

# The *Atharvaveda*: A Study

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The most ancient and basic scriptures of Hinduism are known as the Vedas. Derived from the root *vid* ('to know'), they represent a vast body of religio-spiritual knowledge transmitted orally from generation to generation over millennia. Hindu tradition ascribes to the sage Kṛṣṇa-Dvaipāyana, better known as Vyāsa, the systematization and editing of the vast Vedic literature with a view to preserving it for the posterity. He is said to have divided the Vedas into four parts and taught them to his four chief disciples—Paila, Vaiśampāyana, Jaimini and Sumanta. These four Vedas are well known as *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda* (vide *Mahābhārata*, 'Ādi Parva', 60.5; *Bhāgavata*, 12.6.50).

The *Atharvaveda*, the last in the series, has also been called by several other names: *Atharvaṇaveda*, *Atharvāṅgīrasa*, *Āṅgīrasa*, *Bhṛgvaṅgīrasa*, *Brahmaveda*, *Bhaiṣajyaveda* and *Ḷṣattraveda*.

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 on the earth.

In the Hindu mythology, he is described as a son of Brahmā, the Creator, who introduced fire-rituals with *soma* and other materials. He is identified with Āṅgīras and also called Atharvāṅgīrasa. It is also possible that the *ṛṣis* of the clans of Atharvan, Āṅgīras, Bhṛgu, Atharvāṅgīrasa and Brahman were the *draṣṭāras* of this Veda, that is the sages to whom the various hymns of this Veda were revealed. Hence the other names of this Veda.

The title *Brahmaveda* could have been derived from the fact that it was related to the priest *brahmā*, the fourth of the four priests, the

other three being *hotā*, *adhvaryu* and *udgātā*, 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 *Bhaiṣajyaveda* and *Ḷṣattraveda* have obviously been derived from the subject matter of the Veda, which contains quite a bit of material on *bhaiṣajya* (medicines and treatment) and *Ḷṣattra* (the warrior class known as the *Ḷṣattrīyas*).

The *Atharvaveda* has some special features because of which it stands a little apart from the other three Vedas, especially the *Ṛgveda*. It deals more with the things here and now than the hereafter, and the sacrifices which are a means to it. 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, though high philosophical ideas—much nearer to the thought pattern of the Upaniṣads—are also found. Even the literary style is more sophisticated. Hence some scholars believe that this work had not been admitted into the comity of Vedic literature for a long time. It was perhaps considered a 'scripture of the masses', not fit enough for admission into the 'elite group'. And its sheer popularity might have forced the leaders of the society into admitting it as the fourth Veda and giving its priests also an honourable place in sacrifices.

For the same reasons, it is opined that this Veda is chronologically later than 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 rather hazardous subject and it is very difficult to fix the periods pre-

cisely.

From the ancient times, 9 *śākhās* or branches of the *Atharvaveda* (*Saṁhitā*) are known to have existed. However, only two of them are extant: Pippalāda and Śaunaka. Of these, it is the latter that is available in a complete form.

This Veda is divided into 4 *prapāṭhakas*, comprising 20 *kāṇḍas*. Each *kāṇḍa* is again subdivided into *sūktas*, and these *sūktas* into *mantras*. This gives us 6077 *mantras* in 736 *sūktas* spread over 20 *kāṇḍas* in 4 *prapāṭhakas*. However, due to the different methods adopted in grouping or classifying, the number of *sūktas* given by various scholars have varied from 598 to 759. But there is no difference in the number of the *mantras*.

The last *kāṇḍa*, the 20th, has borrowed heavily (to the tune of 90%) from the *Ṛgveda Saṁhitā*. It is opined that the *kāṇḍas* 19 and 20, sometimes termed 'Khilakāṇḍa', are later additions to this Veda.

Coming to the subject matter of the *saṁhitā* of this Veda, we find that there is no systematic division of the subject in the first 12 *kāṇḍas*. The last two again deal with miscellaneous topics. A brief summary of the contents may now be attempted, under eight subject headings:

#### *Bhaiṣajya Sūktas*

These *sūktas* which deal with diseases, their causes and cures, show a remarkable insight into the subject of health sciences. That is why this Veda is considered to be the precursor of *Āyurveda* or the science of health and longevity. Sometimes *Āyurveda* is listed as an *upaveda* or a subsidiary of the *Atharvaveda*. These *sūktas* contain many prayers for health and longevity. The various names of the parts of the body given here are indicative 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 cures indicated. These diseases are

caused by germs, violation of the laws of nature, anger of deities and malevolent spirits, and sins committed previously. Apart from medicines and physical remedies, use of chants and charms was also in plenty. A deep knowledge of the herbs and their various medicinal properties can be inferred from many *mantras*.

#### *Āyusya Sūktas*

These *sūktas* contain supplications for longevity and are to be uttered on auspicious occasions like *caula* (tonsure), *upanayana* (investiture with the sacred thread) and *godāna* (gifting of cows). The desire to live the full life span of 100 years is often expressed. One of the *sūktas* (*kāṇḍa* 17) prescribes the wearing of *rakṣāsūtra* (thread of protection) on the body to attain longevity.

#### *Pauṣṭika Sūktas*

*Puṣṭi* means worldly progress and welfare. These *sūktas* generally contain prayers for the blessings of deities like the Maruts, Parjanya and others so that there can be good rains and crops, and works like house-building or agriculture or trade flourish well.

#### *Ābhicāraka Sūktas*

If the *pauṣṭika sūktas* are intended to bring prosperity, *ābhicāraka sūktas* are aimed at destroying or harming enemies who obstruct our progress and try to destroy us. This is said to be achieved by pleasing or appeasing certain deities and spirits and getting one's wishes fulfilled through them. This technique is called *yātu* or *kṛtya*. The number of such *sūktas* 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 *sūktas*. The word *kṛṣṇendrajāla* is sometimes used to indicate the type of black magic rites depicted here. As opposed to this, the auspicious rites described in the *pauṣṭika sūktas* are called *śuklendrajāla*.

*Prāyaścitta Sūktas*

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

*Strīkarma Sūktas*

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

*Rājākarma Sūktas*

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 people. The *rājapurohita* (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.

*Brahmaṇya Sūktas*

These *sūktas* unfold the nature of Brahman, the Absolute. The philosophical ideas given here form a link between those of the *Ṛgveda* and of the Upaniṣads.

God, the Absolute, is designated here by various names such as Kāla, Skambha, Ucchiṣṭa and Vrātya, 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 *vrātya* found in this section 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*. Here it represents Brahman, the Absolute.

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The *Atharvaveda Samhitā* gives us an interesting picture of the society of its times. The land in which the people lived extended from Gāndhāra (Afghanistan) to Magadha and Aṅga (Bihar and Bengal). The *varṇa* system had been well established. The first three *varṇas* were called *āryas* and the fourth as *śūdras*. 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 *brāhmaṇas* were powerful and had sometimes to face the wrath of the *kṣattriya* kings. The cow was highly venerated and *godāna* was considered highly meritorious. There are references to the *rājasūya* sacrifice and wars among kings. The institution of marriage was very similar to that of the *Ṛgvedic* times; so also the obsequial rites.

No *āraṇyaka* of the *Atharvaveda* has come to light so far. Only one *brāhmaṇa* has been discovered, the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*.

The three well-known Upaniṣads—the *Praśna*, the *Muṇḍaka* and the *Māṇḍūkya*—belong to this Veda.

In conclusion it can be said that the *Atharvaveda* forms an important landmark in Vedic literature. \*

## The Power of the Spirit

This infinite power of the spirit, brought to bear upon matter evolves material development, made to act upon thought evolves intellectuality, and made to act upon itself makes of man a God.

—CW, 4.351