148-154) based on the ten Āpri- Sūktas identifies ten families of Ṛṣis. He assumes from the study of Āpri-Sūktas that they are of great importance in identifying the Bharatas, among the Pūrus, as particular Vedic Aryans of the *Ṛgveda*. He says that nine of the ten families recognized in the *Ṛgveda* are identifiable with the seven primary and two secondary families of Ṛṣis recognized in Indian tradition. The seven primary families are the Āṅgiras,

Bhr̥gu, Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, Agastya, Kaśyapa and Atri, and two secondary families are the Kevala Āṅgirasas (Kaṇvas in the Ṛgveda) and Kevala Bhr̥gu (Gr̥tsamadas in the Ṛgveda). But the Ṛgveda also recognized a tenth family, the Bharatas.

The seven main Gotras are namely Bhārgavas, Āṅgirasas, Atreyas, Viśvāmitras, Kaśyapas, Vasiṣṭhas and Agastyas.

### **The Bhārgavas**

The Vaṃśa of the Bhārgavas is set out in Vāyu. Brief accounts are also found in the Śrautasūtra. The two wives of Bhr̥gu were of excellent nobility of birth. They were unrivalled and splendid. One of them was the daughter of Hiranyakaśipu, well-renowned by the name Divya. The second was Paulomi, the daughter of excellent completion, of Puloman.

The families of Bhārgavas had thousand sons. Kosambi, based on the Ṛgvedic evidence, states that first mention of Bhr̥gus is, as a tribe who are fighting against Sudāsa. Bhr̥gus are considered by the hymns as the priestly survivor related to other Brāhmin who continue to climb higher in to indo Aryan-priesthood.

### **The Āṅgirasas**

The genealogy gives the first Āṅgiras by the name Atharvan. Three girls became the wives of Atharvan viz. Surūpa, Svarāt, and Pathyā. In them were born the heir and successors of Atharvan. Bharadvāja of very great fame, born of Bṛhaspati is known as Āṅgiras. The groups of families of Āṅgirasas were fifteen in number.

### **The Ātreyas**

Atri, the third prajāpati, had ten beautiful wives who were very chaste. Among the Gotras descended from Datta, four were widely renowned, named after their founder, Śyāvāśva, Mudgala, Balāraka and Gaviṣṭhira. The following four also are remembered as belonging to the subfamily of Atris. They are Kaśyapa, Nārada, Parvata and Arundhatī (Nagasaransing 73-86).

### **The Viśvāmitras**

The family of the Viśvāmitras was found by the great sage Viśvāmitra. He had many sons, chief among them being Madhucchandas, Kati, Ṛṣabha, Reṇu, Agastya and Gālava. He also adopted the Bhārgava Śunaśśepa with the name devarta and made him the chief of all his sons.

Viśvāmitra was the father of Śakuntala. Viśvāmitra's descendants formed many Gotras and more list are given of them than in any other Brahman family. The

Gotra names generally found in these lists are Devarata, Gālava, Hiranyākṣa, Kauśika, Lohita, Madhucchandas, Pāṇini, Suśruta and Yājñavalkya (Nagasaransing 69-74).

### **The Kaśyapas**

The genealogy says that Kaśyapa had two sons Vatsāra and Asita. Nidhruva was born of Vatsāra. Rebhya of very great fame was also born of him. Devala of very great fame was born of Ekaparṇā as the son of Asita. He was the most excellent one among Śāṇḍilays. The line of Kaśyapa consists of the branches Nidhruvas Śāṇḍiliyas and Raibhyas.

### **The Vasiṣṭhas**

Vasiṣṭha married Arundhati. Śakti was their son. Śakti procreated his bosom-born son Parāśara of Adrśyanti. Kṛṣṇdvaipāyana was born of Kālī, by her union with Parāśara. From Dvipāyana, Śuka, equipped with all good qualities was born of the Araṇī. The following six were born of Pivari as the children of Śuka viz. Bhūriśravas, Prabhu, Śambhu, Kṛṣṇa and Gauta the fifth. A daughter was also born viz. Kīrtimati. She was the mother of Yogic power. She maintained all the holy rites. She was the wife of Anuha and the mother of Brahmadatta. Ekāṣeyas as well as other are well-

known as Vasiṣṭhas. Thus eleven sections of Vasiṣṭhas are declared.

### **The Agastya**

Agastya married Lopamudrā. Their son was Dṛḍhāśya. According to some accounts, he had further son including Idhmabāhu, Pulaha and Kratu. (Mitchiner E. John 46) Agastya's descendents were divided in to ten groups. They are Idhmavāhas, Sāmbhavāhas, Agastins, Somavāhas, Yajñavāhas, Sāravāhas, Darbhavāhas, Pūrṇamāsas, Himodaka and Pāṇikas.

### **Conclusion**

The Vedas are, above all, the record of the seers of or Ṛṣi of Ancient India. All over the Ancient world from Mexico to Babylonia, India and china, these are a record of great sages or seers, who founded and guided their cultures according to a divine or heavenly ideal and inspiration. The Vedic Ṛṣis are part of the ancient world order of sages connected to the gods and to the Great Spirit or supreme Brahman beyond time and space. The Ṛṣis are saints with direct knowledge of Truth and God.

In the Vedas, the word Ṛṣi denotes an inspired poet of Vedic hymns. In particular, Ṛi refers to the author of the hymns of the Ṛgveda. Post-Vedic tradition regards the Ṛṣis or "sages" or

saints, constituting a peculiar class of divine human being in the early mythical system. The Vedic hymns

themselves assert that they were skillfully created by Ṛṣis after inspired creativity.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



***Mithuna A.*** is a Research Scholar, Department of Centre for Sanskrit Vedic-Studies, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kalady, Eranakulam District, Kerala, India. She holds M.A. Degree in Vedic – Studies. She has participated and presented the papers in Seminars and Workshops at regional, National and International level.

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