

KEŚIN: A COMET

One hymn of seven *ṛkś* in the RV (10.157) is devoted to *keśī*. According to Sayana, *keśāh keśasthānīyā raśmayah. Tadvantah keśinōgnirvāyuh sūryaśca* : *keśa* are in the position of hair; possessed of them are the *keśin* : fire, wind and sun.

Monier Williams gives the meanings of *keśin* as having fine or long hair, having tips. These meanings are also related to Rudra, Indra's horses, and rays respectively.

In relating *keśin* in this way to Vedic deities, the physical descriptions in the hymn have been overlooked almost totally. The first verse makes the statement that 'this brightness or heavenly body is called *keśī* (*keśīdam jyotirucyate*). The second verse tells us that they 'get into motion like the wind (*vātasyānudhrājim*). The fourth describes how the *keśin* moves in the atmospheric region, viewing objects in the universe (*antarikṣeṇa patati viśvārūpāvacākaśat*). The spatial dimensions of the brightness are expressed in the fifth verse: 'it reaches both the seas - the one in the east and the one in the west (*ubhau samudrāvā kṣeti yaśca pūrva utāparah*).

These descriptions raise before our eyes the picture of a hairy heavenly body, moving in rarified form like that of the wind, glowingly traversing the universe, spread over the space between the east and west seas. It has partial likeness to, but is not the same as fire, wind or sun. And these bodies appear in numbers. *Keśinah* is a plural like stars and unlike the sun, wind or fire.

The heavenly body that fits in with these descriptions is the COMET - *ketu* in Sanskrit.

In keeping with their allegorical, poetical and mythical nature, the Vedic texts detract us from the real subject of the hymn. But the allusions are transparent enough. The very name *keśin* is the exact equivalent of Greek *komētēs* 'long-haired (star)' that has given us the 'comet' denoting a 'Hazy object usually with starlike nucleus and with tail pointing away from sun, moving in elliptical or nearly parabolic path about the sun' as per the Concise Oxford Dictionary.

The rest of the imagery in the hymn can be understood and appreciated by referring to the '*ketucāra* : The course of Comets' chapter of Varahamihira's *Bṛhatsamhitā*. This chapter is a compilation of the collected information of past generations of Indian astronomers about comets, alongwith the traditions as to their influence on human lives with reference to the positions of their appearance and disappearance, and their conjunctions with stars and planets as also their visible colourations (*phalam udayāstamayaaih sthānaih sparśairādhūmavarnaih*). (6)

The first verse of the hymn says that *keśin* holds fire, water, heaven and earth; he brightens the whole of his space; this brightness is called *keśī* (*keśyagnim keśī viśam keśī bibharti rodasī / keśī viśvam svardrśe keśīdam jyotirucyate*). *Ketucāra* verse 3 defines the comet's form as fire in places other than a burning fire (*ahutāsēnalarūpam*); in verse 4, the comets among the constellations called celestial (*divyā nakṣatrasthāh*) and those of the intermediate world (*āntarikṣāh*) and terrestrial (*bhaumāh*) are separately enumerated.

Verse 2 of the hymn describes *keśins* as hermits girt with and winds and clad in unclean tawny skins. (*munayo vātaraśanāh-piśangā vasatemalāh*). The *keśins* are, from this, taken to be naked hermits - which is not correct as the latter part says they are clad, even if uncleanly. As a matter of fact the comets are only likened to hermits just as prominent stars are called *ṛśi* in Indian astronomy and folk tradition. Unlike the stars, however, comets are not spots of steady luminence and have variable, often enormous but hazy spreads of brightness scattered about them. These spreads are variously likened to tails, tufts (*śikhā*), twisted locks (*jaṭā*), chowrie (*cāmara*), and the monkey's tail (*harilāṅgūla*). In the *ketucāra*, verse 5 states, 'Some say there are a hundred and one comets, others say they are a thousand (*śatamekādihikameke sahasramapare vadanti ketūnām*). Of these, 'seventyseven named *aruṇa* are sons of *vāyu* (wind), evil mongers (*pāpadāh*) and uncouth (*paruṣāh*)' says verse 5. The *Gargasmhita* is more explicit in saying that they are of the colour of smoke (*dhūmaraktasavarṇāh*) and they appear as formed of wind or gas (*vātarūpā ivābhānti*). These allusions explain the characterization, plurality, appearance and similarity to winds, of the *keśins* the hymn. The latter half of this verse is already explained above as a physical description and can now be seen to go well with the wind-girt hermits.

Verse 3 reverts to the hermit-myth and expresses the hermit's reaction to the praising mortals, which in essence is the poet's visionary reasoning of the diffuse corporeal form of the comet. Say the hermits : Let into ecstasy by our hermit's life, we have reached the ethereal state/what you mortals see are just our bodies (*unmaditā mauneyena vātānātasthimā vayam /sharīredamasmākam yūyam martāso abhi pashyatha*).

The poet's image of the emancipated hermit and the physical object from which it arises, both find expression in the fourth verse. The comet moves in the atmospheric region (the intermediate region) viewing objects in the universe, as the sage posted as friend for doing good to this and that and all the gods (*antarikṣeṇa patati visvārūpāvacaśat / munirdevasya devasya saukṛtyāya sakhā hitah*.) The comet is depicted here as a benevolent spirit. This belief is also evident in verses 6 and 8 of *ketucāra*. A short-statured, bright, unctuous, upright, spotless comet, rising open or rained upon and staying not for long, leads to abundance and happiness. (*hrasvatanuh prasannah snigdhatvrjurasamsthitah śuklah / unditōthavābhivṛṣṭah subhikṣasaukhyāvahah ketuh*.) The other three kinds of benevolent comets are offsprings of the moon, comparable to lunar rays/silver snows, the night-lotus or jasmine flower, and are seen in the north. They lead to abundance (*śaśikiraṇajātā-himakumudakusumopamāh sutāh śaśinah / uttarato drśyante trayah subhikṣavahāh śikhinah*).

It is pertinent to mention here, that of thirtynine verses describing the comets' influence, two attribute bestowal of plenty and pleasure to them; two others speak of mixed gifts, while the remaining thirty-five relate evil happenings in one form or other for the king or subject of various regions for differing lengths of time. The general tenor of the Vedic hymn, however, is to praise the comet of benevolent affects.

So, the fifth verse of the hymn proclaims : 'He is the horse, the friend of the wind-god and the sage sent out by the gods. He reaches both the seas, the one in the east and the other in the west. (*vātasyāśvo vāyohsakhāthodeveṣito munih / ubhau samudrāvākṣeti yaśca purva utāparah*). The

analogy of the horse with his mane and tail to the comet with its tail-spread is obvious. The word *iṣita* is taken by Sayana to mean *prāpta*, ‘obtained’. However, Monier Williams does not record this meaning and gives ‘moved, driven, tossed, sent out or off, discharged’, against the entry ‘*iṣita*’. The context also justifies this meaning: the very next hymn (10. 137.3) refers to *vāyu;vāta* as messenger of the gods, ‘come *vāta*, bring the medicine, take away the disease. You are the one with all medicines, constantly moving as messenger of the gods’. (*ā vāta vāhi bheṣajam vi vāta vāhi yadrapah / tvam hi viśvabheṣajo devānām dūta tīyase*).

The next half of the verse is a physical description of reality with reference to the impressive comets. Some of them have been observed to cover two-thirds or more of the visible sky with their hazy spread. Therefore “*keśin*’s reaching the east and west seas” is not an exaggeration. The allusion to east and west is significant too. Comets usually make their first appearance on the east or west horizon and as they approach the sun, tails are developed in the direction away from the sun.

These facts are poetically woven in the sixth verse. Treading in the trails of apsaras, gandharvas, and the antelopes of the skies, *keśin* is the knower of the skies, friendly, agreeable and exhilarating! (*apsarasām gandharvāṇām mṛgāṇām caraṇe caran / keśī ketasya vidvāntsakhā svādurmadintamah*.) Occurrence of the word *keta* meaning an apparition also, is noteworthy, in view of its close connection with ketu, comet, who is justifiably the ‘knower of the skies’, in view of his spread in the sky.

The seventh and concluding verse connects the comet with Rudra - consumer of the *halāhala* poison. The physical appearance of the comet provides the materials for imagination. The hazy spread is like froth on a churned pot of buttermilk or chaff on a pounded mortar of grain. The global dimensions of the phenomenon call for *mahābhūta*’s to engage in the tasks – amorphous *vāyu* for the churning, inflexible earth for the pounding. ‘*vāyu* churned and the inflexible one pounded for him to extract that which he drank from the pot of poison with Rudra.’ (*vāyurasmā upāmanthat pīnaṣṭi smākunannamā / keśī viśasya pātreṇa yadrudreṇāpibatsaha*).

The hymn 10.136 is thus seen to be an ode to comets – which are phenomena of the heavens, inspiring awe and reverence owing to their magnificence, suddenness, unpredictability and transience that are all far more impressive than for the other phenomena alluded in the Vedic hymns, and so would not have gone unnoticed and unsung by the Vedic poets.

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The short essay ‘*keśin*: a comet’ leads to a new understanding of a Vedic myth. It explains how the word *muni* in the hymn is not a common noun but a mythical description of the phenomenon that is a comet. The superhuman attributes are also seen to be those of comets and not of sages in human form.