

## Society as Reflected in *Kauśika Sūtra*: An Atharvavedic Text

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The Vedic period spanned at least for a period of around one thousand years (1500 B.C. to 500 B.C.), as is reflected from the literature. The Vedic literature has two distinct parts, one consisting of the *Samhitā*, the *Brāhmaṇa*, the *Āraṇyaka* and the *Upaniṣada* and the other being the *Vedāṅga* literature. Though the literature represents an unbroken tradition of the Vedic society, the society itself witnessed many changes from the age of the *Samhitā* to that of the *Vedāṅga*. The Vedas, as is traditionally believed, are Impersonal (*apauruṣeya*) whereas the *Vedāṅga* literature is recognized as the composition of the Vedic times. Evidently, the Vedic literature was not composed as a social history. Yet the modern scholars who left aside the theory of impersonality have ceaselessly carried on their endeavor to trace in them the religious, social, political and cultural history of the Vedic Aryans.

*Kalpa Sutra* is one of the six disciplines of the *Vedāṅga*. *Kalpa* means ritual and *sutra* means formula. *Kalpa Sutra* are so-called because it contains the prescriptions for actions in the form of formulas. *Kalpa Sutra* is mainly of four types: *Śrauta sūtra*, *Gṛhya sūtra*, *Dharmasūtra* and *Sulva sūtra*. The *sūtras* usually describe systematically what are depicted in the *Samhitā* and *Brāhmaṇa*. The *Gṛhyasūtras* or domestic rules speak about the household rites of an individual Aryan including birth, *upanayan*, marriage, etc., connected with simple offerings into the domestic fire. The *Dharmasūtras* treat customs and social duties, forming the chief sources of the later law-books. The *Sulvasūtras* do not have any relation with the society but they treat of the measurement by means of cords, and the construction, of different kinds of altars required for sacrifices.

As we know, each and every Veda has a number of *Śrauta*, *Gṛhya* and *Dharma sūtras*. In fact, the difference lies in the variety of performance in each *śakhā* of a Veda. The *Kauśika Sūtra* is a *gṛhya* text of the *Atharvaveda*. It is a unique *sūtra* literature in fourteen chapters where we find a mixture of *Śrauta* and *Gṛhya* rites. It is related to text elements of the *Atharvaveda*. The present paper will attempt to find out the society as reflected in the Vedic literature, particularly the *sūtra* literature of the *Atharvaveda*, especially the *Kauśika Sūtra*.

There is a lot of controversy about the subject matter of the *Atharvaveda* and that too for many reasons. On the other hand, its materials mainly apply to the *śānti* and *pauṣṭika* activities of the Atharvavedins. It is said in the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* that both the *śānta* and *ghora* are two main aspects of *Atharvaveda*.<sup>1</sup> Sayana's introduction to commentary of the *Atharvaveda* divides the elements of the *Atharvaveda* into a number

of heads,<sup>2</sup> following which M. Bloomfield,<sup>2a</sup> has classified the subject matter of the *Atharvaveda* into fourteen heads. The Kauśika Sūtra has exploited the materials of the *Atharvaveda* and applied them in many social and religious matters including kingship, cattle-rearing, agriculture, charms for every possible disease, women rites, witchcraft, etc. It will be a rewarding endeavour to exploit the social character as reflected in this interesting *sūtra* text of the *Atharvaveda*.

In the *Atharvaveda*, there are ample references to polity. The word *rāṣṭra* has been used in number of places, particularly in the first chapter (1.29) devoting a complete hymn under the designation *raṣṭrabardhanam* for a welfare state. Prayer to various gods are offered for the prosperity of the state.<sup>3</sup> Even the protection of the kingdom from the enemies and other rivals is found.<sup>4</sup> These references make it clear that a system of polity existed in the Atharvavedic era. Other references to polity also occur (*Atharvaveda* 7.12.1; 10.3.12; 12.1.8; 13.1.35 etc.). Various systems of political nature like *sabhā* and *samiti* etc also find mention. Though the theory of the divide kingship was usually in vogue, elected kingship could also be found in the *Atharvaveda*. It is to be kept in mind that second chapter of the Kauśika Sūtra is very much related to the political matters. Various rites in regard to war and battle fare,<sup>5</sup> coronation of a king, restoration of a dethroned king<sup>6</sup> are prescribed there.

In the *Atharvaveda*, the *purohita* acquires an important position in kingly affairs and these find reflected later on Kautilya's Arthaśāstra. The priest of the king performed various types of religious rites and offerings so that the king may fight enemies and be a conqueror. During the coronation the *purohita* used to give the king various attires (Kauśika Sūtra 17.2; 16.18-19).

## II

In the Vedic age the first three higher caste i.e. *Brāhmaṇa*, *Khatriya*, *Vaiśya* had the right to education. Needless to say, the *Śūdras* were not allowed to read the Vedic scriptures. After the initiation ceremony i.e. *upanayana*, the first three caste would have to go to the house of the *guru* for twelve years for education. In the *Atharvaveda* (11.5), there is a long hymn on the duty as well as the restriction of a *brahmachāri*, which were part and parcel of education. The duties and code of conduct of a student are elaborately laid down in the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.2.1-8). *Kauśika Sūtra* does not lag behind in giving some information on education too. Interestingly, there was no political control or interference on education. It was the teacher- taught relation. Teachers used to be very cordial and simple as well as sincere and honest to his work. Students received education rendering service to the teachers. They had to perform *samāvartana* rite before leaving to their own home. *Taittirīya Upaniṣada* gives a very vivid description of *samāvartana* advice.

About the teacher-student relation Ram Gopal comments "As for the legal aspect of the relationship between the teacher and the student, the *Dharmasūtra* lays down that

on the failure of all heirs, claiming any sort of blood-relationship, the preceptor or the pupil may inherit the property of the deceased person.”<sup>7</sup> The factors related to Vedic learning and non-learning are prescribed in the last chapter (*kaṇikā* 141) of the *Kauśika Sūtra*.<sup>8</sup> During the period of child birth as well as *śrādhya* rite and even on the death of a teacher, the Vedic learning was prohibited.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is clear that the Vedic period to sūtra period presents an unbroken tradition of education, not only in the Veda but also in all sorts of sciences. Regarding women education we do not get any specific reference in the *Sūtra* period or in *Kauśika Sūtra*.

### III

The Vedic economy was marked by two types of basic occupation: agriculture and cattle-rearing. It is believed that among the two the first was cattle-rearing and when the Vedic Aryans settled more firmly, they depended on both animal-keeping and agriculture. In the *Rgveda*, a number of verses are found where the Vedic seers had been praying to the gods for cow. Agriculture was a very regardful profession. In the famous *akṣasūkta hymn*<sup>10</sup> there is a clear reference to enlisting agriculture as an honorable profession.

In the age of *Atharvaveda*, we find many other occupations such as those of blacksmith, goldsmith, carpenters, hair-cutters, bird-hunter etc. The measures for protection of the crops from insects, mouse, birds and other harmful animals which caused damage to the crops were invented. In the *Kauśika Sūtra* (20.4) we come across the word *kināś* that reflects agriculture as a general profession. We find therein also a number of rites like *sthālipāka* being offered to the twin gods *Aśvinau* for the protection of crops. The wife of a farmer is found making prayers to various gods for property including food, wealth and animals. There occur sacraments laid down in the *Kauśika Sūtra* (21.2), where religious performances are done along with Vedic verses to save crops from insects in expectation of better production. Even after harvest, rice is offered to god as a rite to agriculture.

Cattle-rearing comes next to agriculture. Various types of animals were domesticated including cow, buffalo, donkey, camel, sheep, goat, etc. In the *Atharvaveda*, *pūṣā* was the common name of various types.<sup>11</sup> *Kauśika Sūtra* too refers to various types of animals and their rearing (20/26). A number of rites occur in the *Atharvaveda* (22-41) for the protection the domestic animals. We also get references to *goṣāla* in the *Kauśika Sūtra*. Ploughing of the field was done by bullocks. Milk was considered a good drink. From the above we can say agriculture and cattlerearing were main profession during the *Kauśika Sūtra* era.

## IV

Among the four stages of life, the second one was known as *gārhasthya*. After completion of education for at least twelve years, it was the custom for the Vedic Indians to get married. Marriage was regarded as the most important social institution in the Vedic age. In the *Rgveda* (10.85), there is a long hymn known as *sūryā sūkta*, which is actually a hymn on marriage. The *Atharvaveda* contains a long chapter (Ch. XIV) on marriage. Vedic society puts much stress on marriage but the *Gṛhya sūtras* exhibit wide differences in regard to various rites to be performed in a marriage ceremony. Evidently, in the *sūtra* period the Vedic society was divided into many sections with extension of their geographical boundaries.

The importance of marriage could better be understood from the injunction of the *sūtra* literature that an unmarried person or a widower is not entitled to perform sacrifices. In the *Kausika Sūtra* we find four types of marriage, *ārṣa*, *brāhma*, *prājāpatya* and *saurya*. In the *ārṣa* marriage, the bride-groom had to pay a couple of cows as gift. *Śāṅkhayana Śrauta Sūtra* says that the bride is to be presented with new garments and adorned with jewels. Wearing the new garments in the marriage was an indication of the happy conjugal life. Various local rites were also performed during the marriage as gleaned from the *Kausika Sūtra*.<sup>12</sup> The period from *Kārtika* to *Vaiśakha* excepting month of *Chaitra* was the right time for marriage. There was a custom in the marriage ceremony to keep a *kalasa* full of water, which symbolizes the fulfillment of desire both of the bride and the groom. Full description of marriage rites is found in the *Kausika sūtra* (*Kaṇḍikā* 75-79 in Ch. X). Prayers are offered for happy, long, peaceful conjugal life. All *Gṛhya sūtras* including the *Kausika Sūtra* considered marriage life as a centre point of happy family and social life. The chanting of the Atharvavedic *mantras* gives benediction of blessing to a bride. That means the bride was regarded as someone of central importance in a marriage ceremony.

## V

Throughout the ages, man essentially stands in need of three basic requirements: food, clothing and shelter or home. Same was the case with the Vedic Indians. The Vedic people used to take a number of items in their everyday food habits. The food articles may be classified under following groups -

1. Food products from grain and cereals such as wheat, rice, cake, *purodāśa*, etc.
2. Milk and milk products including curd, butter, *charu*, etc.
3. Foods and vegetables.
4. Meat and fish.
5. Alcohol (occasionally).

In the early Vedic period, rice was not very much popular, whereas wheat and *yava* were taken as foods and used in sacrifice. Later on barley, wheat, rice in the form of *taṇḍūla*, *apūpa*, *purodāśa* or cake came to be popular. Milk and milk products also formed favorite dishes for the Vedic people.

There is a notion that the Vedic people were vegetarians. This is not at all correct, as is evidenced from the Vedic literature. Even the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* goes to declare meat as the best food – “*etad a ha vai paramannaṃ yaṇmāṃsam*”.<sup>13</sup> The offering of bull and cow besides sheep in *paśūyāga* and other *yāgas* reflect that the animal flesh was used both in sacrifice as well as in food. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, it is said that slaughtering of both ox and cow was a regular practice.<sup>14</sup> Anyway in the later Vedic age, consuming of meat become unpopular. In the *Sūtra* period we find that the sacrifices were mostly done by offering of cake, milk and milk products, rice and wheat products. Consumption of meat tends to be limited and gradually the higher castes of the Indians gave up taking meat or fish. Probably cows came to be seen as more useful animal, thus restricting the consumption of the beef.

As noted earlier, the Vedic literature is not a document of social history. But scholars, down the age, tried to find out the social picture from this literature flourishing for over thousand years. In continuation of the same effort, we have picked up an Atharvavedic text *Kauśika Sūtra*, which, though composed in the *sūtra* period about 700 BC - 500 BC, has not been fully exploited as yet. Needless to say that we do find some modifications effected in the later period. The society rolls onto rigidity. It is not possible or desirable to draw a true picture of a particular society for a specified period on the basis of just one text. We have, therefore, tried to paint it taking help from the literature of the early Vedic period to the later Vedic period with special and focal reference to *Kauśika Sutra*. This will go a long way to help us to understand the unbroken tradition of Indian life in the midst of changes and modifications.

## Notes & References

1. Bloomfield, M., *The Atharvaveda and Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*, Varanasi, 1964, p. 8.
2. Upadhyaḃya, Baladev, *Vedabhaṣya Bhūmikā Saṅgraha*, Chaukhamba Sanskrit Samsthan, 1985, pp. 138-142.
- 2a. Bloomfield, M., *op. cit.*
3. *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*, 1.29, Nāga Publishers, Delhi, 2003.
4. *Ibid.*, 1.29.2.
5. Bloomfield, M. (Ed.), *The Kauśika Sūtra of the Atharvaveda*, *Adhyaya* 2.13, Reprint, Delhi, 1972.
6. *Ibid.*, *Adhyaya* 2.16.27-32.

- 7 Ram Gopal, *India of Vedic Kalpasūtras*, p. 327.
- 8 Bloomfield, M., *The Kauśika Sūtra of the Atharvaveda*, *Kaṇḍikā* 141.5.
9. *Ibid.*, *Kaṇḍikā* 141.5.27.
10. *Ṛgveda Samhitā*, 10.34, Nāga Publishers, Delhi, 2003.
11. *Atharvaveda Samhitā*, 20.137.2, Nāga Publishers, Delhi, 2003.
12. Bloomfield, M., *The Kauśika Sūtra of the Atharvaveda*, *Kaṇḍikā* 75.5.
- 13 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 7.5.2.42, Gian Publishing House, Delhi, 1987.
14. *Ibid.* 3.4.1.2.