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King and the State: A Concise Discussion on the Polity in the Atharveveda

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Abstract
Among the Vedic texts, the Atharvaveda holds a prominent position, ranking just after the Ṛgveda. What sets the Atharvaveda apart is its remarkable diversity of subjects, particularly its detailed focus on statecraft and governance. The Atharva Samhita devotes significant attention to rājkarmāṇi-the functions and responsibilities of the king-which reveals a well-developed understanding of the state system. This Veda serves as a foundational source for later political thought, influencing texts like Kautilya's Arthaśāstra and various smṛtiśāstras. These later works frequently cite the Atharvaveda as an authoritative reference. For instance, the Yajnavalkyasmṛti states: "Purohitaṃ prakurvit...kuśalamatharvāṅgirase tathā," while Kautilya affirms in the Arthaśāstra: "Atharvabihitaṃ karma kuryāt śāntipouṣṭikam." While other Vedas do touch upon aspects of governance, it is in the Atharvaveda that one finds the most comprehensive treatment of political theory. The sūktas of the Atharva-saṃhitā articulate nuanced ideas concerning state ideology, loyalty to the state, royal authority, assemblies, duties and election of the king, coronation ceremonies, administrative planning, judicial practices, and even psychological and social bonds within the polity. These theories, often embedded in the form of sutras, are further elaborated in the Kauśikasūtra—the Dharma Sutra of the Atharvaveda-and the Atharva-pariśiṣṭa. Through careful study of these texts, one can gain valuable insights into the public administration and political organization of Ātharvaṇa society.

Keywords: Atharvaveda, public administration, state system, kingship, Vedic polity

Introduction
It goes without saying that the political structure of the Vedic era was fundamentally different from that of the modern age. However, various stages of state formation can be observed throughout the Vedic period. According to the Ṛgveda, social division was primarily based on villages or clans, reflecting a tribal system. While this tribal society marked a more advanced social structure, it still represented the earliest phase of political organization. In the Ṛgveda, monarchy did not imply a centralized or absolute rule as we understand it today. The term "king" referred more to a leader of the people or a commander during times of war, rather than the sovereign head of a state. In peaceful times, this leader was treated as an ordinary member of society. Over time, especially by the period of the Atharvaveda, this leader evolved into a more formal ruler figure, embodying early ideas of kingship.

Although the word "state" appears at various points in the Ṛgveda, its meaning remains somewhat ambiguous. A clearer and more structured concept of the state begins to emerge only in the later Vedic texts, particularly the saṃhitās.

Initially, the Atharvaveda was given less importance compared to the other three Vedas, largely due to debates surrounding its Vedic authenticity. Nevertheless, it provides a much more explicit portrayal of the state, the king, and administrative practices than the other Vedic texts. The Atharvaveda serves as a rich source of information on the political and administrative thought of its time. It contains mantras related to governance, patriotism, the election and coronation of kings, warfare, and the ideal functioning of the state. Due to its detailed focus on political themes and Kshatriya (warrior class) affairs, the Atharvaveda has also been referred to as the kṣatra-veda. Its content significantly influenced later treatises on political science and governance, such as śukra-nīti, bṛhaspati-śāstra, Kautilya's arthaśāstra, and the yājñavalkya-smṛti.

The Political Thought and State System in the Atharva Veda
In the Vedic period, social organization-including state administration, legal thought, philosophy, and even

architecture-was intricately tied to sacrificial rituals (*yajña*). It was on the foundation of this *yajña*-centric worldview that early political institutions such as the *janasabhā* and *samiti* emerged. These assemblies represent the primary form of the Indian state system, rooted in collective decision-making.

The terms *prajāpati, ganapati, brātapati*, and *brahmanaspati* were used to refer to the heads of groups or tribes. These groups-clans, villages, and tribes-functioned as population units, indicating a gradual movement toward a more organized state system. The concepts of property, taxation, and the emergence of occupational and class divisions seen in the *samhitās* provide evidence of an evolving and increasingly complex state apparatus.

The Idea of the State in the Atharva Saṃhitā

The *Atharva-saṃhitā* contains around 15 *sūktas* (collection of mantras) where the term "state" (*rāṣtra*) is explicitly mentioned. Other *sūktas* describe royal functions such as enemy destruction (*śatrunāśana*), enemy terrorization (*śatrutrāśana*), and binding ceremonies (*maṇibandhana*). These provide critical insight into the political and administrative concerns of the time.

One notable hymn, *ajarakṣatra* (*rāṣtra-vivardhanaṃ sūkta*), is a prayer by the priest for the strength and prosperity of both himself and the state. It invokes the enhancement of brahminhood, kṣatriyahood, valor, and military might. The desire for victory and protection from disease among Atharvan priests reflects a deep concern for national welfare and unity. A clear nationalistic sentiment emerges in the verse: *"samahamesaṃ raṣtrasaṃ syāmi samojo vīryaṃ valam"* ("May the state where I reside be united by strength, valour, and power.") [1]

The text also includes fervent prayers for enemy defeat, including graphic metaphors for dismemberment and humiliation. There are calls to sharpen weapons, prepare for war, and adorn the state with heroic warriors-clearly reflecting the martial and protective functions expected of a ruler and his army. [2]

Nationalism and Patriotism

Verse 19.41 of the Atharvaveda, known as the *rāṣtraval-sūkta*, is particularly significant: *"bhadramicchanta ṛṣaya svarvidastapo dīkṣamupaniṇeduragre/ tato rāṣtraṃ valamojaśca jātaṃ tadasmai devā upasaṃnamantu."* ("In the beginning, the wise sages undertook penance and initiation, desiring welfare. From that, the idea of the state, strength, and energy emerged. Let the gods be devoted to such a one.") [3]. This reveals a profound vision of patriotism, where the strength of the state is portrayed as the result of sacrificial discipline and collective commitment. Similarly, the *bhūmi-sūkta* (Atharvaveda 12/1) expresses love and devotion for the land, not to a deity but to the community as a whole: *"sa no bhumirvalaṃ tvisiṃ rāṣtrardadhātuttame"* ("May this land, our finest state, retain its strength and splendour."). Such verses emphasize that national pride, unity, and collective prosperity were considered central to a healthy state.

Election and Role of the King

Unlike later divine-right monarchies, in the Atharvaveda (3.4.2), kingship was elective. [4] Scholars like Bloomfield and Whitney (in *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 42) describe the king's installation as a formal election process, not a coronation ordained by divine will. Assemblies (*sabhā* and *samiti*) nominated and approved the king through open discussion among elders, brahmins, and priests.

Once elected, the king bore titles such as *prajāpati, viśampati, rāja, ekrāt*, and *samrāt*. These reflect his duties not just as ruler, but as a protector, unifier, and upholder of dharma. Praise and criticism were both parts of the election discourse, reflecting a proto-democratic ethos.

Sabha and Samiti: Early Political Institutions

In Atharvaveda 7.13, *sabhā* and *samiti* are described as the two daughters of Prajāpati, guardians of the king and pillars of royal administration. According to Sāyaṇa, *sabhā* refers to a scholarly assembly (*viduṣaṃ samāja*), and *samiti* to a war-time people's council (*saṃgrāmina janasabhā*). Scholar Yāska also links the word *samiti* to both war and sacrifice (*yajña*), suggesting a multi-functional body.

Debates within these assemblies were expected to be civil, scholarly, and constructive. Consensus was desired, though dissent was tolerated-a sign of early democratic thinking. Efforts to unite minds and intentions across differences (as seen in AV 3.8.5) indicate the desire for political tolerance and unity amid diversity.

The assemblies were also used for military and strategic decision-making, indicating a fusion of civic and martial leadership. Leadership for war was a key factor in the emergence of kingship, fulfilling the tribe's need for protection and order.

Coronation and Duties of the King

Following election, the king underwent a ritual coronation (*abhiṣeka*) as described in Atharvaveda 4.8. He was bathed in sacred water, dressed in fine clothes, and seated on a throne adorned with lion's skin. The priest, invoking the mantra "*ā tiṣtha mitravardhana*," [5], called on him to strengthen the state and its allies.

Daily rituals reinforced the king's protective role. He was bathed with consecrated water and dressed in magical armor (*maṇi*) believed to guard against illness and weapons. Weapons were consecrated, and sacrifices were performed before going to war to ensure victory. The praised weaponry in the *Atharva-saṃhitā* highlights the era's martial focus.

The King's Relationship with Subjects

The *Atharvaveda* emphasizes reciprocal duties between king and subjects. The king was to be generous, attentive, and noble-minded. Subjects desired a king who would uphold order, protect the land, and remain loyal to his duties: *"sa rājā rājyamanu manyatāmidam..."*
("Let the king regard this kingdom as his responsibility.")
In *prajā-sūkta* (7.20), the king is seen as both originator and nurturer of the people. He is to be free from hatred, like polished metal, and act as a nourisher and unifier: *"prajāpatirjanayati prajā imā dhātā dadhātu sumansyamānaḥ..."*

Role of the Priest (Purohit)

The priest and king were closely intertwined. The ātharvaṇa priest was not just a ritualist but also a spiritual guardian and political advisor. His blessings conferred strength, valour, and health upon the king. In *rāṣtrābhivardhanam sūkta*, the priest claims personal credit for the state's power and victory: *"tīkṣṇīyāṃsaḥ parāśoragnestikṣṇatarā uta... Indrasya vajrāt tīkṣṇīyāṃso yeṣāmasmi purohitaḥ"* (AV 3/19/4). He prays for sharp weapons, heroic warriors, and the king's physical and moral fortitude.

Conclusion

The *Atharva-saṃhitā* offers a vivid and sophisticated picture of early Indian political thought. It discusses:

- Elected kingship, not divine rule
- The role of assemblies in decision-making
- The king's duty to protect and unify
- Rituals for military strength and state protection
- National pride and love for the land
- Political tolerance and democratic values
- Close partnership between king and priest

Although the sacrificial, poetic, and symbolic language of the Vedas presents interpretive challenges, a careful reading-particularly of the *Atharvaveda*-reveals foundational ideas that influenced later Indian political texts like the *arthaśāstra*, *śukra-nīti*, and *bṛhaspati-śāstra*.

Despite the gaps of time, linguistic complexity, and the evolution of political institutions, the *Atharv-saṃhitā* remains a valuable repository of early Indian statecraft-blending ritual, philosophy, and practical governance into a coherent vision of state and society.

References

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2. Ibid, 3/19/3-8
3. Hindi translation, Shri Ramsharma Acharya, Atharvaveda Samhita, Part - 2, Yug Nirman Yojana, Mathura, 2005, 38.
4. 3.4.2 May the subjects welcome you as a king. "Twāṃ biśo vṛnatāṃ rājyāya tvamimā pradiśaḥ..." 104.
5. Atharvaveda, 7.13.1, Sāyaṇabhāṣyam. "sabhā viduṣāṃ samājaḥ. samitiḥ saṃyanti saṃgacchante yuddhāya atreti samitiḥ saṃgrāmaḥ. saṃgrāmina janasabhetyarthaḥ. Yadvā saṃgrāmanāmāni yajña nāmāni bhavantīti yāskenoktatvāt samitiśabdena yajna ucyate."
6. Bengali translation, Tarakanath Adhikari, Atharvaveda-Samhita, Part I, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 7.13.2, "vidmate sabhe nāma nariṣṭhā nāma vā as".
7. Ibid, 7.13.2
8. Ibid, 7.14.8, "yad va manaḥ parāgataṃ yad baddhmiha veha vā/ tad va ā vartayāmasi mayi vo ramyatāṃ manaḥ"
9. Ibid, 4/8/1
10. Ibid, 3/8/3
11. Ibid, 3/19/4