

## Significance of the two Atharvavedic Socio-political Institutions in the modern Indian political system

Dr. Urmimala Bora,  
India.

**Abstract:** The Vedas contain the most valuable records of the Indo-Aryan society. These are also the most ancient documents we ever have. These Vedas are also known as Śruti, Candas, Trayī etc. There are four Vedas viz. the Ṛgveda, the Sāmaveda, the Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda. In common parlance, these are the canonical books of Hindu religion. But a thorough, scientific and secular study gives knowledge of another aspect of these Vedas that these are not only the books of religion but are the origin of all sciences, arts and commerce and the result of a very high education system. Specially, the Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda present a very clear picture of human life as well as social life. On this ground an attempt has been made to highlight the significance of the two Atharvavedic socio-political institutions in the modern Indian political system. The paper will also search some common needs of the ancient and modern people of India.

**Key Words:** Atharvaveda, sabhā, samiti, Ṛgveda, Lok Sabhā, Rājya Sabhā.

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### I. Introduction

In the Atharvaveda we come across two socio-political institutions related to governance and kingship viz. sabhā and samiti. The Atharvavedic society was ruled by a systematic government. The king was the supreme head of the country. He was selected by the king makers known as rājakṛtaḥ<sup>1</sup>. The group of the kingmakers consisted of the following persons:

- i. dhīvānaḥ the fishermen,
- ii. rathakārāḥ the chariot-makers,
- iii. karmārāḥ the black-smiths,
- iv. manīṣiṇaḥ the intelligentsia,
- v. rājānaḥ the kings of other states or the people of royal families or the royal people.
- vi. sūtāḥ i.e. those who lives as charioteers.
- vii. grāmanyaḥ the village headmen.

The verses which provide this information are as follows:

ye dhīvāno rathakārāḥ karmārāḥ ye manīṣiṇaḥ /  
upastin parṇa mahyaṁ tvaṁ sarvān kṛṇvobhito janān //  
ye rājāno rājakṛtaḥ sūtāḥ grāmanyaśca ye /  
upastin parṇa mahyaṁ tvaṁ sarvān kṛṇvobhito janān // [Atharvaveda, III.5.6-7]

Thus it appears that these kingmakers were the representatives of the common people who themselves were probably selected as the members of the samiti by the common people. Kingship in Vedic times depended upon the acceptability of the king by the viśaḥ i.e. the subject. An Atharvavedic passage<sup>2</sup> which is also found in the Ṛgveda runs as follows –

Viśastvā sarvā vāncantu mā tvadrāṣṭramadhi bhraśt

[(O king), may all the people wish to have you (as a ruler). May the kingdom be not lost to you].<sup>3</sup>

The institutions of sabhā and samiti appear to have played vital roles in the proper running of a country. References to the sabhā and samiti are already found scattered in the Ṛgveda. The former was a gambling place and also a place for discussing topics relevant to the society.<sup>4</sup> According to Sāyaṇa the word samiti in the Ṛgveda simply means samhati i.e. a group and samgrāmaḥ<sup>5</sup> warfare. However, in Ṛgvedic examples like

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., Sāyaṇa, the commentator of the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*, 8.4.3 states that the *rājakṛtaḥ* means the relatives of the king. However, the fact that the king was selected by the people has been alluded to *Ṛgveda*, X.173.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., AV, VI.87.1

<sup>3</sup> As translated by M. Bora

Cf., *Concept of Monarchy and Governance In Atharvavedic India: A Note, Śabda-Sudhā (Golden Jubilee Celebration Research Journal)* Dept. of Sanskrit, G.U.2007, p.104.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., RV., VI.28.6; X.34.6 etc.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., Sāyaṇa on RV., I.95.8; IX.92.6, X.11.8, 97.6, 166.6 etc. On I.95.8 Sāyaṇa explains the word as *tejasām samhati* and on X.11.8 as *stutisamhati*.

IX.92.6 and X.97.6 the word samiti appears to stand for an assembly which was regularly attended by the kings. Furthermore, in Ṛgveda X.191.3 the word has been used in all probability to mean a social gathering. The Atharvaveda refers to sabhā as a place of mirth and debate<sup>6</sup>. Thus in VII.12.2 it has been called nariṣṭā: vidma te sabhe nāma nariṣṭā nāma vā asi . It means, we know you o sabhā alias nariṣṭā. Sāyaṇa interpreted the term nariṣṭā as inviolable (ahimsitā parairanabhi-bhāvya) and the term sabhā as the council of scholars (viduṣām samājah)<sup>7</sup>. In this context, it is to be noted that it has been implied in an Atharvanic passage (III.19.1) that sabhā was associated with king and thus was more a political rather than a social institution. In this passage it has been stated that the members of the sabhā (sabhāsadaḥ) of Yama were rājānaḥ and who shared the sixteenth part of the merit accruing from the good deeds of the people (yadrājāno vibhajanta istāpūrtasya ṣoḍasam yamasyāmi-sabhāsadaḥ). Altekar, while referring to this Atharvavedic passage has observed that “ It is possible to argue that the status of the members of the terrestrial sabhā like that of the celestial one was also almost the high as that of the king and that they too were entitled to receive a small share of the tithes and tributes that were paid to the ruler”<sup>8</sup>. Altekar observed that the meaning of the sabhā and samiti differed from age to age and locality to locality<sup>9</sup>. As pointed out by Chakraborti the term sabhā has an Indo-European touch. He has shown that the word is derived from Indo-European s(u)e-bho and is closely associated with Old-European sib, German sippe, Old High German sipp(e)a and Gothic sibja – all meaning an association of kin (of tribe, family or clan)<sup>10</sup>. Scholars like Hillebrandt, Zimmer, Renou, Altekar, Ludwig, Majumdar, Jaiswal, Apte etc. have defined the word sabhā differently. Hillebrandt has even considered that the sabhā and samiti were one and same<sup>11</sup>. But there occurs an Atharvavedic passage which clearly mentions that the sabhā and samiti were two different bodies<sup>12</sup>. William says that the word sabhā is of unknown derivation. Nevertheless he refers that sabhā stands for “ an assembly, congregation, meeting, council, public audience” etc.

Another assembly i.e. the samiti was also a gathering of people. Williams states that the term samiti stands for “coming together, meeting, assembly, council ... encounter, hostile meeting, war, battle” etc. It may be stated here that Sāyaṇa in his commentary on Atharvaveda, VII.12.1 has explained the meaning of the word samiti as saṃgrāmiṇaḥ janasabhā and thus he has suggested that samiti was an assembly of the people which was called in times of the war. The Atharvavedic passages seem to confirm that samiti was a political institute<sup>13</sup>. The regal power of a king depended upon his acceptability by the samiti. Thus it has been stated dhruvāya te samitiḥ kalpatāmiha<sup>14</sup>. Thus it appears to have enjoyed the power to dethrone, to reinstate and also to restrain the king. It has been stated that the samiti does not support a king who transgresses the rights and privileges of a Brahmin : nāsmaiḥ samitiḥ kalpate na mitram nayate vaśam<sup>15</sup>  
[ samiti does not think for this (king), friends (also) do not show respect to him]

Undoubtedly the members of the sabhā and samiti were required to be men of knowledge, wisdom and good personality<sup>16</sup>. Eloquence was indispensable for the members of the sabhā and samiti. One Atharvavedic passage (VII.12.2) it is stated that every man may respect and support the king at the meeting: yenā saṃgacchā upa mā sa śikṣāccāru vadāni pitarāḥ saṃgateṣu [ May every man I meet respect and aid me, Fair be my words, O fathers at the meetings.]<sup>17</sup>

The members of the sabhā and samiti required harmony and peace among themselves. Passages from the Atharvaveda and the Ṛgveda confirm this fact.

So far as the Indian polity is concerned, the council of people’s representatives played the vital role regarding the supreme of the country i.e. the prime minister of India and government as the president of India played the role of a nominal head. In addition to this one would like to mention that the Indian Constitution offers parliamentary form of government to India. This parliament comprises the President of India, the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. The President is the nominal chief of the country. In fact, the government is controlled by the Prime-minister and the members of the council of ministers who are elected by the people of India. Similarly in ancient times, the Atharvan polity was somewhat federal where the king was the head of the state and the actual power was vested to the samiti as it is mentioned earlier. However, it is not clear that the members of samiti were selected or elected. There is no clear reference to the procedure of selection and the role of common people in selecting the members of samiti. Nevertheless the reference of common people in the same group of king, intelligentsia etc. leads to the fact that in that period common people also get equal place in

<sup>6</sup> Cf., AV., VII.12.2; X.8.24; XII.3.46.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., Sāyaṇa on AV., VII.12.2 and VII.12.1

<sup>8</sup> Cf., Altekar, A.S., *State And Government In Ancient India*, Delhi, 2005, p.142.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, p.140.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., Chakraborti, H.P., *Vedic India, Political And Legal Institutions In Vedic Literature*, Calcutta, 1981, p.135.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, pp.130-145.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., AV., VII.12.1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, VI.88.3; 89.6 etc.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, VI.88.3.

<sup>15</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, V.19.15.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, VII.12.3

<sup>17</sup> Translated by Griffith, RTH., *The Hymns Of The Atharva Veda*, Vol. I, 1968, p.333.

politics. But now in modern time in India there is no place for the common people. Although the constitution gives the power to cast vote in election in practice the voters are not so alert and in result India still after independence of sixty years is a country of class three.<sup>18</sup> In this context one may mention that in modern Indian polity there occur so many problems. Of these, the most important one is the lack of unity among the members of the parliament. Many times it is seen that the members play the role of a taciturn man. Most of them also transgress the rules of morality and social virtue.

## **II. Conclusion**

To conclude, one would like to state that definitely the idea of both Sabhas has been taken from the Vedic sabhā and samiti. Indeed the activities are different in many cases. In this juncture one would like to suggest that the members of the parliament should develop their personality and unity among them as the Vedic persons did. Many times it is noticed that the ministers tried to fulfil their personal needs. In this case ministers should learn morals from the Vedic people. Their aim should be to serve the nation at any rate. In fact these are the common needs from time to time in government.

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<sup>18</sup> Information collected from the daily newspapers published from Assam and television channel of India in the year 2012 January- 2014 February.