

Superstition in *Atharvaveda-Samhitā*: A Glimpse

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Abstract

A superstition is an idea or practice founded on unreasoning belief or blind faith. It thrives on ignorance. Once it becomes a habit of mind, it dies hard. Superstition is the belief in supernatural causality that once event causes another without any natural process linking the events such as astrology and certain aspects linked to religion, like omens, witchcraft and prophesy, that contradict natural science. There are various kinds of superstition in the society. Such as to see a black cat is an unlucky thing, to see a man carrying an empty bucket means bad luck etc. A superstition has its origin in man's fear of the unknown, his inability to explain a large number of phenomena and his need to accept authority to live in an ordered society.

The influence of various examples of superstition are seen the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* also. Here, where in the treatment of mantra found among them the fever, cough, leprosy, diabetes, head-ache are the principal diseases. According to seers, these diseases were attacked by the evil power. To cure these diseases, they used some mantras and also used the leaf of medicine tree, root etc. This paper is an attempt to find out these superstitions as reflected in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.

Key words: Unreasoning Belief, Supernatural Causality, Superstition, *Mantra*.

Introduction

A superstition is an idea or practice founded on unreasoning belief or blind faith. It thrives on ignorance. Once it becomes a habit of mind, it dies hard. It is the belief in supernatural causality that one event causes another without any natural process linking two events- such as astrology and certain aspects linked to religion, like omens, witchcraft and prophecies that contradict natural science.

The word superstition is generally used to refer to the religion not practiced by the majority of a given society. It is also commonly applied to beliefs and practices surrounding luck, prophecy and certain spiritual beings, particularly the belief that future events can be foretold by specific unrelated prior events.

There are various kinds of superstitions in different countries of the world. The number '13' is an unlucky number. It is a bad omen if someone calls us from behind when we are to go somewhere. To see a black cat crossing the road is a very bad sign. The crying owl or a raven or even the mewing of a cat is an unlucky thing. To see a man carrying an empty bucket means bad luck. A comet in the sky is a portent. There are scores of such superstitious beliefs.

A superstition has its origin in man's fear of the unknown, his inability to explain a large number of phenomena and his need to accept authority to live in an ordered society. The priests quickly filled in the place of the authority and evolved rules. The priests played upon the innocence of the people. Things which they could not explain were attributed to 'angry gods'. Men made sacrifices to please the angry gods. Thus there grew up countless myths and superstitions.

Aim of the Study

The Aim of the study to find out deferent types of superstitions as reflected in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.

Analysis

Atharvaveda Samhitā

The Vedas are the most ancient existing scripture of the world. *Veda* means 'knowledge'. It comes from the root 'vid' (to know). At the beginning it was transmitted by oral conversations. Hence the Vedas are also known as 'śruti'. *Atharvaveda* is a *taṭpuruṣa* compound of 'Atharvan' and 'Veda'. *Atharvaveda* means so to say "the *Veda* of the Atharvans" or "the knowledge of the magic spells". Originally however the word meant a fire- priest and it is perhaps the oldest Indian name for 'priest' as such, for the word can be traced back to the Indo- Iranian times. Corresponding to the Indian Atharvans there are the Atharvans or "Firemen" of the *Avesta*. Fire-cult played in the everyday life of the ancient Indians no less a role than in the case of the ancient Persians who were so often turned as "Fire worshipper" the priests of this aboriginal fire cult men of the Red Indians-"magic-priests", i. e. priests and magicians is one, as also in the word "magician"- as the Atharvans were called in the word "magician"- as

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the Atharvans were called in the Media- the concepts “magicians” and “priests” overlap each other. Thus the word “*atharvan*” was used also to mean the “spells of the Atharvans or of the magic- priests”. The *Atharvaveda Samhitā* usually called just “the *Atharvaveda*”- is, in the recession which preserved to us in the best condition

Superstition in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*

There are a number of hymns which can be described as charms for curing disease and these have been described by the commentator as *Bhaisayyani*. In this class of hymns we find charms against fever, e. g. The hymns V.22; VI.20; I. 25; then there are charms against jaundice as in the hymn I. 22; charms against cough as in VI. 14; constipation, retention of urine, against dropsy, charms against scrofula, charms for joining fracture, for stopping bleeding of nose, for snake poison and other types of poisons, charms against the biting of scorpions and other such venomous creatures, and other so many diseases. In the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*, Agni and water are praised as demon and destruction of diseases. This *Samhitā* is also the source of natural cure. Here, fever is imagined as a demon and the name of the demon is ‘*takṣan*’. A few verses of the hymn are found in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*. The following verse is one which is said by the *Rishi* to the *takṣan*.

cf. *ayam yona visvan haritan kṛnosyucchodayannagnirivabhidunvan/
adha hi takṣannaraso hi bhuya adha nyannndharan vā parehi//²*

(And thou thyself who makes all men yellow, consuming them with burning heat like Agni, Thou, Fever! then be weak and ineffective. Pass hence into the realms below or vanish)

This pious wish that the disease may go to other folks, may befall other countries, appears again and again in the songs of the *Atharvaveda*. In the similar way the cough is sent away from the patient to a distant place with the charm.³

We find a picture of beliefs of the primitive man, because the superstitions and faiths on magical powers on the part of the primitive mind are seen here. Besides these hymns which are purely used for charms we have also hymns which are in praise of herbs having curative qualities. Here, we find a prayer to a herb called *kustha* or *kutha* for curing the fever. Then the description of a dark coloured plant is also seen which is praised to cure leprosy. A plant called *arundhati* is praised for curing fractures. Other plant is *śilaci* that is praised for curing wounds.⁴ Then there is a plant *ajasṅgi* supposed to have magical efficacy in driving away the demons. Another plant *prisniparnī* is supposed to drive away the demons of disease. In this stage the diseases are not considered to be caused by the physical wrongs but are believed to be caused by the influence of demons and the evils.

There are other types of hymns which may be capable, when recited, for bestowing long life and good health. Such hymns intended the general name *āyusyani*, i. e. the hymns intended to secure long life and good health. Here we find belief in superstitions e. g. it is recommended that an amulet of pearls and gold, secures long life.⁵

In the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*, there are hymns for securing prosperity of all types as *paustikanī*. A prayer at laying a foundation, at the time of sowing crops, can be found in VI. 142 and also prayer for securing bumper crops is found in VI. 79. The charms against the insects which do harm to the grains and also charms for prosperity of the cattle are to be found.

There are several hymns called *vaśīkaraṇa* where a woman is attracted by a man.

cf. *uttudastod tutadu ma dhṛthaḥ sayanī sve/
iyuḥ kākasya ya bhīma taya vidhyami tva hridi//⁶
adi parvam kāmasalyamisum saṅkalpakulmālam/
tam susanna tam kṛtvā kāmo vidya tu tva hridi//⁷*

There are other types of hymns which implicate demons, sorcerers and enemies and these are called *ābhicārikāni*. *Abhi-cār* means literally to practice magic e. g. charms against demons; then imprecations against enemies who may interfere with our holy rites. Then in order to make a sacrifice, being performed by the enemies, unfruitful, we have hymns i. e. charms against hostile plots, charms for destroying the strength of the enemies. Then there is a general hymn containing a curse against an enemy who may be practising hostile magic. So in these hymns, we have what may be described as having the charms for causing harm to the other body, preventing the effect of the charms practised by others.

There are other types of hymns which pertain to various aspects of the social relations with reference to women. In this connection we may include such acts as are exclusively in the sphere of the woman folk. These hymns may be called *strikarmani* i.

e. connected with women. Here we have a wide range of subjects and topics, e. g. for obtaining a husband we have a very large variety of charms and spells. Again we have hymns of peaceful as well as of hostile character, e. g. prayer for mutual good will of a married couple.

There are other hymns which are connected with the acts to be performed by the kings. There are prayers to be used at the time of the consecration of a king after he is duly elected, for getting political supremacy, for securing lustre and power, for fame and glory. These may be termed as holy magic. There is also black magic e. g. there are battle charms for confusing the enemy and also prayer for success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that there are a good number of examples of superstitions in the *Atharvaveda Sarṁhitā*. Prof. Whitney says " It seems in the main that the *Atharva* is of popular rather than of priestly origin; than in making the transition from the Vedic to modern times, it forms an intermediate step rather to the gross idolatries and superstitions of the ignorant mass than to the sublimated pantheism of the Brāhmaṇas."

Nowadays, we see the influence of superstitions in our society. The advent of science began to explode one superstition after another. Yet a large number of women are killed for superstition in our society. In this case, we are having heavy responsibility for the society. By spreading knowledge and enlightenment, by spreading scientific belief, we can get rid of a superstition which is an enemy to progress.

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Footnotes

1. *Manusmṛti. II.10. śrutistu vedavijneyaḥ*
2. *Atharvaveda Sarṁhitā. V. 22*
3. *ibid. VI. 105*
4. *ibid. V.5*
5. *ibid. VII. 33*
6. *ibid. III.25*
7. *ibid. III. 25*