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Reflection of atharvanic beliefs in the present day assamese society related to misfortune and their remedies

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Abstract

Belief is an acceptance that something exists or is true specially one without proof. It is a primary component of Indian culture. Belief in rebirth, existence of soul, results of work, belief in God etc. are the characteristics of Indian philosophy. Our society is associated with various types of beliefs which are not of any scientific value. Belief is an important component of primitive culture. Some primitive beliefs have been existing in our society till date. These are available in our scriptures. *Atharvaveda*, the fourth *Veda* is considered as the *Veda* of common people. This *Veda* was closely connected with custom, culture and society of that time. Therefore, this *Veda* reflects very clearly the primitive society. Some Atharvanic hymns under *Prāyaśchittani* are based on common beliefs of our society. At that time, some activities and symptoms or signs are considered to be the cause of sin and misfortune, like child born under an unlucky star, irregular appearance of the first pair of teeth of a newborn child, birth of twins or sterile cow, evil dream etc. These beliefs also exist in our society in the present time. This paper is an attempt to highlight all these points.

Key words: Belief, assamese society, *Atharvaveda*, misfortune, remedy

1. Introduction

Man is a social human being. Man lives in the society. Our society is attached with some canons and regulations from time immemorial through which men can proceed in their lives in a systematic way. It includes what should be done or should not be done; it is prohibited for this time; it should not be eaten etc. The main aim of these prohibitions or permissions is to maintain peace, prosperity and happiness in our living life. Most of Indian beliefs and values have sprung with an objective to protect from evil spirits. But some of them had their scientific base too. With the passage of time, the original reasoning part behind any belief of these cultural principles and superstitions had concealed. That is why most of these beliefs appear unsubstantiated and false. However, in reality, there are many such beliefs in the Indian culture which are absolutely absurd and have no logic behind them. Beliefs are actively present in vernacular religions of many countries both rural and urban settings from the early time. Beliefs have a little capacity of manifesting religious variations, flexibility, and adaptability for changing the social settings. It cannot be said that these beliefs are not essential for us. It has some values in our personal lives and we must follow that particular belief on the basis of proper analysis of reason behind it.

Belief is an acceptance that something exists or is true specially one without proof. It is a primary component of a society. Beliefs in rebirth, existence of soul, fruit of work, and beliefs in God etc. are the characteristics of Indian philosophy. Our society is associated with various types of beliefs which are of not any scientific value. Belief is an important component of primitive culture. Some primitive beliefs have been existed in our society till date. These are available in our scriptures. *Atharvaveda*, the fourth *Veda* is considered as the *Veda* of common people. This *Veda* was closely connected with custom, culture and society of that time. Therefore, this *Veda* reflects very clearly the primitive society. At that time, some activities and symptoms are considered to be the cause of sin and misfortune, like child born under an unlucky star, irregular appearance of the first pair of teeth of a newborn child, birth of twins or sterile cow, evil dream etc. These beliefs also exist in our society in the present time.

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The Vedic scriptures like *Atharvaveda* consists of various charms related to these types of beliefs. Use of these charms are described in *Kauśika Sūtra* in that specific purposes and dream related are catalogued under *Duḥsvapanāśana Gaṇa*¹. The practices are mainly fall under the *Str̥karmāni* and *Prāyāścittāni*, the 4th and 8th great divisions introduced by Bloomfield and these are used to ward off inauspicious omens and to reverse the effect of unusual occurrences, such as the birth of human or animal twins and also used against to avert the bad effect of nightmare. This paper is an attempt to highlight all these aspects.

AV.3.28 hymn is used against to avert the ill omen of a twinning animal. This hymn is known as *Paśuṣoṣana Sūkta*. Cow or other animals are considered as an inauspicious when they deliver twins. The natural process is to give birth to a calf at a time by a cow. It is believed that when a cow gives birth of two calves at a time, that cow destroys the cattle. Kauśika explains the ceremonies for expiation of it in 109.5. There was a practice of giving a cow to a *Brāhmaṇa*, when it was found to be inauspicious in the owner's home, due to twinning or some other reason, and in case of human mother a payment (according to her value or in accordance with the wealth of the father) is paid². When that cow was given to the *Brāhmaṇa* she would be pleasant and prouspicious.³ There is a verse regarding why the inauspicious cow becomes auspicious in the *Brāhmaṇa*'s (Yajamāna's) house. The verse is as follows-

*yatrā suhārdām sukṛtāmagnihotrahutām yatra lokah/
tam lokam yaminyabhisambabhūva sā no mā himsīt puruṣān
paśūmśca//AV.3.28.6*

i.e., where is the world of the good hearted, of the well-doing, where of them that offer the fire-offering (*agnihotra*) into that world has the twinning one come into being; let her not injure our man and cattle⁴.

Sometimes that cow was offered to the *Brāhmaṇa* as his priestly fees. Thus, the *Brāhmaṇa* owns the cow and that cow is known as *Brāhmagāvi*. There is a prohibition for the *Rājanya* class or a king for eating the flesh of that cow, because that flesh is poisonous to them and it does harm to the King.⁵ This hymn is rubricated thrice in the Kauśika, in the thirteenth *Adhyāya*, which is devoted to expiatory performances (*Prāyaskitti*, *Kauśika mention it as prāyaskitti*) in connection with all sorts of omens and portents. It is described in chapters 109.5; 110.4; 111.5, on the occasion of the birth of twins from cows, mares, asses, and women.

Atharvaveda 6.27 and 28 is used against birds of ill omen. Atharvavedic time reveals a general belief, that the pigeons or Dove (*Kapot*), owls (*ulūka*) and other black coloured (like crow) birds were considered as the messenger of death which was current in those days. They are ill omen. Kauśika describes the employment of this hymn along with AV. 6.28-29 in a pacificatory rite, when misfortune occurred for entering a pigeon or owl in a house. It is considered that when an ill omen bird entered in a house the gods have sent the pigeon as the messenger of *Nirṛti*, the goddess of destruction.⁶ The bird is compared as winged missile and the god Agni is praised and offered oblation there to drive away the misfortune occurring in the house, and keep the cattle and other living beings safe. This bird is especially mysterious because of its strange silent flight, so different the noisy fluttering of other birds. *Atharvaveda* 7.64 hymn is used against evil influence of a black bird⁷. Kauśika (46.47-48) prescribes a rite to avert the evil influence of a bird of ill

omen. Agni *grāhapatyā* is also praised to expiate the defilement caused by something dropped by an ill omened black-coloured bird.

A child born in an unlucky star (*pāpanakṣatrajāta*) is considered as inauspicious. Kauśika prescribes a remedial rite in 46.25. *Atharvaveda* 6.110 hymn to be used for removing the bad impact of that type of birth. The child born on *jesthā* and *mulā* lunar mansions is believed to be inherently dangerous and they are harmful to their parents. The god Agni is praised there to remove all evil effects of that and the child is to be bathed and is sprinkled with water charmed with this hymn so that the child to be good one and he can across all difficulties unto long life, of a hundred autumns. There is a hymn of the *Atharvaveda* 6.140 related to child is an unusual event that on the birth, a child is sometimes found possessed of two teeth, which is an unusual occurrence. *Keśava* on *Kauśika* points out that it is dangerous to the parent the irregular feature of a child's first two upper teeth appearing before the lower. The teeth themselves are believed to be inherently dangerous and hence must be placated. These two unnatural teeth fall off in a few days, if they touch some hard food. Therefore, they are advised to eat rice, barley, beans, and sesame instead of harming their parents. To make the teeth propitious Agni *Jātaveda* and *Brahmaṇaspati* is invoked. Kauśika prescribed a ritual regarding this in 46.43-46.

Atharvaveda 7.115 is also a charm for the removal of evil sign (*pāpī lakṣmī*) and the acquisition of auspicious *Lakṣmī* (*Punya*). Its Stanza 3 informs that one and hundred signs are born with a mortal body at his birth. Kauśika prescribes 18.16-18 the use of the hymn AV.7.115 in a rite. A Metal hook with *puroḍāśa* is fastened to the left leg of a crow and makes it fly away to the lap of *Nirṛti* the goddess of misfortune, so that it can't return. The priest put on blue garment, covering with a red one and puts on a white cloth as a turban. He throws down the turban with the hook of metal (*ayasmaya*) by reciting the verse AV.7.115.2 in the water. In this rite crow is used as the symbol of ill-luck and there it symbolizes the departure of the misfortune clinging to the metal hook. The water and turban carry out the misfortune, which wrapped the body along with the garments which cover it. The god *Savitṛ* is invoked to remove the evil marks of the body and make the person propitious.

In *Atharvaveda* many of verses we find the prayers warding away evil dream. AV. 16.6.1 praised *Uṣas*, who is concord with *Vācaspati* to far away evil dream which dreams make us afraid and carries away it, to him who hates and curses us. And praised *Uṣas* and Agni to carry away to his enemy the ill named ones the niggards, the sadanvās, the kumbhikās, the dūṣikās, walking evil dream and sleeping evil dream, boons that will not come again, plans of non-acquisition, fetters of hatred that does not release. And so that they cannot be impotent (*vadhri*), faltering, not good, i.e., *sādhu*.⁸ *Atharvaveda* 16.1.11 describes that dreams occur on account of our sin and praised Water to carry forth our evil dream with our sin. The bad dreaming being the effect of sin, is wiped away like this sin, on the enemy, and born in such and such family and the son of such and such mother.⁹

Atharvaveda 16.7.8 stated as:

idamaha māmuṣyāyaṇe'muṣyāḥ putre duṣvapnyam mṛje//

The plant *Apāmārga* or *Sahadevī* is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* 4.17.7 as a protector of evil dream. *Atharvaveda* 6.45 and 46 hymns are directed against bad dreams. The

practice of both these hymns mention at the *Kauśika Sūtra*¹⁰ as follows: “With VI.45 and 46 the person that has an (evil) dream rinses his mouth. If he has had an excessively frightful dream he offers a cake of mixed gain, and deposits a second in the territory of an enemy.” The *Rsi* of this *Sūtra* praised god *Duḥsvapnanāśana*, Indra, Brahmanaspati, Agni and *Āṅgīrasa* to protect them from difficulty and from distress.¹¹ They offer a praise to sleep as a true god, born of death is a recurrent theme in the Vedas, as it is in many other religious traditions. Dwelling between and beyond the opposition of life and death, the deity of sleep is believed to have the power of fending nightmares and protecting people during the vulnerable hours of their sleep.¹² In *Atharvaveda* 6.46.3 bad dreams or nightmares are compared with walking enemies of our day to day life. *Varuṇānī* is his mother and *Yama* is his father. *Svapna* is also known by the name *Araru*. The verse is as follows:

*yo na jīvo 'si na mṛto devānāmamṛtagarbho 'si svapna/
varuṇānī te mātā yamaḥ pitārūnārmāsi// (AV. 6.46.1)*

Atharvaveda 7.100. 1 also can be recited for warding off bad dreams. In this verse the priest praise the god *duḥsvapnanāśana* as:

“I turn away from evil-dreaming, from bad-dreaming, from ill-success (*abhūti*); I make *brahmana* my inner [defense]; [I put] away the pains having the aspect of dreams”.¹³

According to *Kauśika*, 46.12 *Atharvaveda* 7.101.hymn is used in a rite against ill effect from food eaten in dreams. It describes that what food the dreamer has eaten in dream and not found in the morning and that all be propitious to dreamer i.e., all ill event will be good for the dreamer.¹⁴ *Atharvaveda* 9.2.2-3 are also used against nightmare according to *Kauśika sūtra* 46.9. along with some other hymns. The second verse of this *Sūtra* praised the god *Kāma* to ward away evil dream from the dreamer which is offensive to his mind and eye, which annoyed and does not please with him, and take away to his enemy. In the third stanza of this hymn it is also praised to god *Kāma* to take away nightmare to his enemy who tries to lose upon him. According to *Atharvaveda* 10.3.6 an amulet of *Varaṇa* is tied against evil dream. *Atharvaveda* 6.121.1 praised the god *Nīrti* to remove pour sins which are occurred from evil dreaming. This mantra is repeated again in the *Atharvaveda* 7.83.4, but there the god *Varuṇa* is praised for removing the sin of nightmare. *Atharvaveda* 19.56 describes that the sleep comes from the world of *Yama*, the ruler of the departed, resolute, affected men with rapture, and created the *Asura*'s dwelling, goest, well-knowing, with the solitary¹⁵ and there also found prayers related to remedy of nightmare. *Atharvaveda* 6.46 and 19.56 hymns are associated with *Yama*. *Atharvaveda* 19.57 praised for removing evil dream on one who is offensive (*apriya*). There the god *Dusapna* is praised for warding off our evil dream from the dreamer and destroy the enemy who hates dreamer.

Atharvaveda 6.124 charm is used by *Kauśika* 46.41 in an expiatory rite for the portent of drops of rain from a clear sky i.e., against the evil of rain without cloud. In *Vaitāna Sūtra* 12.7 describes its use in the *agnistoma* when one has spoken in sleep and separate use of verse 3 (*Vaitāna* 11.9) in the same ceremony. The part of the body or clothing on which the water fell must be purified so as to ‘thrust perdition away.’

Even today, these beliefs exist in our society. At present days the fruit of those circumstances are based on different times called as *Maṇḍala* such as *Agnimaṇḍala*, *Varuṇmaṇḍala*, *Vāyumaṇḍala* etc., according to *Panjikā* and that types of

books. Activities of birds like, Vulture, Crow, Pigeon, and Owl etc. are sometimes considered as an indicator of bad luck or death today also. Fruits of dreams are also depending upon *Pakṣa*, *Tithi*, *Prahar* etc. Some belief exists in our society related to evil or good from the sign of the body called as *Tilatattva*, *Jatuktattva* etc. Some are related to falling lizards also. In our society it is believed that who have two wheels in his head he is very fierce. Rain without clouds is considered as *utpāta* of nature. It indicates the evil sign of future. It is noticed that, now a days, people perform various types of auspicious ceremonies like, *Śāntipātha*, *Gitāpātha*, and various *pūjā* etc., for removing that types of inauspicious occurrences.

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