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The Aksha Sūkta of the Ṛgveda-moving towards a beautiful life by giving up bad habits

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Abstract

The Vedas are a blessing for mankind. The Vedas are a gem of knowledge that has been flowing from eternity, aiming for the great ocean. Among all the Vedas, the *Ṛgveda* is the first and most renowned. In the Tenth Maṇḍala of the *Ṛgveda* there is a famous Sūkta, named Aksha Sūkta (Ṛgveda 10.34). This Sūkta is also known as the Kitava Sūkta and has been designated as a Laukika Sūkta. This Sūkta portrays the life of a gambler who lost everything due to his bad habit of gambling. It provides an example, how the desire and habit of earning wealth through gambling can fully destroy a person. The Aksha Sūkta is a successful illustration of how gambling can become a cause of hardship and can completely ruin an individual. At the end of the Sūkta, it teaches the lesson of forsaking, the vice of gambling and focusing on one's duties, as hard work in one's proper karma is far superior. In this Sūkta, gambling is merely a symbol of bad deeds. The primary purpose of the Sūkta is to guide people to abandon sinful actions and turn towards virtuous deeds—a teaching that remains relevant and instructive for today's society as well.

Keyword: Ṛgveda, Aksha Sūkta, Kitava, laukika, gambler, bad habit, vedic society, agriculture

Introduction

"Vedohkhilo dharmamūlaṃ"

(Manusmṛti 2.6)

The Vedas are the fundamental bases of Indian tradition. The Vedas the brilliance of the ancient thoughts of the great Indian intellect. The meaning of 'Veda' is supreme knowledge. The Vedas contain all the knowledge of the world. It encompass philosophy, literature, science, morals, ethics, tradition, culture etc. Nothing is absent in the Vedas. There are four Vedas-*Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and lastly *Atharvaveda*. Among them the *Ṛgveda* is the oldest literary work. The *Ṛgveda* itself is a treasure of knowledge, covering almost every kind of wisdom. In *Ṛgveda* there are ten Maṇḍalas (circles). There are many Suktas in the ten Maṇḍalas. The word Sūkta comes from Su (good) and Ukta (spoken), meaning a beautiful hymn, praise, or adoration. Generally, each Sūkta is dedicated to deities such as Agni, Indra, Parjanya, Aksha, Surya etc.. However, sometimes a single Sūkta mentions more than one deity. The Ṛṣis of the *Ṛgveda*, by manifest divinity in every aspect of life, conveyed teachings to mankind that remain relevant for all eternity. One of the most significant Sūkta of the *Ṛgveda* is the Aksha Sūkta, which teaches the renunciation of vices and emphasizes the importance of leading an active and virtuous life.

The Aksha Sūkta-a subtle Outlook

Just as good and bad are two sides of the same coin, in our society too, both virtue and vice can be seen in every aspect. For human society, one of the greatest wrongdoings is the addiction to gambling. This depravity was also prevalent in vedic society. The vedic sages, along with offering praises to the deities, also imparted teachings in their sūkta to eliminate such wrongdoings like gambling from society and to build a noble nature in human beings.

In every hymn of the the vedic corpus, there are four essential elements identified-namely, the Ṛṣi (the seer who realised the hymn), chanda (matrical structure of the hymn), devatā (the presiding deity to whom the hymn is addressed) and lastly Viniyoga.

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In the tenth mandala of the *Rgveda*, the Aksha sukta also exemplifies this structure. Where the Ṛṣi is Eluṣa Kavaṣa, Chanda-Jagatī and Triṣṭupa and the Devatā-Aksha, Kṛṣi In the Aksha Sūkta, the term "Aksha" is generally decoded as dice. But Arthur Llewellyn Basham wrote in his book "The Wonder that was India"-" The word 'aksa' in the context of gambling is generally roughly translated 'dice', but the 'aksas' in the earliest gambling games were not dice, but small hard nuts called Vibhisaka or Vibhidaka; apparently players drew a handful of these from a bowl and scored of the number was a multiple of four". (The Wonder that was India, 1967, page no-209). In this sūkta the life of a gambler are presented in form of self narration. This sūkta describes the adverse situations that a gambler faces due to gambling, and later how giving up gambling leads to performing good deeds or turning from evil to goodness.

Principal Components of the Aksha Sūkta

Every phenomena has two sides-positive and negative. However, gambling is a game that carries no positive aspect. The negative consequences of gambling are grave and far-reaching. If a person becomes addicted to gambling, the harmful effects are not limited to the individual alone; they continuously impact the person's family and every related zone in the long term.

The Aksha Sūkta of the *Rgveda* shows how a gambler becoming addicted to dice, ends up losing everything. Just as tasting soma juice once makes one crave it again, and a person can become deeply attached to it over time. Aksha is similar to soma juice in this way. If someone play gambling even once, overtime they develop a bad habit of gambling. The gambler upon hearing the sound of the dice falling on the wooden board called "Trīṇa", could not restrain himself from gambling. When gamblers days and nights became completely absorbed in gambling he forgot that he had a household. Merely, because of his addiction to gambling, the gambler neglected and abandoned his beloved and faithful wife. Even the gambler's relatives and close ones start to dislike him and he loses respect within his own family. His wife began to turn against him, his mother-in-law criticizes him, and his mother sheds tears upon seeing the moral downfall of her son. The gambler who loses in the game of dice becomes beggar and no one shows him any sympathy. Because of gambling, even the gambler's mother, father parents and brother stop acknowledging him as their own. To play gambling, the gambler borrows money from others and is unable to repay the debt. Despite all these the gambler stakes his own wife in the game.

In every game both winning and losing are part of it. But a gambler addicted to gambling is deluded into thinking that he alone will win and sometimes in his madness, makes him lose the game. The dice of gambling do not bow before anyone. Even the powerful people are kept under control by the dice of gambling. Gambling has the power to utterly erode the moral and ethical character of the gambler. A gambler who has lost everything in gambling feels no hesitation and still steal from others homes. At the end of the Sūkta, the gambler takes an oath not to spend money on gambling, and the Ṛṣi also call upon gambler not to gamble and to lead a happy life through doing agricultural work.

The teachings of the Aksha Sūkta-conveyed through its beautiful poetic descriptions

Since ancient times, India has maintained a distinguished tradition of portraying phenomena through a poetic and

aesthetic lens. When something is described in a beautiful poetic language, people find it attractive and understand it quickly. A prominent exemplar of literary practice is the Aksha Sūkta of the *Rgveda*. In this sūkta, the Rsi has poetically depicted the life of a gambler from an exceptionally literary perspective. The Sūkta vividly illustrates the gambler's obsession with gambling, the consequent disruption of his own peaceful family life, his remorse and ultimately, the inspiration to renounce gambling and engage in agricultural labor. These themes are presented with such poetic finesse that even today, the Sūkta continues to resonate with people.

The metrical style of a Vedic hymn or classical poetry is universally appreciated. Similar to other Sūktas of the Veda, each mantra in the Aksha Sūkta is composed in the Triṣṭupa and Jagatī metres, reflecting a sophisticated poetic and rhythmic structure. In this Sūkta the dice is described as extremely fickle and active and it is compared to the soma juice. In gambling, players lose everything. Here, the gambler is compared to an old horse, which can be sold but for which no one is willing to pay its true value. Just as an old horse loses its worth in old age, similarly, due to gambling the gambler loses his position and standing everywhere.

"Dveṣṭi śvaśūrāpa jāyā rūṇaddhi
na nāthito marditāraṃ |
. aśvasyeva jarato vasnyasya
nāhaṃ vindāmi kitavasya bhogaṃ||
(Rgveda 10.34.3)

The gambler is likened to an adulteress woman. Just as a such woman, driven by desire, approaches a man despite the awareness of potential consequences, the gambler, even after recognising the ruinous outcomes of his actions, continues to pursue gambling.

"Yadādīdhye na daviṣāṇyebhiḥ
parādbhryodava hīye sakhibhyaḥ |
nyuptāśca babhravo vācamakrata
emīdeśāṃ niṣkṛtaṃ jāriṇīva||"
(Rgveda 10.34.5)

The dice of gambling act like an aṃkuśa (elephant goad). Just as the goad control the elephant, in the same way, the dice compel the gambler to continue playing. Just as a driver controls horses or oxen with reins, the dice likewise drive and control the gambler's action. The deity Sāvitrī never violates own sacred principles but always abides by them, in the same way the fifty-three dice are also independent. The dice before no one. Even an angry person surrenders before them and even the king himself offers them reverence.

This Sūkta exhibits an exquisite and refined application of figures of speech, reflecting the Rsi's artistic sensibility. By employing Virodhābhāsa alaṃkāra, the power of dice has been described in a highly poetic and artistic manner in one of the mantras. Although the dice remain on the lower surface, they still leap upward, creating joy and sorrow in the gambler's mind and leaving a profound impact on his heart. By presenting the fear of defeat, these dice intimidate the gambler. Though they have no hands, the dice possess the power to overcome a gambler who does. They are like divine embers scattered on the smooth board, which no one can extinguish. Though cold in nature, these dice ignite the gambler's desire to play.

The Society reflected in the Aksha Sūkta

The Aksha Sūkta of the *Rgveda* also renowned as the Kitava Sūkta, recognized for its distinct secular character, has been categorised as a Laukika Sūkta reflecting practical and societal concerns. In a seminal work "A History of Indian Literature", Maurice Winternitz has written about the Aksha Sūkta, stating that-".... But the most beautiful among the non-religious poems of the *Rgveda Samhitā* is the song of the gambler, RV, X, 34. It is the monologue of a repentant sinner, who has destroyed his happy life by irresistible love for gambling." (A History of Indian Literature, 1981, vol-1, page no-102).

The *Rgveda* provides insights into the social system of its time. Within the *Rgveda Samhitā*, the Aksha Sūkta too offers a glimpse of the society of that period. Just as in the present day, even in that era, the bad practice of gambling was prevalent. In society, the husband's position was considered much higher than that of the wife; that is why the gambler intoxicated by passion for gambling, would even stake his wife in the game. This Sūkta shows that in Vedic society agricultural work and animal husbandry highly respected. This works considered the main basic of the economy and livelihood. Therefore, at the end it is advised to abandon gambling and engage in agricultural work.

"Akshaimāṃ dīvyāḥ kṛṣimīta kṛṣavaḥ
Vitre ramaṣva bahu manyamānaḥ|
Tatra gavāḥ Kitava tatra jāyā
Tanme vi caṣṭai Savitāmaryaḥ||
(*Rgveda* 10.34.13)

Teachings, Advices and Contemporary Relevance of the Aksha Sūkta:

Our society is increasingly moving in the direction of materialism. People have even begun committing wrongful deeds for the sake of indulgence. In the desire for wealth and prosperity, people often forgot to practice self control. In the Vedic period, bad habits like gambling were prevalent and this continue even today in modern times, technology has made this addition even more accessible. There is a growing craze among the youth for online gambling. They play it not only for entertainment but also to earn easy money. This practice negatively effect a person's life. Many people become bankrupt and some even commit suicide after losing in gambling. It is extremely harmful not only for present time but also future. In today's world, like gambling, addiction of social media, drug, alcohol etc. effect our society very badly. The youth of today, tends to regard government job as the ultimate goal of life. When they fail to secure a job, mainly become disheartened and turn away from productive work, often falling prey to harmful habits. Agricultural and manual labor no longer appeal to them as dignified means of livelihood.

Therefore, it is essential to provide moral education to our youth from an early age and encourage them to work hard. In our ancient scriptures, we find teachings on moral education, ways to lead a virtuous life, and the consequences of committing wrongful deeds. However, most people today are unaware of these profound lessons. This ignorance may also stem from people's indifference. One of the main reasons for this is the misconception surrounding the idea of dharma. In our society, people hold different and often distorted notions about religion. Everyone should understand that Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are social systems created by human beings—they are not dharma itself.

Our ancient sages have clearly stated that dharma means duty, culture, non-violence, and service to humanity through righteous actions. It is true that because of conflicts and divisions created in the name of religion, people have started viewing dharma negatively. Many also believe that the invaluable Sanskrit scriptures speak only about one specific religion. But now, the time has come to make people realize the true essence of Sanskrit texts. We can say with full confidence that once people understand the real message of our ancient heritage, they will feel proud of our past and strive to abandon bad habits in favor of righteous deeds.

The Aksha Sūkta is a remarkable example of moral and ethical teachings. It shows how a gambler's habit of playing games of chance can destroy his life, family's financial condition-having lost all his wealth in gambling, even family members stop loving him and his social standing disappears everywhere. A gambler often tries to earn money without hardwork relying on gambling, without realising the immense loss this will bring to himself and his family. Bad habits can ruin a person. A person abandons a bad habit only when he consciously resolves to free himself from it. The desire to acquire wealth without hardwork gradually becomes a bad habit, like gambling. It makes one indulgent and devoid of effort. Bad habit always condemnable. Therefore, at the end of the sukta, it is advised to abandon gambling and devote oneself to agricultural work.

From the Aksha Sūkta, we learn that moral education is very important in life. By practicing good ethics, people can lead a meaningful life. For this, we must give up bad habits. Being negligent in our duties will not work either; even wise people have said that performing one's duties is the supreme dharma for humans. According to the time and circumstances, people should base their actions on agriculture, animal husbandry, and other good means of livelihood.

Conclusion

Each hymn of the Vedas, we can learn something valuable. The Aksha Sūkta illustrates a lesson, showing how a bad habit can destroy a person's life. Here, gambling is presented only as a symbolic example. By using gambling as an illustration, the hymn advises us to stay away from such harmful habits, which divert us from our duties and make our lives miserable. The Aksha Sūkta is a guidance for humans to lead a correct and righteous life. Considering inaction or bad habits as the only way of living is a disgrace to human life. The Aksha Sūkta encourages people to perform righteous actions, because only by performing good deeds can one live a happy and peaceful life.

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