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Status of the *Vrātyas* with reference to the *Atharvaveda*

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Abstract
This paper presents the social status of *Vrātya* with Atharvavedic stand-point. The term ‘*Vrātya*’ means belonging to a roaming band, vagrant, member of fellowship that stood without the Brāhmanical pale, it is further applied to the son of a uninitiated man, or also to one who has let the appropriate time for the Sacrament of initiation slip. The social status of *Vrātya* in the Atharvaveda was a special type and high esteem which in the later Vedic literatures and Smṛti Literatures underwent changed. The status of *Vrātya* acquired a totally different by the time of the Smṛti literatures. Manu states that, if after the last given period, the twice-born (dvijātī) stay on uninitiated, they turn out to be *Vrātyas*, fallen from Sāvitri. In the Atharvaveda the term *Vrātya* is used not in the sense of ‘One who has not performed his Upanayana’ but its employed in the sense of the highest Brahmanya. The highest Brahmana is conceived and glorious as the *Vrātya* both as divine *Vrātya*, recognized with the great God or Mahādeva, the Lord Īśāna or Rudra and his prototype, the earthly *Vrātya*. Finally, in the evolutionary process, at each stage of Indian History, *Vrātya* was accorded a different social status; and that status sufficiently mirrored the state of Indian society at that stage.

Keywords: *Vrātya*, *Mahādeva*, Upanayana, Brahma, *Atithi*

Introduction

The term ‘*Vrātya*’ derived from the word ‘*Vrata*’ means belonging to a roaming band, vagrant, member of fellowship that stood without the *Brāhmanical* pale, it is further applied to the son of a uninitiated man¹, or also to one who has let the appropriate time for the Sacrament of initiation slip².

Vrātyas appeared as groups of people (bound perhaps by common vows) in NE India, perhaps the first of the Aryan invaders. They had their own distinct beliefs and customs which they took with them as they migrated east to *Magadha*. Their religion was assimilated into the *Atharvaveda*. They persisted as groups of religious functionaries³.

Vrātya, wandering ascetic, member of either an ethnic group or a sect, located principally in the *Magadha* (Bihar) region of ancient India. The *Vrātyas* lived outside the fold of the dominant Vedic society and practiced their own forms of austerity and esoteric rites. The *Rgveda* uses the term *Vrātya* fewer than a dozen times, usually in reference to a breakaway group or an inimical horde of men living in temporary settlements. The *Atharvaveda* speaks of the ‘mystical fellowship’ of the *Vrātyas*. The Brāhmaṇas which associate the god Rudra with the *Vrātyas*, depict them as ascetics roaming about in an intoxicated state but also describe a purification ritual called a *Vrātya-stoma* (*Vrātya* chant) and speak of the *Vrātyas* as physicians and as guardians of truth. Some scholars conjecture that the *Vrātyas* might have been a source of non-Vedic beliefs and practices introduced into the Vedic religion⁴. Monier Williams dictionary gives meaning of the term ‘*Vrātya*’ as “a man of the mendicant or vagrant class, a tramp, out-caste, low or vile person. That means a man who never acquired any ritual status because of lack of education, or one who has lost status through non-observance of the sixteen principal *Sam-skāras*, or has become a mendicant⁵.

¹ Dvijātayah savarnāsu janayantyavratāinstu yān;
Tān sāvitrīparibhraṣṭān vrātyā iti vinirdiśet, MS. X.20

² Ata ūrddham trayah apyete yathākālamasamśkr̄tāḥ;
Sāvitrīpatitā vrātyā bhavantyāryavigarhitāḥ, Ibid. II.39

³ John Jowker. "Vrātya." The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions. 1997.

Retrieved January 08, 2016 from Encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O101-Vrātya.html>

⁴ <http://www.britannica.com/topic/vrātya>

⁵ Monier Williams dictionary, 'A Sanskrit english dictionary' by Sir Monier Monier-Williams-English-Neha Publishers & Distributors Hardcover_Edition- New Ed. (English).

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Vrātya as a King

Atharvaveda says since the *Vrātya* made everyone happy, he was born as a nobleman (*rājanya*) or king. He arose to the people (tribes), the kinsmen, food and nourishment. Know that he has become the dear abode of the people, of his Kinsmen, of the food and of the eaters of food⁶. He moved towards the people. The assembly, the council, the army, and the good gifts or *Sūra* followed him. Know that he has become the dear abode, of the assembly, of the council of the enjoyments⁷ Thus the kingship is born out of *Vrātya*. Naturally all associates of the kingship follow *Vrātya*. There thus used to be meetings and gathering of people. Army was well equipped and it was associated with wine. So it seems that the people in the army may be given to drinking sometimes. The kingship being an outcome of *Vrātya*, a king should treat *Vrātya* with great respect. He should treat *Vrātya* as superior to himself. Thus he does not offend against dominion or royalty. Priesthood and royalty sprang up from *Vrātya*, and they entered in different places. The *Brāhmaṇa* (Priesthood) entered in *Bṛhaspati*, who is the same as *Prthivī* or *Agni*. Royalty entered in *Indra* who is the same as *Dyaus* or *Āditya*⁸. Thus the poet tells us both *Brāhmaṇas* and *Kṣatriyas* were produced from *Vrātya*. They are the counterpart of the celestial kingship and Priesthood represents by *Indra* and *Bṛhaspati*, respectively. They are on the same relation as the earth and heaven or *Agni* and *Āditya*, who supplement each other. Thus *Brāhmaṇa* and *Kṣatriya* are related to each other and are not at variance with each other. They have a common source and are set up in this world to help each other⁹.

Vrātya and Hospitality

The texts of the *Atharvaveda* states that when *Vrātya* visits a King, the King should consider him as Superior to him. If the *Vrātya* visits to the house of one who knows the greatness of *Vrātya*, the householder should treat him well. The householder should ask ‘Oh *Vrātya*! Where did you stay last? ‘Here is water’. ‘Let these waters gratify you’. ‘Do as you please’. ‘Do as you wish’. ‘Do as you desire’. The householder gets the fruit of this hospitality to *Vrātya*. It may be noted that *Vrātya* treated here as actually a person and not one in the capacity of the supreme creation. He thus comes to the householder as a guest and the poet expects every householder to treat him as cordially as possible.

Sometimes *Vrātya* may come to the house of a person when the fires are taken up and offering to them has begun. The householder should get up and ask his permission to carry on the sacrifice and then only he should continue, otherwise he should not. Thus *Vrātya* command the household of the person and the sacrifice not go on, unless he orders it. On another occasion *Vrātya* may come to stay in the house of a person for the night. The householder should not refuse him place for sleeping, etc. If *Vrātya* sleeps in his house for 1,2,3 or 4 nights he gets holy realms in the east, sky, heaven or purest of the pure worlds respectively. It is always possible, according to the poet, that someone may call himself a *Vrātya*, though himself is not, and may come to the householder to secure his hospitality. The householder may or

may not drag him out of his house. If he does not drive him out, he should treat him as a deity and whatever is done to *Vrātya* is acceptable to the deity. Thus *Vrātya* should be treated as deity anyhow¹⁰. In these sections (AV. XV.11-13) *Vrātya* is a human being and is treated as a deity¹¹.

Vrātya as an Ascetic and his Movement in Various Region

Now we shall discuss the movement of *Vrātya* in different directions. In this time, he had a number of followers and each direction his equipment also changed. When *Vrātya* went to the eastern region *Brhat*, *Rathantara*, *Ādityas* and *Viśvadevas* followed him¹² He get up and went to the southern region. *Yajñayajñiya*, *Vāmavevyā*, Sacrifice, *Yajamāna* and cattles followed him¹³ He went to the western region. *Vairupa*, *Vairāja*, waters and king *Varuna* followed him.¹⁴ He went to the northern region. *Śyaitya*, *Naudhas*, Seven sages and Soma followed him.¹⁵ When *Vrātya* moves, he takes with him some equipment. He has a harlot or lewd woman, Magadha dissolute bard, garment and a turban. His hairs are dressed in a particular way. He has a *pravarta*, rounded ornaments.¹⁶ He puts on a jewel. He has two attendants. He moves in rough vehicles (*vipatha*). He has a charioteer and a whip (*pratoda*). *Vrātya* as a person must be having all these things with him whenever he goes out. His personal equipment included a garment, a turban, dressed hair, two bracelets and a jewel. So a *Vrātya* must be a rich man caring much for his dignity and personal appearance. He moves in a car having two attendants and charioteer. It may be stated that the dignified movements of a *Vrātya* and his moral character was of a high order.

The deified *Vrātya* has all sanctified surroundings and associations. For instances, when *Vrātyas* moves to the east, faith is the harlot, *Mitra* is the Magadha, discernment is his garment, day is his turban and night is his hair. His *pravartas* are yellow. *Kalmali* is his jewels. Past and future are his foot-man. Mind is his vehicle. Wind is his charioteer. Storm is his whip. Thus in an attempt to deify a *Vrātya*, the poet *Atharvan* had idealized all surroundings and equipment. *Vrātya* thus becomes Divine *Puruṣa*. The poet does not feel anything about the *Vrātya*’s association with a harlot. In idealising his personality, he has made *Usas* as his harlot while he is moving to the south. Thought is his *Magadha*. While he is moving to the north, food is his harlot and laughter is his friend. When he is moving to the north lightning is his harlot and thunder is his friend.¹⁷ This much is clear from the description of the movements of *Vrātya* that before *Vrātya* is deified, his moral behavior was not above suspicion. When he is turned into a divine being the poet associates with him all grand things in nature and makes him an omnipotent deity.

Vrātya is also portrayed as an exalted spiritual human being, a wandering without a fixed dwelling who goes from a village to another, scattering the knowledge of spiritual truths and methods of practicing them. When the *Vrātya* comes to a village or a town without any planning as were, some persons there are eagerly looking forward to meet that holy person, even though they had did not known about him.

¹⁰ AV. XV.11-13

¹¹ Sing, N.K., *The Vedic Mythology*, APH Publishing Corporations, Delhi, 1997, pp.143-144

¹² AV. XV.2.1-2

¹³ Ibid. XV.2.9-10

¹⁴ Ibid. XV.2.15-16

¹⁵ Ibid. XV.2.21-22

¹⁶ Ibid. XV.2.5

¹⁷ Ibid. XV.2.1-28

⁶ AV. XV.8.1-3 Or Joshi, K.L., *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*, Vol. III, Parimal Publications, Delhi,2009, p.73 Or Kashyap, R.L., *Atharvaveda*, Sakshi, Bangalore, p.21

⁷ AV. XV.9.1-3 Or Joshi, K.L., *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*, Vol. III, Parimal Publications, Delhi,2009, p.74 Or Kashyap, R.L., *Atharvaveda*, Sakshi, Bangalore, p.22.

⁸ AV. XV. 7-10

⁹ AV. XV. 10.1-11 Or Singh, N.K., *The Vedic Mythology*, APH Publishing Corporations, Delhi, 1997, p.143

In the eastern region, the two spring months protect him and *Bṛhat* and *Rathantara* attend on him. In the southern region two summer months and two *Sāmans* (*Yajñāyajñiya* and *Vāamadevya*), in the western region two rain months and two *Sāmans* (*Vairūpa* and *Vairāja*), in the northern region the two autumn months and the two *Sāmans* (*Śyaita* and *Naudhasa*) do the work for his protection and attendance respectively. In the fixed (*dhruva*) direction the two winter months, *Bhūmi* and *Agni* and in the upward direction the two cool months, *Dyaus* and *Āditya* do the same work. Thus *Vrātya* is protected by all six seasons in twelve months, eight *Sāmans* and some deities attend upon him.¹⁸ In the intermediate directions also he is protected particularly by *Rudra* in his different aspects. In the eastern intermediate direction *Bhava*, the archer, is his attendant similarly in other intermediate directions *Sarva*, *Paśupati*, *Ugradeva*, *Rudra* and *Mahādeva* act as his attendants. In all intermediate directions generally *Īśāna*, the archer, acts as attendant.¹⁹ Now his movements in other directions are being described. He went to the fixed (*dhruva*) direction. Earth, fire, plants, herbs, trees and shrubs followed him. The fixed direction is the earth. Naturally all things on the earth and the earth, itself followed him. He then went to upward direction. *Rta*, Truth, the Sun, the Moon, and the lunar mansions followed him. These are naturally in the sky, above the earth. In the highest direction, *Rk*, *Sāman*, *Yaju* and *Brahma* (the *Atharvaveda*) followed him. This shows that *Atharvan* considers the Vedas to be above the luminaries in the sky. He has already made the Vedas the seat of *Vrātya*. He then went to *Bṛhati* (great) region. There *itihāsa* (narratives), *purāṇa* (legends), *gāthās* (songs) and *nārāśamīs* (eulogies) followed him. To the distant direction there sacrificial fires, sacrifice, sacrificer and cattle followed him. To the unlimited direction, the seasons, group of season, worlds, months, day and night followed him. To the unreturned regions *Diti*, *Aditi*, *Idā* and *Indrāṇī* followed him. In all directions *Prajāpati*, *Parameṣṭhin* and the Father and the grandfather followed him.²⁰

Conclusion

The 15th *kāṇda* of the *Atharvaveda*, therefore, highlights the importance of hospitality. It has been described that a guest ought to be properly welcomed and his wishes fulfilled as much as possible. The host ought to receive the guest even in the midst of a *Yajña*. He should rejoin the *Yajña* only when permitted by the guest. He ought to take food only when the guest has taken it. He should never take his meals before his guest. Hospitality is said to yield infinite virtues. Even if the guest is a hypocrite he should not be treated with disrespect.

The social status of *Vrātya* in the *Atharvaveda* was a special type and high esteem which in the later *Vedic* literature and *Smṛiti* literature underwent change. The status of *Vrātya* acquired a totally different by the time of the *Smṛiti* literatures. Manu states that, if after the last given period, the twice-born (*dvijātī*) stay on uninitiated, they turn out to be *Vrātyas*, fallen from *Sāvitri*. Manu also tells that those whom the twice-born (*Brāhmaṇin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaiśya*) beget from wives of equal caste, but who, not satisfying their sacred duties, are excluded from the *Sāvitri* (initiation), must also delegate by the appellation *Vrātyas*.

In the *Atharvaveda* the term *Vrātya* is used not in the sense of ‘One who has not performed his *Upanayana*’ but its employed in the sense of the highest *Brahmana*. The highest

Brahmana is conceived and glorious as the *Vrātya* both as divine *Vrātya*, recognized with the great God or *Mahādeva*, the Lord *Īśāna* or *Rudra* and his prototype, the earthly *Vrātya*. Finally, in the evolutionary process, at each stage of Indian History, *Vrātya* was accorded a different social status; and that status sufficiently mirrored the state of Indian society at that stage.

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¹⁸ AV. XV.3.1-11

¹⁹ Ibid. XV.5.1-16

²⁰ AV. XV.6.1-26