

# **The Societal Framework Enshrined in the Atharva Veda**

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## **Abstract**

The Atharva Veda has been looked upon with a suspicious eye. Even during the vedic period this veda was not readily accepted by the Aryan mind. The authors find that Atharva Veda is very apt for research as it dwells extensively on the Indo-Aryan culture. Vedic Aryans were perhaps a slightly refined form of the barbarians. The materialistic thoughts and outlook find expression in the magico-religious beliefs and practices of natural religion. The Atharva Veda stands out from the other three vedas as its Samhita does not contain ideas about sacrifice. Atharva Veda is popularly perceived as the veda of spells, charms and incantations. Its main promise is to fulfil all worldly desires of human beings is seldom studied. The authors examine the societal framework enshrined in the Atharva Veda.

## **1. Introduction**

There are four parts for any veda. They are :

1. **Samhita** : The verses or hymns or manthras of the veda.
2. **Brahmana** : The corresponding rituals for the priests. They originated from the scholastic controversies or opinions of the rishis. They are always open to new interpretations.
3. **Aranyaka** : The corresponding commentary designed to prepare a pupil for a secluded life.
4. **Upanishad**

The Atharva Veda has nine recensions. They are Paippalada, Tauda, Mauda, Saunaka, Jajala, Jalada, Brahnavada, Devadarsin and Charanavaidya. Currently the Atharva

Samhita that is available is the “Paippalada Recension”. This recension has about 750 hymns and 6000 verses.

All the recensions of Atharva Veda Samhita mention Atharva-Angirasa as the name of this veda. The Angirasa part dwells in witch craft and sorcery or black magic. Sage Bhrigu also finds a prominent mention as ‘Bhrigangirasa’. It is widely believed that sorcery needs to be eschewed and only Atharva is normally mention in the name of the Veda Samhita. The other parts of this veda also follow the same methodology.

The basic tenets enshrined in the vedic religion are :

- The worship of Gods largely representing the personification of the powers of nature.
- The vedic hymns are replete with myths and sacrifices.
- Polytheism and Pantheism are dominant features.
- The Vedic religion guides one to win the favour of chosen god or gods.
- The worship of Gods is through corresponding rituals.
- Vedic Sacrifice is supplicatory and is meant to obtain benefits in future life.
- Vedic Sacrifice can be simple as well as complicated.
- Faith in the gods is the cornerstone of the Vedic religion.
- The sacrificer gains in the present life by his gifts to the priests.
- The idea of sin is clearly defined.

Gopatha Brahmana is the only Brahamana available. No Aranayaka is available today. The other pertinent scriptures corresponding to ‘Atharva Veda’ [AV] are mentioned below.

## **1.1 Upanishads**

1. Atharvana Upanishad or Mantra Upanishad of Atharvaveda or Mundaka Upanishad
2. Pranava Upanishad (in the Gopatha Brahmana)
3. Gayatri Upanishad (Gopatha Brahamana I, 32-33)
4. Prashna Upanishad
5. Brahma Upanishad
6. Garbha Upanishad
7. Chulika Upanishad
8. Mandukya Upanishad
9. Brahmabindu Upanishad
10. Nadabindu Upanishad
11. Dhyana Bindu Upanishad
12. Amritabindu Upanishad
13. Atharvashiras Upanishad
14. Atharvashikha Upanishad
15. Kaivalya Upanishad

There are of course many upanishads and in some lists even texts like the Kena and Mahanarayana are attached to the AV. Dhanurveda is the Upaveda of AV.

## **1.2 Lakshana Granthas and Shikshas**

1. Panchapatalika
2. Dantyooshthavidhi
3. Shaunakiya Chaturadhyayika aka Kautsa Vyakarana
4. Brihatsarvanukramani
5. Atharva-Pratisakhya
6. Manduki Shiksha

## **1.3 Kalpasutras**

1. Vaitana Srautasutra
2. Atharvaparaschittani
3. Kausika Grhyasutra
4. Paithinasi
5. Angirasakalpa
6. Santikalpa
7. Saunaka Dharmasutra
8. Kasyapa Dharmasutra
9. Paithinasi Dharmasutra

## **1.4 Jyotisha and Parishishta Literature**

1. Atharvana Jyotisha
2. there is a big collection of 72 Parishishtas which comprise diverse topics like the Kautsavya Nighantu, Charanavyuya, the Uttamapatala and other appendices on Royal ceremonies, religious rites and so on.

The interpretation on the Atharva Brahmanam presented in this paper preserves the sanctity of vedic religion.

## **2. The Societal Framework**

The societal framework detailed in the Atharva Veda [AV] is discussed in this section.

### **2.1 Home and Society**

Five great Aryan tribes namely Turvasas, Yadus, Anus, Druhyus and Purus are vividly discussed. AV adheres the four fold classification namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra. AV focuses on the aims and duties of Kshatriyas. Cattle rearing and agriculture are the main occupations. The home is a 'sala' replete with necessary earthen vessels, wooden seats and mats, mortar and the like. The fire was eternally lit in the sala.

There were weavers and color garments were worn. Metallurgists, Chariot-builders and Charioteers enjoyed a high position in the society. Boats were used to transport tree trunks. The standard of morality was very high and immoral acts were severely punished. Gambling was the main entertainment. Flesh, wine, women and chariot racing were predominant.

## **2.2 Woman**

The birth of a daughter was deprecated. A 'ten month old' son was the persistent demand. Woman and the various stages of womanhood are described more naturally in AV.

## **2.3 Kingship**

Kingship was deemed as a solution to prevent anarchy. 'Indra' was considered a typical king. The notion that 'Indra' is a post finds evidence in AV. The king was elected by the people in accordance with Varuna. Varuna was akin to the modern day "electoral officer". The king had a specially decorated throne. 'Samiti' was the national assembly of the whole people. Sabha or Narista is another sister assembly. Narista was more social than political. Vidhata is another institution that deals with civil, military and religious functions.

## **2.4 Disease and Medicine**

More than hundred diseases intended to be cured by charms and prescribed practices are discussed in AV. Charaka and Susrutha Samhita can be traced to AV. Even the modern day Reiki has its roots in AV. Sinful persons were believed to be punished by the Gods with various diseases. Herbs are also detailed along with the diseases they cure. It is interesting to observe that the entire herb needs to be consumed by the patient. This notion is not in accordance with the modern patent system wherein a unique compound of the herb is patented.

Human Anatomy, Physiology and Embryology are wonderfully described in AV. This is quite astonishing considering the times in which these details were documented.

## **2.5 Magic and Witchcraft**

This aspect of AV is most widely known. The defensive magic is to ward off evil and is discussed as the Atharva aspect of magic. The offensive magic or witchcraft that is meant to inflict evil on others is discussed as the Angirasa aspect of magic. Charms, Talismans and Amulets are vividly discussed with purposes clearly described. The rules for using magic are also described. These rules are further elucidated in various "agamas" confirming to the tenets of the religion discussed in the four Vedas.

## **2.6 Cosmology and Cosmogony**

Heaven and Earth are deemed parents of all creation. The abodes of principal gods are detailed. The year was of 360 days and 12 months. Except Earth, Sun, Moon and Rahu the other planets were unknown. Six seasons are clearly mentioned. 27 fixed stars are identified. Sketchy notions of cosmogony – the birth and growth of the Universe are found in AV. A hierarchy of Gods is described with Earth as the mother. The idea of sin is quite clear. It was believed that sin could float away with appropriate appeasement of a relevant god.

## **2.7 Eschatology**

Funeral practices for the disposal of the dead are clearly described in AV. The notions of life after death, the ideas of heaven and hell are detailed.

## **2.8 Myths and Legends**

AV is relatively barren on myths and legends. It presupposes the existence of myths in other vedas. The notion of soul and its journey after death are detailed. The notions of getting desired progeny are also described.

AV Brahmana also has a host of rituals vividly described. The authors have briefly mentioned the aspects of the societal framework deemed pertinent for their work related to re-birth.

## **3. Magic of Atharva Veda and Science**

“A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light; but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”  
**- Max Planck**

The energy behind the magic described in the AV Brahmana pivots on the existence of the subtle force called “kundalini” in every human being. This force can be awakened by practicing Pranayama or by chanting the mantras or meditating using mantras. There appears to be a clear understanding of the occult forces in the AV Brahmana. However, they are quaint and need a careful interpretation.

From physics to metaphysics is a study currently being carried out by the authors.

## 4. Conclusions

Rig, Yajur and Sama veda are often referred to as 'Traividya's'. Beyond doubt there existed a rivalry between these vidyas and the Atharva Veda. This may be due the indifference of AV to vedic sacrifices. Also, AV dwells more on the lower deities mentioned in the other vedas. Over several centuries these differences are smoothened and AV is recognized on par with any of the other vedas.

In this paper the authors aver that there is no need for any special societal framework for exploring the scientific aspects mentioned in the AV. Thus, the study of AV Samhita Brahmana is limited to serve this purpose. Many more interesting truths about vedic religion and society may be found by further study in this direction of re-interpretation.

## 5. References

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