

CHAPTER-VII

CONCLUSION

From time immemorial, religion and magic had co-existed in the primal societies around the world¹. Vedic society was no exception to this phenomenon. As one can see, cult and ritual as reflected in the Vedic texts are well marked by religion and magic. Furthermore, just as Vedic religion was made up of a combination of eulogies of the deities and rituals performed in their honour, so also Vedic magic was a combination of witchcraft rites and spells or charms.

The practitioners of the religion of Vedas sought to establish a relation between men and the deities – great and not so great, who were looked upon as the masters of the world. Vedic religion aimed at securing the good will of the gods through the chanting of hymns and by offering oblations to please them. It was expected that the gods being pleased by the chants and rituals would bless men with prosperity and happiness and would protect them from all evils. The practitioners of Vedic magic on the other hand, were concerned with averting the influence of enemies, evil spirits, demons, goblins and sorcerers on men and with the elimination of such beings. This they did through the chanting of spells and various witchcraft rituals.

While, the religious beliefs and practices of the Vedic people have been dealt with in the three Vedas viz., *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Sāmaveda*, Vedic magic has found its place in the *Atharvaveda*. As a matter of fact, this *Veda*

¹ See Frazer, *op.cit.*, pp.63-79

primarily consists of magical formulas, some of which are benevolent to men and some malevolent. The malevolent formulas it may be mentioned here, are aimed at enemies who are looked upon as evil beings or sorcerers. As against this, the benevolent formulas are meant for protecting men from the ill effects of the activities of demons and witches. This aspect of Atharvavedic magic is particularly discernible in the *Bhaiṣajya* Sūktas (charms to diseases), the *Sāmmānasya* Sūktas (charms to secure harmony), the *Pauṣṭika* Sūktas (charms for prosperity) and the like. The very appellation to denote the *Atharvaveda* viz., *atharvāṅgirasa* is suggestive of these two aspects of this *Veda*. The *atharvan* part of this *Veda* is said to be ‘Śānta, Pauṣṭika and Bheṣaja’ whereas the *āṅgirasa* part is ‘Yātu, Abhicāra and ghora’.² This distinction between the two parts of the *Atharvaveda* has been recognised in non – Atharvavedic text also³.

As it appears, the hieratic hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, and the popular incantations of the *Atharvaveda* existed side by side in Vedic society. In practice while the hieratic religion of the *Ṛgveda* was conducted by the higher priests known as Ṛtviks, the Atharvaṇic practices fell under the purview of the domestic priest called *Purohita*. In other words, while the religion of *Veda* was concerned with *Śrauta* rituals, the Atharvaṇic practices were of the type of *Gṛhya* rites. It may be recalled in this connection that according to Yāska’s *Nirukta* 2.12 a *Purohita* is one who is assigned a position of importance by placing him at the

² See Karambelkar, *op.cit.*, p.1

³ See *ŚB.*, 13.4.3.7,8; *ŚāmŚS.*, 16.2.9.12

forefront: *purohitaḥ pura enam dadhati*. Durga in his commentary on this statement of Yāska says as follows- ...*śāntikapauṣṭikābhicārikeṣu karmasu enam puro 'gre dadhati dhārayanti puraskurvantīti purohitaḥ*. It is furthermore interesting to note in this connection that it was the *Brahman* priest who acted as the *adhyakṣa*⁴ at the *Śrauta* rituals acted as a *Purohita* too. In *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 8.40 one comes across indication that the *Purohita* and the *Brahmā* priest were the same person⁵. In this context one may also refer to *Rgveda* VII.42.1 in which the Aṅgirasas who are the propounders of witchcraft in the *Atharvaveda*, have been referred to as Brahman priest. A clear statement to the effect that the *Purohita* and the *Brahmā* priest are one and the same is found in *Atharva Pariśiṣṭas*⁶.

In the *Samhitās* of the other three Vedas the *Atharvaveda* has not been mentioned, although the *Rksamhitā* contains references to the seers viz., Atharvan⁷ and Aṅgiras⁸. This *Veda* has been referred to only in the *Chādogya Upaniṣad* (7.2) and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.4.10; 4.1.2 and 4.5.11)

It is possible that the Atharvedic Mantras, charms and spells were collected into a *Samhitā* at a later period of Vedic era. This however, does not mean that these charms and Mantras are of later origin than that of the other

⁴ See *RV.*, X.71.11

⁵ See *yasmin brahmā rājani purva etīti purohitamevaitadāha.*, *AB.*, 8.40

⁶ See *AP.*, 2.2; 3.1; 3.3

⁷ See *RV.*, I.80.16; I.83.4; VI.16.13,14; X.48.2 etc.

⁸ See *ibid.*, I.62.2; I.72.2; III.53.7; VI.2.15

Vedas. It has been pointed out by Winternitz that while some of the Atharvavedic spells are older than the oldest Mantras of the *Ṛksamhitā*, some are as old as some of the Ṛgvedic Mantras and some are of later origin than some of the contents of the *Ṛksamhitā*⁹. Bhattacharya is of the opinion that many of the charms, spells and usages have been composed in a language used by the common people and while some of these belong to the Indo-European era, some are from the Indo-Iranian period. Again, according to him the prose passages of the *Atharvaveda* are contemporary to the Yajurvedic texts¹⁰. Thus, one cannot fix a specific period of time as the ‘Atharvavedic period’. From this it follows that the magical formulas of this *Veda* both benevolent and malevolent represent almost the whole of the Vedic era. To state specifically the *Ābhicārika* and *Kṛtyāpratiharaṇa* spells cannot be confined to a specific point of time. They represent the beliefs in black magic of the common masses of the Vedic era in its entirety. The fact that the Vedic people believed in and practiced witchcraft of all types can be gathered from the magical contents of the other three Vedas also. It has been stated above that in the three earlier Saṁhitās have been reflected the beliefs of the people in a world of gods who are looked upon as the protectors of all men, who fought against the enemies of the divine. But in the *Atharvaveda* one comes across the notion of a world dominated by forces who are hostile to men. Even the Asuras which are depicted as enemies of the gods

⁹ See Winternitz, *op.cit.*, p.127

¹⁰ See Bhattacharya, *op.cit.*, pp.18,19

have appeared in *Atharvaveda* VIII.6.5 as hostile to men. The Atharvaṇic world is a world of *Rakṣa*, *Piśācas*, *Yātudhānas*, *Yātus*, *Arāyas*, *Attriṇs*, *Gandharvas*, *Kaṇvas*, *Kimīdins*, *Kṛtyā*, *Muradevas*, *Viṣkandha*, *Saṃskandha* and so on. The Vedic people believed that these evil spirits lived in forests, trees, plants, caves, the nether region as well as in all the directions¹¹.

As per Atharvaṇic belief all the calamities including diseases that afflict human beings are caused by forces hostile to men. It is believed that evil spirits enter the human beings through food¹².

According to Oldenberg, this belief is the root cause of fasting prescribed in connection with religious practices. The sacrificer by rule has to avoid taking certain foods so that undesirable elements do not enter his body through food¹³. The witchcraft practices have for their basis a sense of mutual hatred and enmity. The *Ābhicārika* and *Kṛtyāpratiharāṇa* rites are performed by a person whom his enemy hates and who hates his enemy. The motto in performing black magic is *yo'smāndveṣṭi yaṃca vyaṃ dviṣma...*¹⁴ Thus, intense hatred too is considered as a hostile force acting against men.

It is interesting to note that just as Vedic religion has been tinged by magic both benevolent and malevolent, so also Atharvavedic magic has been

¹¹ See *AV.*, I.8.4; II.14.1 and 3; IV.20.9; VIII.3.5 etc.

¹² *ibid.*, V.29.6

¹³ Oldenberg, H., *The Religion of The Veda*, (trans. into Eng.), S.B. Shrotri, Delhi, 1988, pp., 224,254

¹⁴ *ibid.*, II.11.3, 11-23; III.6.1

touched by religion. The Atharvavedic magician priest declares his superiority of power over evil beings by saying that his strength does not lie with Piśācas or thieves or with the prowlers of the forest, the fiends disappear from the village which he enters, because of his formidable power (*ugraṃsahas*)¹⁵. But unlike a true magician who does not seek divine intervention in his magical rites, the magician priest of the *Atharvaveda* seeks the help of the Vedic gods in achieving successful completion of his witchcraft. Thus, he is partly a magician and partly a man of religion. A good number of Vedic gods like Agni, Indra, Āpaḥ, Bṛhaspati, Agni-Soma, Agni-*Jātaveda*, Agni –*Vaiśvānara*, Soma, Marut-Santāpana etc have been invoked in the rites of *Ābhicārika* as well as *Kṛtyāpratiharāṇa* to aid the magician priests. The manner of invocation of the gods in these rites have been illustrated by citing ample examples of charms from the *Atharvaveda* in chapters V and VI of this thesis. In these examples all the gods are depicted as the slayers of non-human demoniac forces as well as of human sorcerers. Some such examples are I.7.1,6,7; I.8.2; I.16.1; I.28.1; II.19 to 23; III.6.3; IV.16.6; V.29.2; VI.2.2; VI.34.1,2; VI.75.2,3; VI.104.1-3; VI.134.1; VII.32.1; VIII.3.1-4; VIII.4.1 etc. It appears that so far as counter witchcraft charms are concerned, the examples of charms in which help from the gods is sought are quite few in number. Some examples are IV.14.7, 8; IV.18.2; IV.40; VII.66.2; VIII.5.3, 5, 10, 15, 17-19, 26; etc. In this context it should also be noted that while there are as many as sixty one *Ābhicārika* charms in the

¹⁵ See *AV.*, IV.36.6-9

Atharvaveda, the number of charms related to *Kṛtyāpratiharāṇa* are only fifteen. Furthermore, in case of *Ābhicārika* spells usually entire hymns are recited during the witchcraft rites. However, majority of the *Kṛtyāpratiharāṇa* charms consists of only one stanza. Some examples are the charms included in the *kṛtyāgaṇa* of *Kauśika Sūtra* and also in the *Gaṇamālā*¹⁶. Majority of the *Ābhicārika* spells falls under *Cātanagaṇa* of *Kauśika Sūtra* (1.8.5). Four charms are recorded in the *Gaṇamālā* of the *Atharva Pariśiṣṭa*. Over and above these, there are about fourteen other hymns which display the character of black magic. It should also be stated here that there are in addition to these, some yet other hymns dealing with black magic which have been recognised by Kauśika as *Abhicāra* hymns, although these do not fall under *Cātanagaṇa*. Some battle charms and charms for women also fall under the category of black magic.

The hymns themselves are not indicative of the rites related to them. Informations on the witchcraft rites are supplied by the *Kauśika Sūtra* and the *Vaitāna Sūtra*. Some of the *Ābhicārika* rituals are performed by offering into the fire, various materials like *ingīḍa* oil, mustard seeds, sesame seeds, husks of grain, various herbs, clarified butter, *puroḍāśa* etc. The fire is kindled in the forest and for fuel are used sticks from birds' nests, sticks collected from trees like *aśvattha*, *kṛkatāsa*, *eraṇḍa*, *ślesmānlīka*, *khadira* etc as well as from reeds. Offerings are accompanied by the utterance of the word *svāhā*. In charms II.19 to 23 fore-offerings of clarified butter are made to Agni, Vāyu, Sūrya, Candra,

¹⁶ See Karambelkar, *op.cit.*, p.94

and Āpaḥ. These offerings are treated as pre-requisites of both *Ābhicārika* and *Kṛtyāpratiharāṇa* rites. Water plays an important role in all witchcraft practices. Preparation of holy water (*śāntiyudaka*) is a must for a number of such rites. Use of amulets of different types of trees and herbs is a part and parcel of rites of black magic. One comes across invocations of the plants and the amulets in which the magical power and potency of these objects are glorified. These plants and amulets are implored to do away with the effects as well as evil intentions of the demons, sorcerers and such other evil beings. As it appears tying of amulets (*maṇis*) is of greatest importance in counter-witchcraft rituals. There are instances of counter-witchcraft charms in which the amulets made of different plants and herbs themselves are hailed as counter-conjurers which are banishers of curses, conquerors of all evils and protector of human body. Thus for example, it is said that- such is the power of the amulet of the plant called *apāmārga* that it can on its own revert the evil deeds of *Kṛtyā* by compelling such deeds to return to affect the person who has used *Kṛtyā* to harm other people. In one hymn (V.14) a magical plant is repeatedly implored to kill the maker of *Kṛtyā* (*kṛtyākṛt*) with the expressions like *ava kṛtyākṛtaṁ jahi... kṛtyākṛtaṁ hanata...etc.*¹⁷

It may not be irrelevant to state in this context that, there existed in Vedic society a fire-cult of magic both *śānta* and *ghora*. The two appellations of

¹⁷ *Kṛtyā* which is an embodiment of evil is apparently a doll, like tool complete with a head, a nose and ears all of them well formed and put-together by the magician. See *KauS.*, 5.39.7

Atharvaveda viz., *Atharvāṅgīrasa* and *Bṛḥgavāṅgīrasaḥ* seem to stand testimony to this fact. All the three families of priests viz., the Atharvans, ṅgīrasas and the Bṛḥgus were priests related to the fire-cult¹⁸. While the Atharvans and Bṛḥgus have been related to fire-cult, which may be called *śānta* (beneficial), the ṅgīrasas are fire priest dealing with rituals of the *ghora* (maleficent) type. In later Vedic texts too the word *āṅgīrasa* has been connected to hostile magic. In fact there is mention of one Ghora ṅgīrasa in *Kauṣītakī Brāhmaṇa*, 30.6, *Aśvalāyana Śrautasūtra* 12.13.1 and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 3.17.6. In the *Atharvaveda* one comes across expressions like *kr̥tyā āṅgīrasasīḥ* (VIII.5.9) and *praticino 'āṅgīraso 'dhyakṣaḥ naḥ purohitaḥ* (X.1.6) etc. Even magical plants have been referred to as *āṅgīrasīḥ* (XI.6.16). The *āṅgīrasa* family of priests is particularly connected with Yama the king of the dead¹⁹. They are said to have received immortality as divine gift²⁰. This priestly family which is related to Atharvaṇic black magic has been depicted as semi divine beings in the *Ṛgveda*²¹.

The importance of the *Atharvaveda* lies primarily on the fact that this *Veda* is a veritable store house of ethnic culture and civilization of Vedic India. This research work taken up on Atharvavedic witchcraft and black magic has enabled the researcher to have an insight into a very noteworthy aspect of Vedic

¹⁸ *RV.*, VI.16.13; VI.15.17; X.21.5; X.87.12; I.31.1; I.71.2; V.11.6; VI.11.3; I.60.1; III.2.4; III.5.10; IV.7.1; VI.15.2; X.46.2; X.122.5 etc.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, X.14.3-5

²⁰ See *ibid.*, X.62.1

²¹ See *ibid.*, III.53.7; X.62.4; X.67.2 etc

civilization viz., the belief in black magic. Belief in and practice of black magic is in fact a phenomenon noticeable in almost all ancient societies around the globe. Belief in magic was indeed very deep rooted in the psyche of many races of the world. In this context one may refer to Frazer who in his *Golden Bough* has referred to magical practices that were prevalent in ethnic societies of continents and countries like Australia, Afrika, Scotland, Malay, British Columbia, Bulgaria, Mexico, Borneo, India, China, Malagury, ancient Egypt, Babilonia and the like²².

Before concluding this chapter one may point out to the fact that magical notions and practices of Atharvaṇic character were very much in vogue in Assam of the ancient and mediaeval periods. Ancient Assam which was known as *Kāmarūpa* was known as a land of necromancy and black magic. As pointed out by Barua 'In the accounts of mediaeval travellers and writers magic appears to be a noticeable feature of Assam'²³. Barua in his article on sorcery in mediaeval Assam has referred to witchcraft practices meant for victory in battles, which according to the accounts of Muhammedan chroniclers were very much in practice in *Kāmarūpa*²⁴. A huge *Mantra* literature on black magic are available in Assam. Some such collections are *Kāmarūpatantra*, *Kāmākhyātantra*, *Jarā-phukā Mantra*, *Dhātutantrakṣarī*, *Jvarar Mantra* etc.

²² Frazer, *op.cit.*, pp. 16-63

²³ Barua, B.K., Notices of Sorcery and its Practices in Assam, *Journal of the University of Gauhati*, Vol.I, No.1, Guwahati, 1950, p.14

²⁴ See Barua, pp.42-44

According to Barua, in some of the Mantras themselves it has been stated that the spells ‘originated from *Atharvaveda*’²⁵.

As a matter of fact, belief in black magic seems to have continued in Assam for centuries since the mediaeval times. There is a village called Mayong in the Morigaon district of Assam. For it is still known as the village of black magic and witchcraft. In its heydays ‘Mayong’ and ‘black magic’ were just like two sides of the same coin. But unfortunately the place does not have a well documented history because the residents of the village are reluctant to share the secrets of their witchcraft practices with ‘outsiders’. As a result, attempts undertaken in course of this research work to collect data from the villagers of Mayong have not been fruitful.

Belief in magic and witches is still wide-spread among many ethnic communities of Assam. And this has often led to the menaces of social persecution and boycott of persons – both male and female, whom people suspect to be practising black magic to harm others.

²⁵ See Barua, p.50