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## A few legends of Satapathabrahmana: Socio-cultural analysis

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### Abstract

*Satapathabrahmana* is a Vedic text that is directly associated with Vedic Sacrificial Culture. To describe the Vedic sacrifice in general this text as well as all other *Brahmana* texts used to prescribe the use of *Mantras* ascribed in *Samhitas*. Unique style of this text is to justify each and every statement made either in *Satapathabrahmana* or in *Samhita* texts. Contextually we can see hundreds of legends and myths or stories which are aptly used to justify the statements made in the text. From which two noble purposes may be apprehended

1. To instigate the sacrificer to perform the sacrifice
2. To justify the fundamental ideas behind the performance

This paper shall focus on Seven no of legends from the initial part of the text ie. *Satapathabrahmana*.

**Keywords:** *Sanatana Dharma*, Hinduism, Vedic religion, *Devas*, *Gandharvas* etc.

### Introduction

It is generally contended that the *Veda* is the fountain head out of which *Sanatana-dharma* or Hinduism has sprang. The expression of *Veda* refers to knowledge, knowledge par excellence, which was well visualized by the inherent intellect of human. In Indian thought system it is accepted as non authoritative and god itself. It is also well established that this is the repository of all knowledge. Sri Aurovindo considers Vedas as the path finder of human being. This suggests the human to accumulate wealth *Artha* through righteousness (dharma) and distribute the wealth for others through *Kama* and one can achieve the ultimate i.e *Moksha*. The term *Veda* is explained as *Brahma*, which stands for the ultimate reality and which is the origin of the universe. Similarly *Veda* is also considered widely as a combination of two literatures one is findings (intellectual property) and the other is practice manual (use of those intellectual property), i.e *Mantra* and *Brahmana*.

A cursory glance at the Indus-civilization finds would show that the Indus- religion, unlike the *Vedic* religion was characterized by iconolatriy, which incidentally has continued to be an essential feature of the classical Hinduism. Not only the iconographic similarity but also habitation pattern, idea of cultural forum, concept of devotion and godly oblations (as imagined from different statues) are the basic conceptual similarities which are available to us in a continuation with sufficient additions and alterations. A natural consequence of this was that there grow up in the Vedic society, a separate class of people who are commonly known as priests, who attained a certain amount of expertise in ritual practice and could therefore help the people in their sacrificial performances. And it was certainly out of this need the various *Brahmana* texts originated. The central them of the *Brahmana* texts is ritual. The *Yajurveda* and *Samaveda* are also ritualistic in character. Association of *Yajurveda Samhita* is direct and association of *Samaveda samhita* is from the point of the purpose which it is expected to serve. Subsequently *Shrautasutra* seek to consolidate and systematize the teachings of *Brahmanas*. All these above mentioned texts of Vedic people have immense importance to the Hindu idea of ritualistic culture, more specifically the sacrificial culture of Hindu society, then and now.

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### An Insight to the Ritual Literatures

It is further claimed that the manner of the correct ritualistic employment of the Vedic mantras could be properly known only from the *Brahmana* texts.

In other words *Brahmanas* had to be regarded as the only authoritative commentary on those Mantras, commonly it is also accepted as authoritative commentary on whole *Samhita* literature of the same branch or tradition. The ritualistic tradition also demanded that every *Samhita* (Branch) should have its own *Brahmana* literature, but most of them are lost in course of time.

The major *Brahmana* texts are, *Aitareya Brahmana* and *Sankhayana Brahmana* or *Kausitaki Brahmana* of Rigveda, *Taitareya Brahmana* of *Krisnayajurveda*, the *Satapatha Brahmana* of *Suklayajurveda*, the *Jaiminiya Brahmana* and *Tandya Brahmana* of *Samaveda* and *Gopatha Brahmana* of *Atharvaveda*.

From the point of contents, a *Brahmana* text may be divided into two parts *Vidhi* and *Arthavada*, which are usually available in an intermingled form.

The *vidhi* may be said to be dealing with the theory *karmacodanabrahmanani* and the practice the doctrine and procedure of sacrifice *brahmanasesoarthavadah*<sup>1</sup>. The *arthavada* portion of *Brahmana* literature is intended to justify, glorify, and there by recommended as it was a particular sacrifice or a part of a sacrifice or any specific feature of a sacrifice which is prescribed in the *vidhi* portion<sup>2</sup>. *Arthavada* portion of *Brahmana* include several aspects like- *Nirvacana*, *Ninda*, *Prasamsa*, *Prakriya*, *Purakalpa* etc. Out of the several aspects myths or legends associated with the sacrifice became most vital aspects, probably intended to convince and attract the sacrificer at large.

### Legends: As an Efficient Device

Legend or Myth was an efficient medium through which the primitive people expressed their religious ideology and social culture. Various schools of interpretation of Vedic Mythology have been existed even in the early post-Vedic period as can be seen from *Nirukta* and other such texts.

There are some creation myths narrating how *Prajapati* created human beings. Besides this there are stories of love, glorification and etc, such as that of *Prajapati* lusting after his own daughter or *Vak* being converted by *Devas* and *Gondharvas*. With a different text we can also trace the famous story like those *Manu* fish (*Manumatsyakatha*) or the gods, getting the earth from the demons through sacrifice in the disguise of a dwarf, which clearly be attested as the root of the incarnation stories of the latter ages. The story of *Indra-Vritra* has given rise to the later versions of the puranic stories of similar import. Quite a large number of stories again appear to have been coined just to emphasize the importance of some sacrificial details. We have stories telling us why a *diksita*/sacrificial performer should cloth himself, why a particular rite is called so, what is the significance of the *Asvavata* grass, or so on. The story of *Rudra* piercing *Prajapati*, destroying the sacrifice, and then reliving a share at the sacrifice or that of *Videga Mathava* belong to a class that reflects the progress of sacrificial cult and the ups and downs in its course. Majority of the *Brahmana* legends have the essential character that pertaining to the rivalry and contest between gods and demons.

### Some Myths of Brahmanas in Particular and their Socio-Cultural Analysis

#### I. Legend- 01

The idea of *Agni* running away from the gods and hiding himself in the waters and ultimately rediscovered by *Matarisvan* has been referred to in *Rigveda* for more than once. In other *Brahmanas* also we can trace some stories with similar ideas. But we can see a fully developed story on different line altogether in *Satapathabrahmana*. (*SB.VII.3.2.14*) The story here is- The sacrificial fire or *Agni* escaped from the gods and entered into the water. *Prajapati* requested by the gods, went in search. Probably through this legend *Rishi* of *Satapathabrahmana* has the intention to make notice and justify the natural enmity within Water and Fire. In common life we experience water extinguishes the fire and the fire vaporizes the water. So their relationship is considered contradictory. This contradiction has been focused nicely in this legend of *Satapathabrahmana*.

#### II. Legend -02

The legend of *Soma* is not one of escape but of fetching. At *SB.3<sup>rd</sup>.2.4.1-3* it is narrated that Gods who were then on the earth, desired to sacrifice with *Soma*, which was in the sky. They created two illusions, *Suparni* and *Kadru* of whom the latter, scoring a victory over the former in a dispute, asked the former to fetch the *Soma* for the gods. She accordingly brought forth the meters and *Gayatri* (mantra) fetched the *Soma* from heaven. But the *Gandharva Visvvasu* by sending to them *Vak*, whom they readily accepted in exchange for *Soma*. This story is also repeated in the same text at *SB.3.6.2.2*. This legend establishes the fact that the *Soma* was not a commonly available herb, so its heavenly availability, may hints the scarcity and preciousness, for which need of mantras have been mentioned.

#### III. Legend-03

There is a similar story about *Indra* at *SB.1<sup>st</sup>.6.4.1*. Hurling his thunderbolt at *Vritra*, *Indra* felt himself weaker and feared that he had not brought him down. *Indra* therefore, concreted himself and went to the furthest distance. When gods discovered him and offered him a rice cake (*Purodasa*), *Indra* said ---"this cake does not satiate me; prepare for me what satiate me". Then the gods prepared *Soma* for him. Even by *Soma* he did not revived, and then gods made it agree with him by means of boiled milk and thus made him strong. The foundation of this story is also available in *Rigvedic* text. Humbly the story promotes the importance of consumption of milk and proved the fact with the example.

#### IV. Legend 04

In the same *Brahmana* of same *Adhyaya* we can have a new legend. Background of the legend is the metallic sound created in sacrifice. In one statement there is a prescription to create some sound out of two stones then *Satapathabrahmana* tries to establish a judicious logic on the same activity. *Manu* was in possession of a Bull. In to that Bull had entered an *Asura* killing, enemy killing voice and by its snoring and roaring, the *Asuras* and *Rakhyasas* were being crushed. Priests of demons named *Kilata* and *Akuli* proceeded to *Manu* and convinced him that they want to do a sacrifice thee. After getting the consent they begged the bull for the sacrifice and killed it. Being killed the voice went and entered in to *Manavi*, the wife of *Manu*. As a result when she speaks the *Asuras* and *Rakhyasas* were continually being crushed. Problem persisted, *Kilata* and *Akuli* proceeded to *Manu* and

<sup>1</sup> Rigveda Bhasya Bhumika of Sayana, Krishnadas Academy-p.66

<sup>2</sup> Dandekar, R.N. some aspect of the History of Hinduism, 1967.p.65.

procured *Manavi* for their sacrifice and on her being sacrificed that Voice went from her and entered in the sacrificial vessels. Now the *Asura* priests were unable to expel it. The same *Asura* killing and enemy killing voice sounds fourth. This legend establishes the sacrificial activity that creates sound out of two stones. Probably, there is certain similarity with the ringing of bells in sacrifices as well as in the homely rituals. From certain scientific discourses it is also established that the sound of the metals have the capability to destroy some diseases creating viruses. Probably to propagate this social practice and benefits of ringing the bell, the Vedic *Rishi* introduced the story.

#### V. Legend-05

To establish the thought associated with offering of *Purodasa* or commonly known as cake offering as a oblation, this legend occurs at third *Brahmana* of 2<sup>nd</sup> *Adhyaya* of 1<sup>st</sup> *Kanda*. It has a little relationship with legend available in *Aitariya Brahmana*. As it is narrated in many sutra literature that the kindled *Agni* always desires to victimize whatever is nearer to it. This shows the priest or the sacrificer become first victim of the sacrificial fire. Here also in this legend the gods offered of a man as the victim. When he was offered of the sacrificial essence (*Yajna*) went out of him. Probably *Rishi* has the noble intention to exhibit the essence or the quality of oblation or the sacrificing object, that went out of the body when it is implemented illogically. This essence entered into horse, subsequently they offered of the horse. Again the sacrificial essence went out of the horse and entered into the ox. Gods offered of the Ox and at that time of offering the sacrificial essence went out and entered in to the sheep. They offered of the sheep and the sacrificial essence again went out of it and entered into the goat. They offered of the goat, when it was offered of the sacrificial essence went out of and entered into this earth. Gods in course of search for it they dismantled a part of the earth like ploughing of land. Probably after some days they found it in the shape of two substances like Rice and Barley. Very interestingly this last part of the legend hints on the indigenous agrarian history. *Satapathabrahmana* says “therefore even now they obtain those two (Rice and Barley) by digging” or by ploughing the mother earth. This legend symbolically shows a change in sacrificial oblation from a human to seeds or “*Panacasasya*. Even now-a-days we come across the small homely sacrifices where oblation becomes seeds or animal products like ghee and butter. In the rest part of the sacrificial process, we can trace an elaboration on making of rice cake which has also accepted as a substitute of living object

i.e man> horse>ox>sheep>goat.

This legend prohibits the bloody victims, it was clearly mentioned that for certain scarifies these rice cakes were as efficient as the flesh of animals. This also establishes the theory that *Sanatan* system accepted a change of oblation from biological things to botanical things. This may also hint on the non-vegetarian food consumption to vegetarian idea of food consumption.

#### VI. Legend-06

In the fourth *Brahmana* of 2<sup>nd</sup> *Addhya*, we can experience a new type of legend on the historiography as well as importance of *Sphya* a sacrificial instrument. In each sacrifice priest hold sword shaped wooden *Sphya*. According to the legend when *Indra* pelt his bolt (*Vajra*) to the demon *Vritra*, that has broken to four pieces. With one piece the priest made the *sphya*, with another price the *Yupa* and from other piece

the *Rath* or the Chariot. From the remaining part of that broken *Vajra* (bolt) which torched *Vritra* became the Arrow. Out of those four pieces, two pieces taken by Brahmin to utilize in sacrifice and rest two pieces taken by Krsatriya to utilize in wars. To destroy the enemy the priest (*Addhvaryu*) holds to *Sphya* in sacrifice.

#### VII. Legend-07

In the fourth *Brahmana* of *Satapathabrahmana*, we come across a very small legend associated with *Darsapournamasa* sacrifice, where the priest accepts a piece of black antelope skin for sacrificial use, Then the question arises in the mind that why the skin of black antelope is in use. To justify the utility this legend proves it a good device. Once upon a time the sacrifice escaped the god, and having become a black antelope roam about. The gods by the way caught it and stripped it of its skin. They brought it away with them; the skin of black antelope may be regarded as one of the vital symbol of brahmanic worship and civilization. In many cases we can trace several statements where black antelope has been treated considerably. *Manu*(2.22/23) identifies that part of land as ‘*Aryavarta*’ where the black antelope roams about, and it is also establishes that this place is most suitable place for sacrifice. In the next part of the legend the *Rishi* here tries to get symbolic apprehension, what can black hairs on the skin represent ‘*Rik*’ and ‘*Saman*’. Black part considered ‘*Saman*’ where as white part consider as ‘*Rik*’ and vice-versa. This statement looks ambiguous, but dependability of ‘*Saman*’ on ‘*Rik*’ may be the symbolic representation of the facts. Similarly, the yellowish brown part of the skin considered as the *Yajus* texts. In this way the legend tried to justify the use of the skin in sacrificial process. SB again establish it as the best equipment for the competition of the sacrifice. It is also used for husking and bruising, in order that nothing of the oblation may get split. Simply this skin of black antelope works like a carpet on which preparation of grain flour to be performed.

#### Conclusion

Though there are hundreds of legends are available in *Satapathabrahmana*, here this paper in an initial study of Seven legends only. Socio-cultural activities which are considered as more rituals deprived of any logic. One can also argue what is the need of these logical arguments? We are very much argumentative on our Socio-cultural activities but we have not given a little importance to investigate why the performances. Simply by biased arguments one can establish the negative side of any activity but by experimentation and positive investigation our cultural activities shall spread its fragrance and the linking thread of Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Panjab shall not be delinked. Co-existence shall be well apprehended.

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