The positive science of the present day refuses to accept anything that is not openly verifiable by direct experimentation, yet there is no denying the fact that 'there are more things in Heaven and Earth, than are dreamt of in our philosophy'. Many secrets of nature still remain undiscovered and are not susceptible to open scientific experimentation. Such phenomena come within indefinite extensible domain of secret science of occultism.

The science of para-psychology has however in modern times made attempts to explore occult mysteries, but it is still groping in the dark. Etymologists have therefore rightly defined the word 'Occult' (derived from the root 'Occultare') to mean - 'to conceal, to hide from sight, to eclipse or to extinguish the light by intervention'.
These occult rites and practices enjoyed such widespread popularity among the masses in India from the vedic period, that occultism became an inseparable part of India's culture and religious thoughts.

The significant characteristics of occultism as traceable in the Sastric texts are:

(a) Asking favours from the super-natural spirits.

(b) These favours are invariably worldly and mundane; not metaphysical like punya (unseen merit), Svarga (heaves) etc.

(c) Occult practice has in it the underlying spirit of compelling the super-naturals to grant the favours demanded.

(d) Two main elements of occultism are chanting of hymns and performances of connected rituals. Generally, the two are performed in accompaniment, but there are occasions where only chanting of hymns or mere performances of the rituals also serve the same purpose.

The Atharva-veda is generally acknowledged to be the most ancient book of Indian occultism and the fountain-head of occult
practices in India. In the Atharva-veda or in the other vedas, we do not find any exact word for occultism, but there are certain words like Atharvan, Abhicāra, Māyā, Indrajāla etc, which however convey the meaning akin to occultism.

Conception of occultism is identical with science in some respects, because both believe in laws of nature and causation; e.g. whenever there is drought, the occultist believes that the cause behind it is the god's anger; if the gods are appeased, the cause will be removed and rains will start. The scientist however asserts that the drought is caused by particular atmospheric condition, which if controlled and conditioned, can produce rains.

The difference between occultism and science is that the occultist believes in super-causation and that all calamities are caused by displeasure of the gods and spirits abounding in the world, but Science does not accept such supra-sensible sources because these are not verifiable by direct experimentation.

Occultism is also different from religion. Religion is human recognition of super-human unseen controlling power entitled to obedience; effect of such recognition on conduct and mental attitude. Occult science is also founded on the belief in controlling powers of the super-naturals but it has no necessary
effect on human conduct and morality. We therefore find many black occult practices which cause injury to others.

Secondly, religion, as it progressed, took a high philosophical character, which sought knowledge of the absolute (Ātmānām biddhi) and not earthly benefits as are prayed for in occult practices.

Occultism, therefore cannot be termed as pure science, neither it is a religion, nor any philosophy or art.

Occultism is different from the magical performances popularly known as 'Indrajāla' or 'Bhānumatī-kā-khel' or 'Bhojavidyā' introduced by the Maga Brahmāns in India who later came to be known as Bhoja-brāhmans. Because, these performances are based on the art of deception and sleight of hand, generally for public entertainment; whereas occult rites are based on supernatural forces and involve no deception.

II

Atharva-vedic occult practices can generally be divided on the two Frazerian principles of thought: first, that like produces
likewise and secondly, that things which have once been in contact with each other will continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contacts have been severed. First of the kind is sympathetic occultism (based on laws of similarity) and the second is contagious (based on laws of contact). Both types of occult practices are found in the Atharva-veda.

From the viewpoint of purposiveness also, the Atharva-vedic occult hymns are of two distinct types: Holy (Beneficent, that is, the hymns directed to individual or community benefit) and Black (Maleficent, that is, causing injury to others).

Not all AV hymns are occult hymns; there are other few non-occult hymns which are either sacrificial or philosophical hymns used in funeral rites or eulogising someone.

III

It should however be noted that occultism is not solely an affair of the Atharva-veda. In the Rgveda there are several mantras which fall strictly within the area of occultism. Moreover many
AV mantras occur in the RV, application of which are similar in both the cases.

The other samhitās, that is the Sāmaveda and the Yajurveda also contain a number of mantras which are similar to Atharva-vedic occult mantras in spirit.

This shows that though the AV as a literary composition is the latest of all the vedas, Athar-vedic occult incantations and practices were prevalent during the period of the earlier vedas. In course of time, these occult practices gathered such a mass popularity that it necessitated compilation of such incantations and practices in the form of another Veda, the Atharva-veda.

IV

In the Brāhmanical description of the Yajñas, also there are many citations which bear a marked similarity in purpose and spirit with the Atharva-vedic occult mantras. Influence of the Atharva-veda is conspicuously clear on the Sāmavidhāna Brāhmaṇa
and the Mantrabrahmana. On many occasions, these Brahmanas
prescribe application of the Atharva-vedic mantras directly
in occult rites.

Frequent mention of the word Atharvan and Angiras in the
Brahmanical texts further indicate the influence of the Atharva-
vedic occultism on them.

The Atharva-vedic incantations are used in Grhya-rites also,
as can be seen in various Grhya-sutras.

There are many similarities and parallelism among the
Atharva-vedic and other European and Central Asian occult rites.
Probably, these similarities are, because the people of these
regions, even though far distant apart had a common Indo-European
origin who in the olden times migrated to these various parts of
the hemisphere.

Tibetan occultism also has many marked similarities with AV
occultism which indicate that however being and isolated Tibet
might have been, cultural osmosis between two countries, India and Tibet, did take place in vedic period, as is only natural between any two neighbouring countries.

VI

In later periods, Puranic, tantric and Ayurvedic rites were also directly or indirectly influenced by Atharva-vedic occult practices. Many Puranas have applied Atharva-vedic mantras in several rituals; some Puranic texts have directly referred to the severity and usefulness of the Atharva-veda.

The tantric text for driving away demons, causing injury to enemies, winning over certain persons, rites for acquiring wealth and wisdom, curing of diseases and snake-bites, wearing amulets are apparently mere modified versions of the Atharva-vedic rites.

According to some, the Atharva-veda is also related to Yogic rituals in some respects. References to Brātya-practices in the Atharva-veda, however, outlines a system of elaborate breath-control and regulation by Brātyas which appear to be systematised in later Yoga practices.
In the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata we often find the mention of the words Atharvan, Atharvāngiras and Atharva-veda, which shows that the Atharvan practices were quite prevalent during that period. There are many illustrations, which prove that the people, during the period of Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata often performed rites and rituals, according to the Atharva-vedic system.

It is strongly felt that if adequate field study of occult practices, still prevalent in India, is made, it may probably establish that these rites have their roots in the ancient Atharva-vedic rites.