

THE *ATHARVA VEDA*

The *Atharva Veda* is the fourth of four Vedic hymn collections that are revered by Hindus. It has twenty books in total; its primary purpose is to provide directions on how to act auspiciously within the Hindu tradition (Bloomfield xxix). Although the *Atharva Veda* is considered Vedic literature, it is fairly different from the other texts within the Vedic canon. The *Atharva Veda* focuses on “spells, charms and incantations”, which promise to “fulfill all worldly desires of human mind” (Karambelkar xi). This differs greatly from the sacrificial themes of the three other Vedas (Karambelkar xiii). However, despite the *Atharva Veda*’s uniqueness, it still has a vital place in the Vedic canon. The structure of the *Atharva Veda*, its directions on how to act auspiciously, and its influence in Hinduism are important to discuss when examining the *Atharva Veda*.

The *Atharva Veda*’s twenty books incorporate seven hundred thirty-one hymns, which are then subdivided into six thousand verses (Winternitz 120). There are three major divisions of the *Atharva Veda*—the first grand division (books 1-7), the second grand division (books 8-12), and the third grand division (books 13-18). Since the last two books of the *Atharva Veda* were added at a later date, they are not included in the three grand divisions.

The first grand division contains short hymns, which consist largely of charms and curses (Whitney cxlvii). This division of the *Atharva Veda* is regarded the most important section of the text; out of all the divisions, its hymns are the most widely read (Whitney cxlviii). The second grand division consists of longer hymns than the first division (Whitney clv). These hymns provide instructions on how to perform priestly

duties in an auspicious way (Whitney clv). The third grand division contains books that are characterized by “unity of subject” (Whitney clviii), meaning that the remaining six books of the *Atharva Veda* have been kept together, and “constitute [as] a whole by itself” (Whitney clviii).

Instructions on how to act auspiciously is a main theme throughout the *Atharva Veda*. Its hymns can be categorized into different types—those to obtain long life, those to acquire desired good wishes from deities for households, those to ward off misfortune, and those to excuse errors, to name a few (Joshi ix). There are also sorceries in the *Atharva Veda*, but these are used to benefit oneself and to harm others, and are therefore considered as auspicious (Bloomfield xxix).

The role of the *Atharva Veda* was very important in the Indo-Aryan culture. Karambelkar reasons that agriculture and raising livestock were probably the main professions of people of that time (58). The *Atharva Veda* contains incantations that protect cows and their calves, along with charms that are performed to protect the sowing and harvesting of crops (Karambelkar 58-59). Verses in the *Atharva Veda* also describe other aspects of ancient culture—weaving, metal smiths, and chariot builders (Karambelkar 61). In addition, the incantations of the *Atharva Veda* reveal something about how the medical practices of the Indo-Aryan culture were performed. Through reference to the *Atharva Veda*, it can be concluded that citizens of that time believed that disease was “caused by supernatural powers, particularly demons” (Karambelkar 77). Incantations in the *Atharva Veda* were used as a means to defend against different diseases incurred amongst the Indo-Aryan citizens. The contents of the *Atharva Veda*

give scholars some idea about the Indo-Aryan culture—both its practices, and its belief system.

Despite all the cultural information that the *Atharva Veda* gives, describing Indo-Aryan lifestyle is not its main focus. Instead, “magic is the main and essential subject matter of the [*Atharva Veda*]” (Karambelkar 91). The magical incantations that the *Atharva Veda* consists of are both “defensive magic” and “offensive magic” (Karambelkar 91). In other words, the purpose of magical incantations is to remove unpleasant powers, to preserve blessings and to avoid harmful things. The *Atharva Veda* is divided into two parts—the Atharvana discusses auspicious practices, while the Angirasa concerns itself with sorcery (Karambelkar 92). The hymns of the Angirasa section are “full of the spirit of intense hatred”, condemning to death anyone who interferes with the magical incantations (Karambelkar 92). On the other hand, people performing from the Atharvana “generally invoked Heaven and Earth”, with an understanding that both entities would participate in the magical blessing (Karambelkar 96). Both sections focus on magic as a means to bring about desired effects, whether that is prevention from the bad, or calling upon the good.

Because the *Atharva Veda* is largely filled with magical chants and incantations, Bloomfield believes that it received strong opposition in ancient Indo-Aryan culture (xxix). In fact, some followers of Hinduism actually question the authority and authenticity of the *Atharva Veda* because of its magical contents (Bloomfield xxix). However, Adhikari suggests that the religious contents of the Hindu tradition “are infected with magic in inseparable identity” (135-6). Bloomfield agrees, stating that witchcraft and sorcery are incorporated into every aspect of Hindu religious thought and

action (xxxix); he argues that witchcraft has “penetrated...the holiest Vedic rites” (xlv). Despite the fact that many oppose the position of the *Atharva Veda* in the Vedic canon, Bloomfield suggests that its place in the Vedic scriptures is essential to the Hindu tradition (xl).

Since the *Atharva Veda* discusses auspicious behavior in the Hindu tradition, it seems appropriate to discuss the rituals described in the text, which are intended to bring about auspiciousness. The first way in which the *Atharva Veda* promotes auspicious behavior is the way in which its hymns are categorized into different *ganas*, which are groupings of *mantras* (Karambelkar 167). Hymns of the same type compose a *gana*. The grouping of similar hymns assists in the correct recitation of hymns in the *Atharva Veda* (Karambelkar 168). This promotes auspicious behavior. Water is a very important aspect of the Atharvan rituals because it is considered a protection against demons and a healing remedy (Karambelkar 168). Fire is also important because it is used for priestly rituals and sacrifices that accompany the recitation of hymns (Karambelkar 168-9). Symbolism is another very important part of Atharvan procedures. Certain things like the shooting of arrows, the color of a cow’s milk and the burning of chaff demonstrate auspicious behaviors, which Atharvan rituals promote (Karambelkar 171). Chanting in *ganas*, the use of water and fire in sacrifice, and symbolism are all important aspects of Atharvan ceremonies.

To demonstrate some of the different aspects of correctly reciting a hymn from the *Atharva Veda*, it is appropriate to examine a specific hymn and its recitation rituals. An example of an Atharvan ritual is the hymn to heal *ksetriya* (inherited disease). First,

the priest “washes the patient outside of the house while reciting II.8.1,2 at dawn”

(Karambelkar 173). This chant consists of the following:

1. Up have risen the majestic twin stars, the *vikritau* [italics added] (‘the two looseners’); may they loosen the nethermost and the uppermost fetter of the [*ksetriya*] (inherited disease)!
2. May this night shine (the [*ksetriya*]) away, may she shine away the witches; may the plant, destructive of [*ksetriya*], shine the [*ksetriya*] away!” (Bloomfield 13).

The second portion of the ritual is to recite the third verse:

3. With the straw of thy brown barley, endowed with white stalks, with the blossom of the sesame—may the plant, destructive of [*ksetriya*], shine the [*ksetriya*] away!” (Bloomfield 13).

While this hymn is being chanted, the priest crushes up the plant aforementioned, collects mud, and sews up a freshly hunted animal, tying it to the leg of the diseased patient as a type of good luck charm (Bloomfield 287). The next section of the ritual is to chant the fourth verse:

- “4. Reverence be to thy ploughs, reverence to thy wagon-poles and yokes! May the plant, destructive of [*ksetriya*], shine the [*ksetriya*] away!” (Bloomfield 13-4).

During this portion of the ritual, the priest places a plough and cattle near the diseased patient, while pouring water over it (Karambelkar 173). The fifth and final part of the ritual sees the priest pouring ghee into a pot holding water, which is then placed in an empty house while reciting the fifth verse (Karambelkar 173):

“5. Reverence be to those with sunken eyes (?), reverence to the indigenous (evils?), reverence to the lord of the field! May the plant, destructive of [*ksetriya*], shine the [*ksetriya*] away!” (Bloomfield 14).

Thatches from the empty house which contains the pot of water are placed in a ditch (Karambelkar 173-4). Ghee is then placed in this ditch, followed by the patient, who drinks the water (Karambelkar 173-4). More treatments are given to the patient and eventually the ritual ceases.

This example demonstrates some of the aspects within the Atharvan ritual—the different uses of water, the employment of priestly activity, and the many different applications of symbolism. While the symbolism is not completely clear, the practices “seem at any rate to be built up...in the sense of ‘field’” because of its references to plants, fields, and plowing (Bloomfield 287-8). Since agriculture was a major part of Indo-Aryan culture, the symbolism refers to things that many citizens could recognize and identify with. Along with the usage of symbolism, explicit instructions are provided on how to perform this ritual properly. This example, along with numerous other hymns in the *Atharva Veda*, emphasizes and promotes auspicious actions. The *Atharva Veda* instructs individuals and priests how to perform auspicious behavior through the use of rituals and chants.

The *Atharva Veda* is not something irrelevant; it holds authority in present-day Hinduism. Its instructions on auspicious behavior, its rituals, and its magical incantations contribute a unique and vital aspect to the Hindu Vedic canon. The *Atharva Veda* is a valuable tool to ancient scholars, as well as modern-day readers and interpreters, in describing the actions of the Indo-Aryan culture and their religious rites. The *Atharva*

Veda's use of symbolism, along with its instructions on how to recite hymns auspiciously, is essential to the Hindu tradition today. The structure of the *Atharva Veda*, its role in the Indo-Aryan culture, and most importantly, its directions on acting in an auspicious way through the incorporation of magic, are all important aspects of the text. The *Atharva Veda* holds an essential role within the Vedic canon.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS

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<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/av.htm>

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Article written by: Julie Steeves (April 2010) who is solely responsible for its content.