

Atharva-Veda—A Brief Study

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Swami Harshanandaji Maharaj, a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and the President of Ramakrishna Math at Bangalore as also the author of several books and monographs, presents in this article a brief insight into what Atharva-Veda contains. This may stimulate interested readers to go in for a deeper study of this branch of the Vedas.

The most ancient and basic scriptures of Hinduism are known as Vedas. Derived from the root 'vid' (=to know), they represent a vast body of religio-spiritual knowledge transmitted orally from generation to generation over the millennia. Hindu tradition ascribes to the sage Krishna-Dvaipayana, better known as Vyasa, the systematization and editing of the vast Vedic literature with a view to preserving it for posterity. He is said to have divided the Vedas into four parts and taught them to his four chief disciples: Paila, Vaishampayana, Jaimini and Sumanta. These four Vedas are well known as *Rig-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda* and *Atharva-veda* (vide *Mahabharata*, *Adi-parva*, 60.5; *Bhagavata*, 12.6.50).

The *Atharva-veda*, the last in the series, has also been called by several other names: *Atharvana-veda*, *Atharvangirasa*, *Angirasa*, *Bhrigvangirasa*, *Bhriguvistara*, *Brahma-veda*, *Bhaishajya-veda* and *Kshatra-veda*.

The word *Atharvan*, probably derived from 'athar', an obsolete word for fire, might mean 'the priest of fire'. So, *Atharvan* may be the name of an ancient sage who 'brought fire down from heaven' and started the sacrificial rites here on earth.

In Hindu mythology he is described as a son of Brahma, the Creator, who induced fire-rituals with *soma* and other materials. He is identified with Angiras also called Atharvangirasa. It is also possible that the rishis of the clans of Atharvan, Angiras, Bhrigu, Atharvangirasa and Brahman were the *drashtaras* of this Veda, i.e., the sages to

whom the various hymns of this Veda were revealed. Hence some of the other names of this Veda.

The title *Brahma-veda* could have been derived from the fact that it was revealed to the priest Brahma, the fourth of the four priests, the other three being Hota, Adhvaryu and Udgata, connected with the first three Vedas in that order. In a more general sense it can also mean the Veda that helps in the attainment of Brahman.

The two names *Bhaishajya-veda* and *Kshatra-veda* have obviously been derived from the subject-matter of the Veda which contains a bit of material on *bhaishajya* (medicines and treatment) and *kshatra* (the warrior class known as the *kshatriyas*).

The *Atharva-veda* has some special features because of which it stands a little apart from the other three Vedas, especially the *Rig-veda*. It deals with things here and now, than with the hereafter, and the sacrifices which are means to them. A major portion of this Veda is concerned with diseases and their cure, rites for prolonging life, rites for fulfilling one's desires, building construction, trade and commerce, statecraft, penances and propitiatory rites and black-magic. However, high philosophical ideas, very near to the thought-pattern of the Upanishads are also to be found. Even the literary style is more sophisticated. Some scholars believe that this work, for these reasons, was not admitted into the comity of Vedic literature for a long time. It was perhaps considered as a 'scripture for the

masses' and not fit enough for admission for the 'elite-group'. Its sheer popularity might have forced the leaders of the society into admitting it as the fourth Veda and into giving its priests also an honourable place in sacrifices.

For the very same reasons, it is opined that this Veda is chronologically posterior to the other three Vedas. Some modern scholars like C.V. Vaidya (vide *History of Vedic Literature*, p. 156) assign to it the period 3000 to 2500 BC. But, Vedic chronology is a very hazardous topic, it being very difficult to fix the periods precisely.

From ancient times, nine *shakhas* or branches of the *Atharva-veda (Samhita)* are known to have existed. However, only two of them are extant: *Pippalada* and *Shaunaka*. Of these, it is the latter that is available in a complete form.

This Veda is divided into four *prapathakas*, comprising of 20 *kandas*. Each *kanda* is again subdivided into *suktas* and these *suktas*, into *mantras*. The details are given in Table I. This gives us 6077 *mantras* in 736 *suktas* spread over 20 *kandas* in 4 *prapathakas*. However, due to the different methods adopted in grouping or classifying, the number of *suktas* given by various scholars have varied from 598 to 759. But there is no difference in the number of the *mantras*.

The last *kanda*, i.e., the 20th, has borrowed heavily (to the tune of 90%) from the *Rig-veda Samhita*. It is opined that the *kandas* 19 and 20, sometimes termed *Khilakanda*, are later additions to this Veda.

Coming to the subject-matter of the *Samhita* of this Veda, we find that there is no

Table I: Break-up of Atharva-Veda

<i>Prapathakas</i>	<i>Kandas</i>	<i>Suktas</i>	<i>Mantras</i>
I	1 to 7	433	2030
II	8 to 12	45	1573
III	13 to 18	43	1063
IV	19 & 20	215	1411

systematic division of the same in the first twelve *kandas*. The last two, again, deal with miscellaneous topics. A brief summary of the contents may now be attempted, under eight headings:

1. *Bhaishajya Suktas*: These *suktas* deal with diseases, their causes and cures, and show a remarkable insight into the subject of health sciences. That is why this Veda is considered to be the precursor to *Ayurveda* (The Science of Health and Longevity). Sometimes *Ayurveda* is listed as an *upaveda* (subsidiary) of the *Atharva-veda*. These *suktas* contain many prayers for health and longevity. The names of the various parts of the body given here bespeak of an intimate knowledge of human anatomy. Several diseases like fever, leucoderma, leprosy, jaundice, diabetes, dropsy, skin disorders, troubles of the ear, nose and throat, fracture of bones, diseases of the heart and tuberculosis, are mentioned and their cures indicated. These diseases are said to be caused by germs, violations of the laws of nature, anger of deities and malevolent spirits, and sins committed previously. Apart from medicines and physical remedies, chants and charms are also prescribed in plenty. A deep knowledge of the medicinal properties of various herbs can be inferred from many of the *mantras*.

2. *Ayushya Suktas*: These *suktas* contain supplications for longevity and are to be uttered on auspicious occasions like *chaula* (tonsure), *upanayana* (investiture with the sacred thread), *godana* (gifting of cows) and so on. The desire to live the full span of life, i.e., 100 years, is often expressed. One of the *suktas* (*kanda* 17) prescribes the wearing of the *rakshasutra* (thread of protection) on the body to attain longevity.

3. *Paushtika Suktas*: *Pushti* means worldly progress and welfare. These *suktas* generally contain prayers for invoking the blessings of deities like the Maruts, Parjanya and others so that there may be good rains and crops, and, works like house-construc-

tion or agriculture or trade may flourish well.

4. *Abhicharaka Suktas*: While the *Paushtika Suktas* are intended to bring prosperity, the *Abhicharaka Suktas* are aimed at destroying or harming enemies who obstruct our progress or try to destroy us. This is said to be achieved by pleasing or appeasing certain deities or spirits and getting one's wishes fulfilled through them. This technique is called *yatu* or *kriya*. The number of such *suktas* is rather large. Destruction of one's enemies including the lovers of one's spouse, annihilation of evil spirits, mesmerizing others through whom one can get one's desires fulfilled—these are some of the topics dealt with in these *suktas*. The word *Krishmendrajala* is sometimes used to indicate the type of black-magic rites depicted here. As opposed to this, the auspicious rites described in the *Paushtika Suktas* are called *Shuklendrajala*.

5. *Prayaschitta Suktas*: These are concerned mainly with expiatory rites to offset the evil effects that may accrue as a result of non-performance or wrong performance of religious rites. Omens foreboding evil and the rites necessary to combat them are also described.

6. *Strikarma Suktas*: These *suktas* deal mainly with marriage, love and allied topics. Rites that help in regaining the lost love of one's spouse are also described.

7. *Rajakarma Suktas*: This section gives an account of the political system that obtained during those days. The king used to be elected by the people. National and social problems used to be discussed by or decided in a *samiti*, a parliament of the people. The *rajapurohita* (chief priest of the state) had an enviable place in the affairs of the state. Prayers for victory in war and hymns expressing devotion to the motherland given here are highly poetic and moving.

8. *Brahmanya Suktas*: These *suktas* unfold the nature of Brahman, the Absolute. The philosophical ideas given here form a

link between those of the *Rig-veda* and of the Upanishads.

God, the Absolute, is designated here by various names such as Kala, Skambha, Uchchishta and Vratya which are rather peculiar to this Veda. From Him the whole universe emerges and in Him it is established. He is the Lord of the whole creation. The universe has evolved out of Him, because He willed it thus (vide 19.53.8). The sun is a symbol of His power and is called Rohita, the Red One. He is identified with God Himself. This Absolute is also identified with the Atman.

The word *vratyā* found in this section represents Brahman, the Absolute. It has nothing to do with the people who had been without Vedic sacraments, the sense in which the word has been used in the *dharmaśāstras*.

The *Atharva-veda Samhita* gives us an interesting picture of the society of its times. The land in which the people lived extended from Gandhara (Afghanistan) to Magadha and Anga (Bihar and Bengal). The *varna* system had been well established. The first three *varnas* were called *Aryas* and the fourth as *Shudras*. But people lived in harmony. Kings were powerful. Trade and commerce were prosperous though agriculture was their mainstay. There are hints to show that the *brahmanas* were powerful and had sometimes to face the wrath of the *kshatriya* kings. The cow was highly venerated and *godana* (gifting of cows) was considered highly meritorious. There are references to the *Rajasuya* sacrifice and wars among kings. The institute of marriage was very similar to that of the *Rig-vedic* times; so also the obsequial rites.

No *Aranyaka* of the *Atharva-veda* has come to light so far. Only one *Brahmana* has been discovered, the *Gopatha Brahmana*.

The three well-known Upanishads—the *Prasna*, the *Mundaka* and the *Mandukya*—belong to this Veda. □