

Vrātya in ancient India: An Overview

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Abstract

This article is to give an account of a general outline of *Vrātyas* as revealed in the *Atharvaveda* as well as later in the early *Brāhmanical* texts. Here follows an overall picture of the study as a whole. The study embodies all the important aspects denoted by the term '*Vrātya*'; the meaning of *Vrātya* as reflected in the *Atharvaveda* in particular, and other vedic texts as well as *Smṛti* literature; the social status of *Vrātyas*; the glorification of *Vrātyas* etc., have been enumerated in this article.

Keywords: *Vrātya*, Social status, Glorification, Upanayana, Smṛti

Introduction

The word '*Vrātya*' derived from the word '*Vrata*' means belonging to a roaming band, vagrant, member of fellowship that stood without the *Brāhmanical* pale, it is further applied to the son of a uninitiated man^[1], or also to on who has let the appropriate time for the Sacrament of initiation slip^[2]. Generally, those who do not undergo the sacraments like *Upanayana* are *Vrātyas*. Such persons do not enjoy the right to perform Vedic practices like *Yajña* and are treated as mean. But if a *Vrātya* scholar appears to be a holy person, he is revered and appreciated like a God, even when superfluous by the *Brāhmaṇas*. *Vrātya* is the more commonly known to be a person who, though born in a *Brāhmaṇa* family, does not underage sacraments like *Upanayana*.

The *Atharvaveda* describes the *Virāt* form of this very *Śiva*. The *Vrātyas* consider their deity, Lord *Śiva*, the greatest power in the world and the greatest God. *Śiva*, according to them, is the God of all Gods, *Brahmā* or *Mahādeva*^[3].

Vrātya is accompanied by *Prajāpati* and *Parameṣṭhi*. All deities, *Diti*, *Aditi*, *Idā*, *Indrānī* and *Virāt* God accompanies *Vrātya*. The *Atharvaveda* describes *Virāt* figure of *Vrātya*. The sun is his right eye and the moon his left. *Agni* and *Vāyu* are his two ears. Day and night are his nostrils. *Diti* and *Aditi* are the two parts of his head. Year is his head^[4].

Vrātya has been described as the scholar of all the Vedas. The four Vedas follow him. In the same way, *history*, *Purāṇa*, *Gāthā*, *Nārāśmsī*, the three fires i.e., *Āhavanīya*, *Gārhapatya*, *Dakṣiṇāgni*, the *Yajña*, *yajamāna*, the animals, all the universe and all seasons too follow him. Not only the Vedas but also the whole of the world, land medicinal herbs, flora, the sun, the moon, the stars, the seasons, the truth, the glory and the fame follow him.

Vrātya incorporates all the deities. It has, therefore, been said that the scholar who condemns *Vrātya* is held guilty to all the deities. The *Atharvaveda* reveals that the *Vrātyas* were less familiar with *Yajñas* but were extremely hospitable. The 15th *kāṇḍa* of the *Atharvaveda*, therefore, highlights the importance of hospitality. It has been described that a guest ought to be properly welcomed and his wishes fulfilled as much as possible. The host ought to receive the guest even in the midst of a *Yajña*. He should rejoin the *Yajña* only when permitted by the guest. He ought to take food only when the guest has taken

it. He should never take his meals before his guest. Hospitality is said to field infinite virtues. Even if the guest is a hypocrite he should not be treated with disrespect.

The social status and glorification of *Vrātya* in the *Atharvaveda* was a special type and high esteem which in the later *vedic* literature and *smṛiti* literature underwent change. The status of *Vrātya* acquired a totally different by the time of the *Smṛti* literatures. Manu states that, if after the last given period, the twice-born (*dvijāti*) stay on uninitiated, they turn out to be *Vrātyas*, fallen from *Sāvitrī*. Manu also tells that those whom the *twice-born* (*Brāhmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaiśya*) beget from wives of equal caste, but who, not satisfying their sacred duties, are excluded from the *Sāvitrī* (initiation), must also delegate by the appellation *Vrātyas*.

Conclusion

In the *Atharvaveda* the term *Vrātya* is used not in the sense of 'One who has not performed his *Upanayana*' but its employed in the sense of the highest *Brahmaṇa*. The highest *Brahmaṇa* is conceived and glorious as the *Vrātya* both as divine *Vrātya*, recognized with the great God or *Mahādeva*, the Lord *Īśāna* or *Rudra* and his prototype, the earthly *Vrātya*.

Finally, in the evolutionary process, at each stage of ancient Indian History, *Vrātya* was accorded a different social status; and that status sufficiently mirrored the state of Indian society at that stage.

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