

Religion and Philosophy of the Atharvaveda: A New Approach

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The *Atharvaveda Samhita* (AV), being the second largest compendium in the Vedic literature of the *Rgveda Samhita* (RV), occupies a great position in the ancient history of religion and philosophy. But unlike the RV, the religion and philosophy of the AV have not been properly analysed, rather somehow misinterpreted. It has been portrayed that the religion of AV is primitive, full of magic and devoid of priestly religion. Again, the philosophy of AV does not represent anything new or original, even if it is a preacher of pseudo-philosophy. In the backdrop of this picture, the paper aims to revisit the old theories on the one hand and on the other hand, it has shown the religion and philosophy of the AV of a new dimension in the Vedic Corpus. This new dimension in the Vedic Corpus needs to be addressed properly. Thus, in the proposed paper, it has been tried to establish that the religious culture of AV fills up the gap of the total gamut of Vedic religion with its social responsibilities. For philosophy, it is the AV that represents more originality than the RV, not only in quantity but also in introspection. The philosophy of the *Upanishad*, which represents Brahman as the ultimate reality and creator of the world, has been more vividly represented. It has prepared a bridge between the *Samhita* and *Upanishad* in respect of philosophical concepts. All these have been elaborately dealt with documents and references in the proposed paper.

Keywords: introduction, points of religion and philosophy, arguments of the old classical scholars, counter arguments, original contribution in religion and philosophy

Introduction

We would like to enter the world of *Atharvaveda* (AV)—the fourth Veda, which rumbles round so many controversies since the early days of its redaction. Its content, its language, its age, its religion and philosophy, even its true spirit have gathered so many debates and queries, which are not always addressed properly. But in this small, humble attempt, it is not possible to depict all issues, thus we would restrict our tread into two aspects, i.e., religion and philosophy. It is obvious that as a continuity of Indian tradition, it should not differ much from the R̥gvedic tradition, yet it unfolds a few more aspects and they are to be addressed and examined from a different perspective. It is a no denying fact that the word “Dharma” is difficult to translate into English. Though it is roughly translated as “religion”, it is a very unsatisfactory rendering. To some modern scholars, “religion consists of a belief in the powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate them”.¹ Again, in early period of human civilization, like Vedic, this belief in these powers may take form of Gods, like Agni, Indra, and Viṣṇu which is implored by devotees to favour them with prosperity of men, cows, horses, etc. by means of offering sacrifices along with the recitation of prayers. Shende (1972) went on saying that “it is the sweet will of the deity, who confers such favours to its devotees” (p. 1). But in our opinion, this concept does

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¹ Quoted by Shende (1972) in his book *Religion and Philosophy of the AV*, from “*The Golden Bough*”, Part I, p. 1.

not go at par with the Vedic Dharma. It is narrow and of restricted nature. In India, right from the Vedic age down to Epic Purāṇa and Dharmaśāstra period, the sense is far wider in nature. It pervades and permeates every activity of ours in every branch and department not even from our birth to death, but commencing long before our birth and continuing its rule over us for long ages after death.² Religion may be a part of it, but not the totality. Dharma in Vedic senses a way of life, before and after, “Dharma is the explanation through intuitive, meditative and scientific discovery of that Reality”.³ This difference between Dharma and religion has been echoed even by Tagore once in his lecture “Religion of man”.⁴ Thus, Manu had to declare in his treatise “*Vedo’khilladharmamūlam*”, i.e., the whole proposition of the Veda is Dharma. The word Dharma has been used in the Ṛgveda more than 60 times singly and nearly 20 times as a compounded word. The early commentators equate it with activity, the highest kind of activity that they called “yajña”, i.e., sacrifice. Yāska’s Nirukta explains *Dharma iti yajñasya nāma* (Nir. 3. 13). Ṛgveda itself explains it in verse in puruṣa-hymn, “*yajñena yajñamayajnta devāstāni dharmāni prathamānyāsan*”.⁵ The verse implies that the divine activity with a motif of “*tyāga*” (sacrifice) performed by the deities known as the primary form of Dharma. To explain a verse from the *Ṛgveda* (RV), Sāyaṇa explains dharma is one kind of activity that beholds us. Even *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB) claims: *Yajña* is the highest kind of activity.⁶ The root of the word Dharma comes from √dhr that means what upholds all.⁷ This is the basic characteristic of Vedic religion (Dharma), which has been extended and moulded in later epic purāṇas, but the original concept remained unchanged.⁸ It is divine and revelation. In our dharmaśāstras as well, a few novel characteristics of human beings, which are highly ethical, have been equated with Dharma. What I wanted to mean here is that Vedic religion does not restrict itself in only ritual activities, but a profound self-sacrifice philosophy worked behind it, but it was sometimes narrowed to mere religious activities, rites and rituals in later period. Now the question is “What is more with Dharma or religion—of the AV, that differs it from the RV?”. Or at all are there any differences? Shende has shown some new characteristics in his book. We shall cross-check its propriety. But we shall keep in mind that the Vedas themselves deal not merely with the means required for the attainment of happiness and joy in the future world (*āmuṣmika phalam*) but also prescribe the necessary means for securing happiness; the physical, mental, material and other so-called “secular” values of life as explained by Swami Bharati Tirtha (Sec-Bharati Tirtha in his essay, “The Sanātana Dharma” in the book *The Dharmaśāstra* by Swain, 2011, p. 121). The interpretation of the Atharvaṇa religion may be explained from that perspective. Now, we have to examine the characteristics as observed by Shende and others.

Shende in his book has noted about 10 points. If we sum up them, the following may be noted:

1. It is magical in nature to be applied by Ātharvaṇa (AVn) priests.
2. Atharvaṇa (AVn) religion aims at securing a full span of life, i.e., 100 years.
3. AVn spells are both offensive and defensive; its spells are peaceful magic and hostile magic by Aṅgīrās.
4. It is reformist in nature.

² See the article “Sanārana Dharma” by Swami Bharati Tirtha in the book *The Dharmaśāstra* (2011, p. 121).

³ See the article “Dharma and religion” by Jatindra Saha in the *Journal of Vedic Studies* (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, p. 120).

⁴ See the essay “Religion of Man” by Rabindra Nath Tagore.

⁵ RV. 10. 90. 16.

⁶ *Yajño vai śreṣṭhatamaṃ karma*—ŚB; also see the essay “Interpretation of Dharmaśāstra” by M. Rama Jois, p. 484, of Swami’s book *The Dharmaśāstra*.

⁷ *Dharma dhārayate prajāḥ, ... Mahābhārata, Śānti Parvan*.

⁸ See the book *The Dharmaśāstra* by Swami.

5. It makes a bridge between Brahman in the sacrificial activities and Brahman of *Upanishad*.
6. To glorify and justify the religious practice they borrowed deities from the RV.
7. They are secular in nature and may be practised other than Brahmins, even by *sūdras* and women.
8. It forms the basis of statecraft, which later on developed Indian polity.
9. It makes the foundation of sciences of Medicine, Erotics and *Gr̥hyasūtras* of the Vedic Aryans.

It is no doubt that Shende's observations are important, and the observations of classical scholars do not differ much from him. According to them, AVn religion is primitive, full of magic, folk elements and far from high class priestly religion (Bali, 1981). Before entering into the religious character of the AV, a few more references to the concept of religion and its evolution down the ages are to be noted. When Manu declared, the Vedas as a whole is the root of religion, he kept in his mind that only the sacrificial performance was not the suffice to Dharma but had a greater vista of it. The concept of *ṛta* was never out of sight. The guardian of *ṛta* was Mitra and Varuṇa “*mītrāvaruṇau tvottarataḥ paridhattām dhruveṇa dharmāṇā*”.⁹ Then, the dharma and yajña became a unified character which is reflected in the well-known verse of puruṣasūkta of the RV. 10. 90. It is the *mīmāṃsakas*, who chiefly propagated the sacrificial activity as the prime character of Dharma.¹⁰ Again the *Vaiśeṣikas*, instead of accepting “*Karma*” as “*Dharma*”, categorized Dharma as “*guna*” (quality), which does not change its original character of the matter. Even then, they give a definition of Dharma as a means of prosperity on the earth and the highest aim of life.¹¹ *Manusmṛti* iterates 10 qualities of humans as the essence of Dharma.¹² The human qualities, like perserverence (*dhṛti*), forgiveness (*kṣamā*), restraint (*dama*), non-stealing (*asteya*), purity (*śauca*), control of senses (*indriyanigraha*), wisdom (*dhī*), knowledge (*vidyā*), and truth (*satya*), comprise Dharma. He added later on other human qualities, like four stages of life to be performed by the upper three castes, were included as *varṇadharma*. It included 10 or more sacraments (*saṃskāras*) as a part of Dharma. Our *oldest Dharmaśāstras*, *smṛti*-texts too partake clearly the code of conduct in family and social life, through a whole span of life that elevates man from humanity to divinity, differs human beings from other animals get the sign of Dharma (*dharmeṇa hināḥ paśubhiḥ samānāḥ Mahābhārata*). What I wanted to mean is that only a few ritual activities as prescribed in our ritual texts by *mīmāṃsakas* and *Śrautawriters* are not the only character of Vedic religion, but it is a whole-some existence of life. And this is important to understand the religion of the Veda and AV as well. Each and every activity may be treated as religion in Indian sense. *Mahābhāṣyākara* Patañjali in his *paspasā* understands study of grammar is also a Dharma. We can multiply example from texts of different sciences, where each and every activity may be treated as dharma, whatever may be the task, but *ṛta*, *śatya* honesty and no trickery are attached to it. We get a verse in *Nāradaśmṛiti*, where this notion is transparently declared where it says, “there is no religion where there is no truth”.¹³ I took a bit excess in introduction, that may draw your annoyance, but I had no alternative but to explain that in the whole course of our Indian Tradition Dharma is a much bigger concept than the Western concept of religion or even Indian sectarian religion that narrows the scope of Dharma of ancient Indian tradition. In modern times too, Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest poet philosopher of India, in one of his writings, explains philosophically that religion is not the cause of prosperity, not the means of small bridge of happiness, but it is both means and

⁹ ŚYV. 2. 3.

¹⁰ RV. 10. 90. 16, *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, 1.1.2.

¹¹ यतोऽभ्युदयनिः श्रेयसः सिद्धिः सधर्मः/वैशेषिकसूत्र-१.१।

¹² Dhṛtiḥ kṣamā damo 'styeam śaucamindriyanigrahaḥ/dhīrvidyā satyamkrodh daśakaṃ dharmalakṣaṇam/Manu—6. 92.

¹³ Nāsau dharma yatra na satyamasti na tat satyaṃ yacchalenānvyupetam/(Nārada Smṛti).

ends (Tagore, 1034 B.E.)

धर्म नहे सम्पदेर हेतु महाराज
नहे से सुखेर क्षुद्र सेतु
धर्मइ धर्मर शेष।

Point 1

Let us come to the focal point. We have mentioned beforehand a few characteristics of Ātharvaṇa religion as laid down by Shende. Before him, Keith in his famous book *Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas and Upanishads* (two parts) has elaborately discussed Vedic religion—what includes the sacrificial activities, the characteristics of Vedic gods, magic, rituals—everything (Keith, 1989). But when he comes to the AV, his understanding runs thus,

it is a collection of spells for every kind conceivable end of human life, spells to secure success of every kind, in the assembly, in public life ... to procure health and offspring, to defeat rivals in love, to drive away diseases ... and so on. (Keith, 1989, p. 18)

Bloomfield (2000) had discovered a double face of religion in the AV, both auspicious and inauspicious (*Śānta* and *ghora*-Atharvan with auspicious charms and Āṅgīrasa with aggressive witchcraft). The opinions of Winternitz, Macdonell and their Indian counterparts do not differ much from it. It is as if a book of magic formulas, a collection of popular spells current among the masses, which always preserve primitive notions with regard to demoniac powers (Macdonell, 1976). The normal tendency is to level the AV in a contemptful fashion, without advanced religion of śrauta-rites of the other three Vedas. Macdonell and Keith and a few other scholars tried to show that it was not primarily accepted as fourth Veda and a deliberate attempt was later made to bring it in the Vedic fold, so the 20th book of the AV was added, which contains the hymns used for soma sacrifice (Keith, 1989). Bloomfield (2000) referred Burnell who reports that the most influential scholars of south India still deny the genuineness of the Atharvana.

We need to examine these theories properly by thorough investigation of the original text of the AV in order to find out the real truth and at the same time the causes of such deformation. A few points are noted below.

1. Most of the classical Vedic scholars have taken for granted the AV as a book of magic spells, full of witchcrafts with primitive notions of common mass, being influenced by non-Aryan aboriginals of native India who were non-Aryans.

2. To interpret the AV-content, they mostly depend upon *Kauśika Sūtra* (KS); *Dārila bhāṣya* and *Keśavapadhati* and a so-called Sāyaṇa commentary whose originality is now in question but avoided Vaitāna sūtra (AV) cleverly.

3. Scholars did not always verify the content of the text, not even the spirit and interpretation of the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* (GB), nor do the śrauta-text VS, not even the spirit of the opening verse of the Sāyaṇa-commentary of the AV, where it clearly mentioned that both earthly prosperity and heavenly bliss are the subject matter of the AV (*aihika* and *āmuṣmika phalam*).¹⁴ But buttressed upon the application of KS, I must keep aside Gonda here who contradicts the 19th and 20th century classical scholars in a number of cases to rectify their misunderstanding.

¹⁴ “*Aihikāmuṣmikaphalam caturthaṃ vyācīkṣati*”, introduction to AV Comentary by Sāyaṇa.

4. As the content of the AV has been misinterpreted, so the religion of the AV has also been manifested half-truth. On the basis of modern investigation, we wish to modify the earlier observations.

There are a number of parameters to judge the truth, but it is not possible to elaborate all the aspects, but a few are placed here. First of all, we will verify the character of the chief redactors of the AV, then the records of GB, then the Kalpa texts and finally the observations of modern scholars, who worked on the AV seriously and also the content of the original text without its application.

My Propositions

1. First of all, the most ridiculous question, that among the Vedas, the AV was not first included into the Vedic fold and it struggled hard to achieve Veda-hood. The word “Trayī” represents the other three Vedas, i.e., RV, SV, and YV. It includes the fourth one (Macdonell, 1976). But this question is neither factually true nor is the brain child of the modern scholars. The old commentator Sāyaṇa had to face the same controversy and had to refute the arguments of the opponents, to establish its “Veda-hood” in his own way. One can get it from his long introduction to the commentary on the AV. We should remember that Sāyaṇa was a south Indian *Yajurvedīya* Brahmin and an ardent *mīmāṃsaka*. Had the south Indians, as the question raised by Burnell and Ridgeway were against the AV, at least Sāyaṇa would not take his pen to defend it. The concept of “Trayī” is actually three-fold knowledge of the Vedas (i.e., *Vidyā*, not three Vedas) and it is clear from Jaimini’s standpoint.¹⁵ Indian tradition does not support it and the point is not factually true. Even Keith (1989) suspected Ridgeway’s contention (Keith, 1989). *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*, many times referred to four Vedas; even a number of *Brāhmaṇas* and *Upaniṣads* accept the AV as the fourth Veda.¹⁶

2. The next question is that the AV has a double face regarding its religious character. The two chief poet seers, Atharvan and Aṅgiras, represent two opposite faces of it. One is *śānta*, i.e., holy represented by Atharvan, while the “*ghora*”, i.e., terrible is represented by Aṅgirā, who is lean and black complexioned and preaches *abhicāra*-rites. Mitra in his introduction to GB has first discovered it and Bloomfield referred to it in his book *The AV and the Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*. This is also not factually true if we go straight to the text. In the AV, we find 85 poet seers, whose names are to be found in the RV. But Atharvan, and his disciples, composed the largest number of verses of the AV (A record shows 1,612 verses by Atharvan and his sons, Bhṛgvaniṅgiras 231, Bhṛgu 224, Aṅgiras 88, Atharvaṅgiras 52, in total 2,331, i.e., 2/5 of the total verses).¹⁷ Though Atharvan has been mentioned several times in the RV as an old poet seer, yet no hymn is composed by him in the RV. A few references of his name (in the RV: 6. 16. 13. 14; 10.120. 9; T B 3.5.11). In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (ŚB), he is an ācharya. Atharvā is one of the priests of Yudhisthira in Aśvamedha sacrifice. He is also occurred in Avesta as “Atharvan” as a fire priest. Even his practiced penance with Manu and Dadhyān as mentioned in the RV. Thus, can we say that right from the RV to puranic age? This regardful poet seer changes as a composer of folk elements, primitive culture is not justified. The word “Atharvan” is derived from the root *√tharv*, which means one who does not injure. Śabdakalpadruma derives “*atha maṅgalāya arvāte prastūyate yat*” (he who prepares himself for the benefit of the people). I have searched from the text of the AV, the verses composed or seen by this seer and have noticed no such references of magic or inauspicious objects. The same is the case with Aṅgiras. He is enormously found in the RV, particularly in the 1st Maṇḍala. Agni was first produced by Aṅgira,

¹⁵ “*Saṁsa ṛk yatrātharvaśena pādavyāvasthā / gītiṣu sāmākyā śese yajuḥ sabdah*”/Jamini Sutra, Chap. 1.

¹⁶ GB. 1. 3. 2.

¹⁷ See footnotes of the book “*Veda-Mīmāṃsā*”, p. 67.

(RV.1.1.6;120.1); he dispels darkness as recorded in the RV.1.62.5 and it has been attested by Nirukta (3.17.) too, where the word has been derived from fire (*Āṅgāra*). In the AV, he is the healer of diseases, even mental, drives away evil dreams, but not as a priest of witchcraft, and the original text too does not approve. A hymn of the AV 2.35, where *Āṅgirā* is the seer, is clearly associated with sacrifice.¹⁸ I have traced verse by verse, hymn by hymn, but could not trace inauspicious activity of this poet seer. Recently I have written a paper on this issue which was published by the school of Vedic Studies, Kolkata, on *Ātharvaṇa* priests and *abhicāra* to show that these poet-seers were never associated with so called *abhicārika* or black magic (Adhikari, 2014). I have tried to show there that the word “*abhicāra*” used only four times in whole gamut of the AV (8.2.26; 10.37; 11.1.22; 19.9.9). Even the KS does not support the contention, where sometimes its application is shown *Upanayana Karma*, or protection from evil effects or *Brahmaudana* rite, a *śrauta* ritual. No specific negative witchcraft or black magic is noticed thereof. I also showed there, the word “*abhicāra*” perhaps underwent a doctrinal change and began to signify witchcraft, sorcery being influenced by later literature, like *purāṇas* and *tantras*. *Nāradya purāṇa* once (5.7) refers to six types of activities, like *māraṇa*, *mohana*, *ucāṭāna*, *vaśikaraṇa*, *stambhana*, and later *Atharvanic* literature, like KS, DB used those materials applying free style interpretation that leads to such misinterpretation. Bali too admits that it is academically indiscreet to level the AV as a Veda of magical formulas.¹⁹ Even when Prof Sashi Tewary writes on ethical Values of the AV, where she shows the higher values embedded in the AV, not magic.²⁰

3. Shende has leveled the AVn religion as reformist in character. Keith too hinted it in his observation. We think it is an important observation, but not completely correct, but only partially true. We should like to draw attention to the scholars towards a new perspective of its religious character. It is a no denying fact that the AV is more distinct in character than the RV or YV. *Sāyaṇa* once hinted that both earthly prosperity and heavenly happiness are the aim of the AV, while other three Vedas chase only the heavenly prosperity. Anyway, we want to modify that both *śrauta* and *grhya* activities got a balanced proportion in the AV. Sri Anirvan explains that in other three Vedas, the aim is to achieve immortality through soma sacrifice with the help of gods, where as in the AV, the chief application is on *grhya* rites (*śānti* and *pauṣṭika* rites), which aims at prosperity of both worlds with the power of gods.²¹ We would like to add that both benefits can be achieved from this Veda. In one part, all kinds of worldly benefits listed in *grhya* text *Kauśika-sūtra*; at the same time, all kinds of *śrauta* rites are prescribed in the *Vaitāna sūtra* & GB. Unfortunately, we overlooked it. Keith once commented that *śrauta* rites were deliberately a later addition in the 20th chapter of the AV. But we are not satisfied with their observations. If we follow the hymns of the first seven chapters of the AV, we can discover that the commentator *Sāyaṇa* showed application of the hymns both in *grhya* rites and usual *śrauta* rites too in the sacrifices, like *homa*, *iṣṭi*, and *soma*. Anyone can verify it. Not only the VS, even if we go through the passages of the GB, will we see that all kinds of *śrauta* rites are depicted there. In my book *The Gopatha Brāhmaṇa: A*

¹⁸ *Atharvāṅgirasogoptārah*—GB.

¹⁹ See Bali (1981, pp. 48-53), where Prof. Bali has severely criticized the freestyle interpretation and remarks on magic elements of the AV. To him there is no such primitive or black magic exists in the AV. To him if *abhicāra* means killing and *Āṅgiras* is preaching all such heinous acts is funny and without any foundation.

²⁰ See the article, “अथर्वसंहिता मे नीतिविश्लेषण” in her book *Vedic Studies*, pp. 126-127.

²¹ See *Veda-Mīmāṃsā* (Vol. I) by Anirvan, p. 66 (त्रयीर विनियोग श्रौतकर्म-यार मध्ये प्रधान हल सोमयाग, लक्ष्य देवतार सङ्गे सायुज्येय द्वारा अमृतत्व लाभ, आर अथर्ववेदेर प्रधान विनियोग हल गृह्यकर्म-नाना शान्तिक ओ पौष्टिक क्रियाय, यार लक्ष्य हल देवशक्तिर सहाये अभ्युदय लाभ).

Critical Study, I have elaborated them (see my book, mentioned above Chapters IV and VI). All kinds of normal sacrifices, like *Ādhāna*, *Agnihotra*, *Darśapūrṇamāsa*, *Cāturmāsya*, *Soma yāga*, particularly *Ekāha soma* sacrifice, have been elaborately depicted there. From a book on Śrauta rites of the AV has been published in Delhi by Partiva Prakashan, one can justify my contention. More of it, a new kind of “*Savayajña*” has been depicted in the AV. Jan Gonda has written a book on this subject, while a detailed paper on *Savayajña* has been prepared by Urmila Rustagi, published in the book of Bali. The system of performance of this new kind of sacrifice which involves *iṣṭi paśu* and *soma* sacrifices in a shorter reformed way has been depicted as the aim of which is heaven.²² Even Gonda has contradicted the opinion of Roth & other 19th & 20th scholars and detailed on the Sava, its origin and feature in the AV. Some may argue that KS is the prime Vedāṅga text of the AV and VS and GB were composed later on to bring it into the Vedic fold. Bloomfield has tried to show it in his book AV and GB, but scholars, like Caland, contested it. I have shown the probable chronology of GB-KS-VS in my book, refuting the arguments of Bloomfield (Adhikari, 1994).

To conclude this part, I would like to point out that the AV is not a book of magic formulas, but a balanced religious book of social life, family life, and the prayer book for ancient wisdom to give a new edge to fulfil both worldly and heavenly desires, even philosophically very sound that we will discuss later part. And even for argument’s sake, if we accept magic or witchcraft or *abhicāra* in the AV, particularly showing a verse repeatedly altered “*yo asmān dveṣṭi yaṃ vyaṃ diṣmaḥ*” (AV 2. 19. 23, five hymns), it is to be seen that the same verse is to be found in other Vedas too. So, when they are overlooked, why do we point only to the AV? This is academically not acceptable. Even if we verify the content of these five hymns, where these parts occur, we can see that they are addressed to the Vedic deities, like Agni, Vāyu, Sūrya, Candra, and Āpaḥ. Are these deities related to *abhicāra*? They are prayer for protection not *abhicāra*. Prof. Chakraborti, in his paper commented that “*abhicāra*” is not the monopoly of the AV (Chakraborti, 2002). We again remind that to understand the religion of the AV, its character we have to go to the original text, not depending on the commentators, application or books of late-dated texts influenced by later literature. Then, you will get the real flavour of this Veda, its unique character, its religion and a wonderful collection of lyrical literature.

For the final part of its religion, we can say it is a religion of poets. Apart from other things, the AV exhibits some finer taste of poetry. The text itself records the AV as a piece of immortal divine poetry that never decays not dies.²³ Shende wrote a full book on the poetic elements of the AV and we can discover hundreds of hymns with poetic beauty. We can refer here to the *Bhūmi sūkta* of the AV 12. 1. The poetic beauty of this hymn has been eulogized by both Indian and Western scholars. Even the serious scholar, like Bloomfield, remarks, “The hymn is one of the most attractive and characteristics of the Atharvan, rising at time to poetic conception of no mean merit and comparatively free from the stock artificialities of the Vedic poets”.²⁴

Anyway, we would wind up this portion to avoid excess, but we must remember that this Veda is varied as well as its religious character, though different from the other three Vedas, yet it never loses its weight. Even Tagore translated a number of verses of the AV, which are magical to commentators, but lyrical to the great poet and he defended his justification for his translation and who can deny that a poet understands poetry better

²² See the article, “अथर्ववैदिकमन्त्रऔरसवयज” in the book of Bali (1981, pp. 181-200).

²³ *Devasya paśya kāvyam na mamāra na jīryati*, AV.

²⁴ See Bloomfield-Hymns of the AV, SBE, Vol. XL, p. 639. Anirvan too has mentioned in the same language in his book.

than an orthodox commentator.

Vedic Philosophy and Atharvavedic Philosophical Elements

To begin with the second part on Atharvavedic philosophical tenets, we need some sweeping remarks on Indian philosophy, Vedic philosophy and its development in the AV, as a general introduction to enter into the original subject. We all know that philosophy that is termed as 'Darśana' in Indian tradition both in India and the West as an endeavour to satisfy his thirst for knowledge through his natural understanding of this world. Plato rightly commented that "philosophy begins in wonder". Human beings, since the ancient period, have been fascinated with their perceptible world. Then, he questions: From where has this world been created? (*Kuto va iyatavistlib*—RV. 10. 129), who create it? Why did he create it? Is there at all anyone who is behind this creation? What is the reason of creation? What is the final goal of human life? How can it be achieved? All these are some of the basic questions related to basic doctrines behind philosophical quest. In India, since the days of Ṛgvedic era, these questions have driven the Vedic seers and later philosophical thinkers. As a result of which, in India, a number of philosophical schools developed. India thought men have been driven by the quest of searching for the four ends of life viz dharma artha kama and mokṣa. Except cārvāka-school, on other systems, acknowledge "moṣka" as the highest goal of life, but each school (out of 16 schools as recognized by Sāyaṇa-Mādhava), where the Vedānta system alone again is subdivided into more than 10 schools) the "svarūpa" (form) of mokṣa (salvation) and the means to achieve it is different. Analyzing the highest goal (parama-tatva) and understanding the "highest truth" is the chief aim of Indian philosophy that is termed as "metaphysic" in Western sense? Classical Western scholars, like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Bradley more or less accept "metaphysics" as the central theme of the philosophy, but in modern times, Western philosophy has been developed in so many systems, like: (a) metaphysics, (b) epistemology, (c) logic, (d) ethics, (e) aesthetics, etc. (Chattopadhyay, 1963). Professor Chattopadhyay has tried to show that in both Indian and Western philosophy, the basic problems or questions are, more or less the same, even the final goal, but Western philosophers differ in methods of judgment of truth and systems of thinking. In Indian philosophy in general, it has been taken into account the metaphysics, logic, epistemology, ethics in each stream, which is a synthetic outlook. That is why in Indian religion, philosophy is not clearly remarketed, but inter-related where as in Western philosophy; they are different systems (Chattopadhyay, 1963).

Now, the Vedic literature in directly two systems was developed; one is based on Karmakāṇḍa (Mīmāṃsā) and the other is Jñānakāṇḍa (Vedānta). The former one emphasizes the performance of sacrifice and the goal is "heaven" a place of complete happiness, on the other hand, Vedānta is based on *Upaniṣads*, where the doctrine of "self" or "*brahman*" and the way of achieving this brahman is the main theme. In both cases, the basic questions regarding this world are the same and both accept the "Veda" (*śruti*) as a "*svataḥpramāṇa*" (self-proof). Monoism and pluralism is a pet subject there. From many to single, from many gods to one, Brahman or ātman is a favourite topic of Vedic philosophers. We shall try to see the connection or rejoinder of the *Atharvaveda* in this development in our discussion with refutation some misconception raised by scholars, while discussing the philosophy of the *Atharvaveda*.

If we try to discover the elements of philosophical ideas embedded in the Vedas (excluding *Upaniṣads*), one may find a number of ideas. The composers were surprised by the creation of this world, its objects and thus started to find out its answer. The poet-seers, praised deities, worshipped them and prayed for earthly and heavenly bliss. Though in general, these Vedic deities were their everything, yet their enquiry about the

creation, they might not have been satisfied with those ideas. The well-known hymn (RV 1.164), (*asyavāmīyasūkta*), where a question comes out from the mouth of seer Dīrghatamas, “who has seen the first created from non-existent to existent? How was ‘self’ (*ātmā*) created”?²⁵ Where does this mind come from?²⁶ “*prcchāmi tvā*” is an idiomatic usage of this long hymn, where one can discover at length the germs of Vedic philosophy.²⁷ The *Nāsadīyasūkta* (1.123) is one of the finest examples of such enquiry where not only of this existent world, but a deeper question of “pre creation” has been asked. “What was the state of Universe before creation”?²⁸ The tuning line of *Hiraṇyagarbhasūkta* (10.121), “*kasmai devāya haviṣā vidhema*”, points to us about the philosophical enquiry by the first philosophers. At least a dozen of such hymns can be traced in the RV. Alone, where creation, queries and their empirical answers are given by the seer-poets, where it shows that this universe is created by one great soul.²⁹

Objections

Let us come to the AV. Earlier we started with an introductory verse of Sāyaṇa. That verse has been coined in order to understand the philosophy of the AV. Following *Kauśikasūtra* & *Vaitān-asūkta*, he has given the list of contents that has been restructured by Bloomfield into 14 heads.³⁰ In spite of that, we are co-erced to say that Sāyaṇa was not as sincere as R̥gveda, because of his overdependence on *Kauśikasūtra*, *Dārilaḥṣya*, etc. He has diluted his statement. Anyway, what I submit with fear is that the characters painted by partly Indian commentators and their Western counterparts are not fully true.³¹ Unfortunately, the scholars, without going through the semantics of texts, relied upon its application, which sometimes even ruthlessly criticized by Whitney (Macdonell, 1976). Winternitz speaks the most negative remark about the philosophy of the AV. Let us hear him,

but they, too, are only conjectures who pose as philosophers, by misusing the well-known philosophical expressions in an ingenious, or rather artificial, web of foolish nonsensical plays of fancy, in order to create an impression of the mystical, the mysterious. What at the first glance appears to us as profundity, is often in reality nothing but empty mystery—mongering, behind which there is no more nonsense than profound sense. (Winternitz, 1927, p. 131)

²⁵ *Ko dadarśa prathamam jāyamānam asthanvantam yad anasthā vibharti/bhūmyā asurasṛg ātmakāḥ svit ko vidvāṃsam upa gāt sraṣṭum etat*/(RV 1.164.4).

²⁶ *Manah kuto adhi prajātam* (1.164.18).

²⁷ *Nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīm nāsīd rajo no vyomā paro yat*/(RV 10.129.1).

²⁸ *Ko addhā veda ka iha pravocat/kuta ājātā kuta iyaṃ visrṣṭiḥ*/(RV 10.129.6).

²⁹ Winternitz (1927) observed, “but there are about a dozen of hymns in the R̥gveda which we can designate as philosophical hymns, in which, along with speculations on the universe and the creation, that great pantheistic idea of Universal Soul which is one universe appears for the first time—an idea which since that has dominated the whole Indian philosophy” (Vol. I, p. 85). Hymns like 1.164; 10.90 (*Puruṣasūkta*); 10.121 (*Hiraṇyagarbha*); 10.125 (*Vāk*); 10.129 (*Nāsadīya*), etc. bear the germs of philosophy.

³⁰ The content of the AV has been classified by Sāyaṇa, in his introductory portion of the AV. Acc to *Kauśikasūtra*—the contents are as follow *pauṣṭikāni*, (*kṛṣṭi puṣṭi—anaḍuh samṛddhi karaṇāni*) *bhaiṣajyāni*, (*vāta pitta śleṣm nirodhakāni*) *strī karmāni* (*garbhādhāna prasavādi karmāni*), *grhaśāntividhiḥ*, *duḥsvapnanivāraṇam*, *ābhicārikāni*, *parakṛtyābhiicāra—nivāraṇāni*, *savayajñah*, *vivāha*, *pañcamedhikāni*, *piṇḍapitryajñah*, *ājya—tantraḥ*, *aṣṭakā karma*, etc. According to *Vaitānasūtra*—*darśapūrṇamāsau*, *agnihotram*, *cāturmāsyaṇi*, *āgrayaṇeṣṭiḥ*, *paśuyāgaḥ*, *agniṣṭomādi catuḥ saṃstha somayāgaḥ*, *sautrāmaṇi*, *gavāmayanam*, *rājasūyah aśvamedhaḥ*, *puruṣamedhaḥ*, etc. It is clearly reflectsthat both *aiihika* & *āmuṣmikaphala* can be produced by only Atharvaveda.

³¹ Bali (1981) in his book *Historical and Critical Studies of the AV* has dealt this issue elaborately and showed that the interpretations done by Westerners are not to be actually found in the AV. The word “*ābhicāra*” as explained by them is also doubtful. Even the very word “*ābhicāra*” has been used by Atharvaveda only four times the verses containing the word does not show any kind of *ābhicāra* (four verses are AV 8.2.26; 10.3.7; 11.1.22; and 19.9.9; Sāyaṇa interprets it in some negative effect, pp. 22-23).

Actually he considers the subject matter of the Atharvaveda, like other classical scholars, *a book of magic formulae* and this remarked that the allegations of Winternitz are very serious. So, we shall have to examine this issue to find out the truth.

Our Opinion

Anyway, let us turn our attention to the philosophical aspects represented by this Veda. We shall take up only two or three aspects here. Like Ṛgveda, the AV has a number of philosophical hymns that contradict the opinion of Winternitz. Among them, I mention here *a few like Virāṭsūkta* (8.9), *Ātmasūkta* (9.9 & 10), *Skambhasūkta* (10.7), *Jyeṣṭhabrahmasūkta* (10.8), *Ucchiṣṭabrahmasūkta* (11.7), *Varuṇasūkta* (4.16), *Rohitasūkta* (13.1), etc., one scholar has counted nearly 30 philosophical hymns in the AV³² see...) where the philosophy of oneness in the midst of plurality, the speculations on creation of this Universe from a great (*vṛhat*, *mahat*, *virāt*) soul has been depicted. One may ask what can we get extra, in these hymns, that we cannot have in the Ṛgveda? Yes, according to Anirvāṇa, to the Vedic Aryans, there was no fundamental difference between “one” and “many”³³ “*ekaṃ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*” is its famous example. Yāska in his Nirukta (chapter VII) has dealt this issue of puerility with “*māhābhāgya*” theory (*māhābhāgyād devatāyā eka ātmā bahudhā stūyate—Nirukta—Chapter VII*).

The original contribution of the AV in Indian philosophy is that, for the first time, it connected Brahman with creator or great soul that has been elaborately discussed in the *Upaniṣads*. The philosophical thoughts of the AV are pre-upanisadic (अथर्वसंहितार आरेकटि वैशिष्ट्य हल औपनिषदिक भावना, Anirvan Veda-Mīmāṃsā, p. 66). The philosophy of oneness or singularity among plurality is the common character of the Vedic philosophy, but we never come across the word “*Brahman*” in an upanisadic concept. In the Ṛgveda, the word Brahman is not unknown; at least to be found nearly 100 times, if not more, but in most cases, it means *Vāk* or *Stotra/Śastra* (*yāvad vṛhantaṃ brahma tāvatīyaṃ vāk*). The famous *Vāksūktya* (10.125), where a feeble touch of *Ātmatattva* can be traced, but that great power, the creator of this Universe has never been categorically identified with the word “*Brahman*”. In *Nāsadīyasūkta* “*ānīdavātaṃ svadhayā tad ekaṃ*” (10.121) one “*svadhā*” is there, but no direct mention with the word “*Brahman*” of the highest principle is not shown there. Here, we can say, it is the AV, who connected the Saṃhitā’s “*Brahman*” with Upanisadic Brahman. Let us take a couple of examples from the AV. In *Jyeṣṭhabrahmasūkta* (10.8), the hymn begins with the all-pervading and all creating power who is *Jyeṣṭhabrahma* (*yo bhūtaṃ ca bhavyaṃ ca sarvaṃ yaś cādhi tiṣṭhati/ svaryasya ca kevalaṃ tasmai jyeṣṭhāya brahmaṇe namaḥ*//10.8.1). Here, 44 verses are to be found in this long hymn, depicting the power, greatness and all pervadedness of *Brahman*,

yataḥ sūrya udety astam yatra ca gacchati/
tad evaṃ manye’ haṃ jyeṣṭhaṃ tadu nātyeti kiñcana// (10.8.16)

Any reader will simply realize that this *Jyeṣṭhabrahman*, who is all pervading in the *Upaniṣads* (*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*) is one and the same as this *Jyeṣṭhabrahman*. Again, this *Jyeṣṭha brahman* is one and the same as *Skambha*.

³² Whitney (1996), *AV Saṃhitā* (edn), says that the native commentators’ explanation is nothing to do with the verses.

³³ ‘एकदेवतावाद आर बहुदेवतावादे विरोध आर्यमनरे अगोचर’ वेदमीमांसा, 1 म खण्ड, भूमिका-पृष्ठा-21”, “एक आर वहु मध्ये विरोधेर कल्पना करे तार्किक मन... तदेव-पृ-21”.

skambheneme viṣṭabhite dyauś ca bhūmiś ca tiṣṭhataḥ/
skambha idaṃ sarvam ātmanvad yad prāṇan nimiśac ca yat// (10.8.2)

Skambhasūkta (10.7) is also a long hymn with 43 verses. Where everything in this Universe is created and existed in *Skambha*.

yatrāmṛtaṃ ca mṛtyuś ca puruṣa' dhi samāhite/
samudro yasya nābhyāḥ puruṣo' dhi samāhitā//
skambhaṃ taṃ brūhi/ (10.7.15)

or

bhūtaṃ ca yatra bhavyaṃ ca sarve lokā pratiṣṭhitāḥ/
skambhaṃ taṃ brūhi katamaḥ svid eva saḥ// (10.7.30)

All gods are *Skambha* (10.7.30). And these types of expressions are enormous in each and every line of *Skambhasūkta*. And this *Skambha* is nothing but *Brahman*. The same is the case with *Ucchiṣṭabrahmasūkta* (11.7). Hymn 11.8 is also highly spiritual, where the one *puruṣa* is depicted in a mystic way, in which everything enters and there it is very clearly mentioned that *puruṣa* is *Brahman* (*tasmād vai vidvān puruṣam idaṃ brahmeti manyate*// 11.8.32). All these clear evidences prove that the upanisadic *Brahman* has got its first revelation in the AV. In the AV, the word *Brahman* has been uttered more or less 230 times in the AV.

Śvetāśvataropaniṣat starts with (1) 1/1—*kiṃ kāraṃ brahma kutaḥsma jātā jīvāma kena, kva ca sampratiṣṭhāḥ/ adhitiṣṭhā kena kālaḥ svabhāvo niyatir yad ṛcchā bhūtāni yoniḥ puruṣa iti cintyā/*

The *Taittirīyopaniṣat* (2.3) describes the AV as the foundation of *Brahman*, conceived as *Puruṣa*. Thus, Atharvanic conception of *Brahman* is the basis of *Upaniṣads* (Shende, 1952, p. 212).

The *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad* (1.3) describes *kāla* (time) as such:

Which is the root of creation? Is it nature or destiny or arbitrary?

Answer: *Kāla* is the root of everything, *te vyāyayogānugatā apaśyan ... yaḥ kāraṇāni nikhilāni tāni kālātmayuktānyadhitiṣṭhatekaḥ/ Kāla* as the first principle. The conception of *kāla* is the source of eternal principle. The conception of *Kāla* as the source of eternal principle of the world order (*Ṛta*) is to be found first in two *Kālasūktas* of the AV.³⁴

kale ha bhūtaṃ bhavyam ceṣitaṃ ha vi tiṣṭhate/ (19.53.5)

or

(kāle tapaḥ kāle jyeṣṭhaṃ kāle brahma samāhitaṃ
Kālo ha sarveśvaro yaḥ pitāsīt prajāpateḥ/ (AV 19.53.8)

or

Kāla sayate paramo nu devaḥ (AV 19.54.5)

Do you think these verses are profound nonsense or mongering? I hope you won't.

Now if anyone asks “What is the intention of the creator in creating this Universe?”, we have a number of

³⁴ *Yas tvam asi so' ham asmi—Kauṣītakiupaniṣat—āyam ātmā brahma—ekamevādvitīyaṃ sat—Chāndogya—6/2/1 tat tvam asi—6/8/7 etc. so' kāmāyata—bahusyām prajāyeyeti—Tai. U. 2/6/4; satyaṃ jñānam anantaṃ brahma—Tai. U. mano brahmeti prajānāt 2/1/2; brahmā devānām prathmaḥ sam bhabhīva viśvasyakartā bhuvanasya goptā/sa brahma vidyām sarva vidyā pratiṣṭhām atharvāya jyeṣṭha putrāya prāha—Muṇḍko. 1.1.*

stories in the Brāhmaṇas. Prajāpati was alone in the beginning. He desired to be many (*eko'haṃ bahu syām?*). This “desire” is considered by the Atharvanic seer as the basis of creation. It was “*Kāma*” to him. In the AV, we get a hymn on desire (*Kāmasūkta*).³⁵ *Kāma* was there in the beginning. It was the product of mind (*kāmastad agre samavartata manaso vetaḥ prathamam yad āsīt/* 19.52.1). Another *Kāmasūkta* is to be found in the AV 9.2, but there, the spirit is different.

The concept of Ātman also in the sense of highest power is to be seen in the AV.³⁶ We shall conclude our topic about the philosophy of life and death in the AV. In the AV, we find a positive outlook about life. To the seer, this world is the world of immortality, which actually means to attain a fullest course of life (*ihāyamastu puruṣaḥ suhāsanā sūryasya bhāge amṛtasya loke*)³⁷ or (*imaṃ sahasra viryeṇa mṛtyor ut pārayāmai*)³⁸ (AV 8.1.18). One desires to cross the death by his power.

There are two long hymns in the 8th *Kāṇḍa*, where longing for the fullest course of life is to be heard and a prayer to all deities is to be seen for a long life.³⁹ What is this length and how would be its span?

Listen to AV Seers:

Jivema śaradaḥ śatam// paśyema śaradaḥ śatam//
 Budhyema śaradaḥ śatam// rohema śaradaḥ śatam//
 pūṣema śaradaḥ śatam// bhavema śaradaḥ śatam//
 bhūyema śaradaḥ śatam//bhūyasī śaradaḥ śatam//⁴⁰

The logical construction of this hymn deserves attention. Here the poet prays want to live hundred autumns (100 years). Not just to live, but we want to see with eyes the beauty of this beautiful world. Our senses should be healthy, therefore. Not only senses, but our intellect shall remain alive, so that we may be capable of understanding everything for hundred years. This is the aim of the AV, which has been designated, unfortunately as charms and spells of unholy magic by some scholars.

Now, another question arises—“How can we live so long?”. The answer also is that the AV. It is also known as a *Bhaiṣajyaveda* that is the root of Indian Medical science. The first Indian medical science developed in the AV. It is fact, what once Caraka declared—there is no beginning of *Ayurveda*.⁴¹ Yet in ancient India, when *Āyurveda*, first developed at the hands of Caraka, Śuśruta and Vāgbhaṭṭa (*Vṛddhatrayī*), as a faculty of medical science, then these ancient physicians drew our attention that they had received inspiration and information from the AV. *Āyurveda* developed as an *Upaveda* of the AV.⁴² [“*yad bheṣajam tad amṛtam yad amṛtam tad brahma*”—GB—1.34], i.e., *vāyu*, *pitta* and *kapha* are the basis of Indian Ayurvedic system did exist in the AV or not. Though Prof. Bhattacharya is doubtful of its existence, yet scholars, like Karambelkar, Dasgupta and others including this humble fellow think that some references of *tri-dhātu-tattva*, in other names existed in the AV.⁴³ Recently, it came to my notice that Prof. Dasgupta in his book *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Vol. II), showed that the theory was known to AV. I only add here one more point that about the causes of diseases *Dārilaḥṭṭa*, the commentator of *Kauśikasūtra* observes that there are two basic factors of

³⁵ AV 19.53 & 54.

³⁶ AV 19.52.

³⁷ AV 19.51.

³⁸ AV 8.1.1.

³⁹ AV 18.1.18.

⁴⁰ AV 8.1 & 2.

⁴¹ AV 19.67. 1-8.

⁴² *Na hi nābhūt kadācid āyudhaḥ santāno buddhi santāno vā*—Caraka. 1.30.27.

⁴³ *Iha khalu āyir vedo nāmopāṅgam atharva vedasya*—Suśruta (1.1.5).

diseases: (i) due to wrong consumption of food; and (ii) and due to sin (*āhāraja & pāpaja*). The first kind of diseases are treated by herbs and the second sort by the spells of the AV. GB (2.1.19), finds a relation between disease and change of season “*ṛtusandhiṣu vyādhir jāyate*”. Anyway, about *Āyurveda*, Atharvaveda, and their relation, courses of diseases, their treatment etc. are elaborately dealt with by Karambelkar, Dasgupta, etc. My intention here is that it is AV that turns our attention towards human health, its wellbeing and earthly prosperity philosophically. It shows that not only for the “heaven” after death, but in this beautiful earth too, one should complete his long span of life being quite healthy. Remember: “*śarīram ādyaṃ khalu dharmasāadhanam*” (Kālidāsa in Kumārasambhava, Canto V).

Have we noticed that the largest number of *Upaniṣads* are attached to the AV? And why? Shende has counted 112 in number.⁴⁴ There is a controversy about the number, yet it is a no denying fact that the highest number of *Upaniṣads* find their basis in the AV and even the *Upaniṣads* of TU., Ch., UP., Br., up etc. have drawn philosophical elements from this Veda.⁴⁵ Still shall we say that this Veda is a collection of old primitive charms and spells and magic formulae? We strongly refuse to accept it. If the Veda is a “knowledge per excellence”, then the AV is not out of its periphery.

Conclusion

The religion and philosophy of the AV, in general, does not differ from other three Vedas, yet it expands its area; it is between earth and heaven; it includes the philosophy of a poet which is also one kind of religion (*apāre kāvyasaṃsāre kavirekaḥ prajāpatiḥ*...). And both śrauta and smārta culture are the basis of its religion. So, we showed not encircle on its magic, but think about the power of mantra, not its abhicāra, which actually exists very few in the original as it is the culture of all ancient religion including Vedic religion (Shende, 1972). The philosophy also is very strong and sound. Scholars must pay attention to the new perspective of the AV (Shende, 1972). It is a matter of hope that during the last 30-40 years the situation has been some-how changed and scholars right from Goṇḍa to other Vedic scholars are trying to show its new dimensions including content, language, power of mantra or music and philosophy, and we are hopeful that the new Atharvaveda, a source of varied intrinsic knowledge and wisdom, will emerge in the passage of time rubbing off its grey unwanted character.

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⁴⁴ Bolling, in his articles on diseases and medicine (Vedic) in the “*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*” comments that Hindu theory of the constitution of Body of three elements bile, phlegm (*pitta*) and wind does not appear in the AV texts. Prof. Dasgupta does not agree him. He says there passages, which Bolling missed 1.12.3, where it is told that diseases are divided into three classes; viz. those produced by water by wind and by dry *yo abhrajā vātajā yaś ca śuṣmaḥ: abhrajā—Phlegm—kapha* (water—cold)/*vātajā—Wind—vāyu/śuṣma—pitta—fire—śuṣma*, see Dasgupta (1957, pp. 299-300).

⁴⁵ The essay written by Prof. Dipak Bhattacharya entitled “On the Relation between the Atharvaveda and Ayurveda” in the book *Science and Technology in Ancient India*. But Prof. Dasgupta in *History of Indian Philosophy* (Vol. II) prefers to accept the *tri-dhātu-tattva* (pp. 299-300). See also my paper “Concept of Disease and its Causes in the AV”; (*Anvīkṣā*, Vol XXII, 2001). Cf. Caraka-vāyuh *pittam kaphaś cokaḥ śarīro doṣa saha srahaḥ* (1.57). AV, Verse—*yo abhrajā vātajā yaś ca śuṣma vanaspatīn svacatām parvatāmś ca* (AV 1.12.3).

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