

## Cultural aspects in the *Atharvaveda*: A Study of Women, Dress, Ornaments, and Food

Dr. Jagadish Sarma<sup>1</sup>, Manisha Talukdar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Gauhati University, Guwahati

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, B. B. Kishan College, Jalah

### Abstract

This article examines selected dimensions of cultural life in the *Atharvaveda*, with particular emphasis on the position of women, dress and ornaments, and the food system of Vedic society. These are significant expressions of the social, economic, religious, and domestic organisation of the period. The *Atharvaveda* presents women as occupying an honoured and multifaceted position within both household and wider social life. The terms *jāyā*, *patnī*, *jani*, and *vadhu* reveal the religious, familial, reproductive, and social responsibilities attributed to women, and their participation in ritual and public activities. The discussion of clothing and ornaments demonstrates the diversity of textile practices and the aesthetic, economic, symbolic, and social functions associated with dress and personal adornment. Terms referring to garments, textile materials, gold ornaments, necklaces, and earrings indicate a developed material culture and an awareness of distinctions in dress and ornamentation. The study further analyses food as an essential component of physical well-being, social interaction, ritual practice, and cosmological thought. Terms like grains, pulses, prepared foods, and *puroḍāśa* illustrate the close relationship between nourishment, communal life, and sacrifice. Collectively, these dimensions provide significant insights into the socio-cultural life reflected in the *Atharvaveda*.

**Keywords:** *Atharvaveda*, Women, Dress, Ornaments, Food, and Culture.

### Introduction

The *Atharvaveda* is an important source for understanding various aspects of social and cultural life during the Vedic period. This *Veda* provides information on everyday life, social relationships, the position of women, clothing, ornaments, food habits, and the material culture of the people. The position of women forms an important aspect of the social life reflected in the *Atharvaveda*. This *Veda* presents women in relation to family, marriage, religious duties and social responsibilities. Different terms used for women and wives indicate the importance attached to their roles within the household and society. It also contains references suggesting women's participation in social activities and their association with courage and warfare. The wife is presented as an important member of the family who contributes to religious and domestic life and is associated with the continuity and welfare of the family. Dress and ornaments occupy an important place in the cultural and social life reflected in the *Atharvaveda*. This *Veda* provides valuable information about cloth, its production, uses, and different types of garments. The term *manujāta* is used for cloth. The *Atharvaveda* mentions references to garments and textile

materials, including *vāsas* and *tārpya*, as well as the wool-related expression *ūrṇamradas*. Clothing was considered not merely a means of protection from cold, heat, and disease, but also a symbol of dignity, well-being, prosperity, and social life. Similarly, ornaments were connected with beauty, wealth, status and identity. Their use was not restricted to women; men, kings, and even male deities are also associated with ornaments. Terms associated with adornment and gold-related imagery, such as *niṣka*, *rukma*, *pravarta*, and *hiraṇyahasta* illustrate varied forms of adornment and gold-related imagery in Vedic literature. Food also occupies an important place in the social life described in the *Atharvaveda*. The text discusses food in relation to health, strength, longevity and well-being and refers to different grains, pulses and preparations. Food was also connected with social sharing and religious practices, particularly sacrificial offerings. Thus, the study of women, dress, ornaments and food together provides a broader understanding of the socio-cultural life reflected in the *Atharvaveda*.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-cultural life reflected in the *Atharvaveda* through its references to women, dress, ornaments and food.
2. To study the position and role of women in *Atharvavedic* society.
3. To study the different types of dress which were used in the Vedic period and examine their importance in daily and social life.
4. To examine the different ornaments referred to in the *Atharvaveda* and understand their association with beauty, wealth, status and identity.
5. To study the food system described in the *Atharvaveda*, including the different grains, food preparations and ideas concerning health and nourishment.

### Methodology

The present study follows an analytical as well as explanatory methodology. Data have been collected from primary and secondary sources, with supporting references cited in endnotes. All Sanskrit terms are used in italic style.

### Position of women in the *Atharvaveda*

In the Vedic period, the position of women was very high. According to the *Atharvaveda*, women held an honourable place in society. Women assisted men in various kinds of work, such as rituals, possibly in education, economic activities, etc. Moreover, in the *yajñas*, women held an equal and honourable position alongside their husbands. According to the Vedic tradition, a man should perform a sacrifice together with his wife, and both should recite the *praiṣa* and *nivid* mantras.<sup>1</sup> In the *Atharvaveda*, the word '*saman*' occurs in a passage describing a woman going to a communal gathering. This suggests that women were not confined to domestic life alone and could participate in public or social gatherings.<sup>2</sup> In the *R̥gveda*, there is a verse associating women with weapons.<sup>3</sup> The episode of Viśpalā, who is described as receiving an iron leg after injury in

Khela's contest or battle, has also been interpreted as evidence of female participation in conflict.<sup>4</sup> In the *Atharvaveda*, Indrāṇī is described as unconquered and as taking the foremost position.<sup>5</sup> According to the *Rgveda*, the female speaker declares that she has overcome her rivals and will exercise authority over her husband and people.<sup>6</sup> The expressions *Aṣādhā*, *Sahamānā*, and *Sahasravīryā* occur in the *Yajurveda*, while *Asapatnā*, *Sapatnaghni*, *Jayantī*, and *Abhibhūbarī* occur in the *Rgveda*.<sup>7</sup> In the *Rgveda*, the wife is often compared to the home itself,<sup>8</sup> because the woman is regarded as the true heart and foundation of the household. She is called the '*grhinī*', meaning the mistress or the soul of the house. While a man may build or provide a house, the woman turns it into a home filled with warmth, love, and sanctity. In the *Atharvaveda*, several words are used to refer to a wife, and each carries a deep meaning that reflects her role and status in the family and society. One of the most significant terms is '*jāyā*'. The term *jāyā* comes from the Sanskrit root *jan*, and it literally means 'the one who gives birth'.<sup>9</sup> This word highlights the wife's creative and nurturing role. In the *Atharvaveda*, the word '*jāyā*' is used around 29 times, which shows how important and sacred the concept of the wife was in Vedic thought. The frequent use of the term emphasises the central role of the wife in family life, religion, and society. The word '*patnī*' is also used for the wife. A wife helps her husband in performing his religious duties. That is why she is also called '*dharmapatnī*'.<sup>10</sup> In the *Atharvaveda*, the word '*jani*' is also used for a wife. When a wife has the ability to give birth to children, she is referred to as *jani*.<sup>11</sup> The term *jani* is used for a wife because she is the one who gives birth to children and continues the family through childbirth.<sup>12</sup> Apart from this, in the *Atharvaveda*, the word *vadhu* is also used for a newly married woman.<sup>13</sup> A woman is also called the queen of her husband's family.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, a woman should always be a source of happiness for her mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, husband, and the entire family.<sup>15</sup> A woman is expected to bring joy, peace, and harmony to her husband's family. She should maintain good relationships and contribute to everyone in the household. A woman is called the protector of the family,<sup>16</sup> because she gives birth to children and continues the lineage. A woman should give birth to good and brave sons who will contribute to the welfare of society.<sup>17</sup> In ancient Vedic times, society believed that sons were responsible for supporting and looking after their parents, especially in old age. Therefore, at that time, people preferred to have a male child rather than a female child. The term '*virāsū*' shows that women in earlier times desired to have sons.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, she was also called '*putriṇī*', because a woman was expected to wish for a son.<sup>19</sup> Although ancient texts often focused on sons, the *Atharvaveda* also mentions daughters in several places. The Sanskrit word '*duhitṛ*' was used to refer to a daughter, and it occurs 15 times in the *Atharvaveda*.<sup>20</sup>

### **Dress and Ornaments used in the *Atharvaveda***

In the *Atharvaveda*, a variety of information is found related to cloth. At that time, the word '*manujāta*' was used for cloth.<sup>21</sup> The word *manujāta* implies that Manu made the clothes. It also implies that cloth was made with deep thought and deliberate consideration. It is found in the *Atharvaveda* that women used to make clothes for their sons and husbands. The *Rgveda* also

mentions that mothers used to make clothes for their sons.<sup>22</sup> Again, Bṛhaspati, a Vedic sage, made clothes for King Soma.<sup>23</sup>

Humans wear clothes for several important reasons that serve both practical and social purposes. Firstly, clothing helps protect the body from environmental conditions such as cold and heat. In cold weather, clothes provide warmth and prevent the body from losing heat, while in hot climates, they shield the skin from the sun's harmful rays and help regulate body temperature. Secondly, clothing plays a vital role in maintaining modesty. It covers the body according to cultural and social norms, helping individuals feel comfortable and respected in public settings. Thus, clothing is not only a means of physical protection but also a reflection of social values and personal dignity. In the *Atharvaveda*, it is mentioned that the act of wearing clothes or engaging in the making of garments contributes to the well-being of an individual. According to this ancient text, such practices are believed to enhance a person's lifespan and attract wealth. This reflects the Vedic understanding that cloth is not merely a physical necessity but also carries spiritual and symbolic significance. Proper attire is seen as a means of maintaining health, dignity, and social harmony, while the craft of making clothes is recognised as a valuable economic activity.<sup>24</sup> The term 'long life' refers to the protective role of cloth, as it shields the human body from cold, heat, and diseases, thereby helping to maintain health and prolong life. On the other hand, 'income' implies that through the production and sale of clothing, people can earn money and improve their financial stability. Thus, clothes serve both as a means of physical protection and as a source of economic benefit. In the *Atharvaveda*, references are found to garments and textile-related expressions. These include *vāsas*,<sup>25</sup> *tārpya*,<sup>26</sup> and the wool-related expression *ūrṇamradas*.<sup>27</sup> Apart from the *Atharvaveda*, the word *ūrṇamradas* is also found in the *Rgveda* and *Vājasaneyi Samhitā*.<sup>28</sup> This shows that the expression and related forms occur across multiple Vedic texts. Furthermore, in the *Atharvaveda*, three types of garments for women are also mentioned.<sup>29</sup> It shows that during the Vedic period, people were familiar with various clothes and had distinct names for each, indicating their knowledge of textiles and the importance of clothing in their daily lives.

Just as cloth is a necessary item for humans, ornaments also hold great importance. Ornaments are among the key elements of beauty. Women wear ornaments to enhance the beauty of their bodies. Along with clothes, ornaments have played a significant role in human culture, especially for women, as a means of expressing beauty and identity. In ancient times, not only women but also kings, emperors, and other men wore ornaments. This shows that the use of ornaments was not limited to women alone; it was equally significant among men, especially in royal and noble circles. Ornaments symbolised not just beauty but also status, power, and wealth in historical societies. They wore various types of gold and silver ornaments studded with gems and pearls. Among the gold ornaments, there was one called '*niṣka*', which was worn around the neck. A person who wore this ornament was referred to as *niṣkagrīva*. This clearly proves that men also wore gold ornaments in ancient times.<sup>30</sup> Gold ornaments were also worn on the chest, which were called '*rukma*'. A person who wore this ornament was referred to as '*rukmaṇvakṣas*'.<sup>31</sup> In the *Rgveda*, *Vājasaneyi Samhitā*, and *Taittirīya Samhitā*, the person who wore this ornament is

referred to as 'Rukmin'.<sup>32</sup> The term 'rukmanakṣas' refers to someone who wears this ornament. This term is used for Marutdeva, a male deity. It implies that such ornaments were not exclusive to women, but were worn by men in ancient times. Similarly, the ornament worn on the ear was known as 'pravarta', and this ornament was green in colour.<sup>33</sup> In the *Āpastambaśrautasūtra* and *Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra*, this ornament is referred to by the name 'karṇābharaṇa'.<sup>34</sup> In the Vedic literature, particularly in ritualistic texts like the *Śrautasūtras*, specific terms were used for different ornaments. Gold is also associated with the hand in Vedic ritual and poetic contexts. In the *Atharvaveda*, the expression 'hiraṇyahasta' literally means 'golden-handed' and is used as an epithet of Savitr.<sup>35</sup>

### **Food system in the *Atharvaveda***

The *Atharvaveda* provides various guidelines and instructions on not only spiritual and ritualistic practices but also practical aspects of life, including food and drink. It mentions that food is considered beneficial and should be consumed for health and well-being, and explains what kinds of food should be consumed, which foods are considered forbidden or harmful, and at what times certain foods should be eaten, etc. People should have a positive mindset and should eat food with a joyful mind. Eating with joy and peace makes the food more beneficial, i.e., by helping in better digestion and providing more nutrition, etc. That is why people should always eat with full attention.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, while eating food, people need to understand the nature of food, its positive qualities, and possible negative effects, etc.<sup>37</sup> Along with that, one should eat food that enhances longevity, strength, energy, and nutrition.<sup>38</sup> Also, one should always eat together and share with others. This brings happiness and leads to longevity.<sup>39</sup>

Food is the fundamental basis of life. All living beings are sustained by food. Thus, it is described as the creator of the world or creation. Prajāpati is a Vedic deity considered the lord of creatures or the progenitor of all beings. Prajāpati created the thirty-three worlds through this food and initiated sacrifices for the knowledge of it.<sup>40</sup> In the Vedic tradition, yajñas are means to honour the gods, sustain the cosmic order, and gain knowledge or spiritual insight. *Yajña* refers to ritualistic offerings or sacrificial acts performed to honour deities. It is not limited to fire rituals; it includes selfless actions and duties performed for greater purposes. *Yajña* is central to the maintenance and balance of the universe. It nurtures and supports all life, also making it a vital principle for worldly and cosmic order. In the *Atharvaveda*, there is a description of the *virāt anna*. According to it, the head of the *virāt anna* is Bṛhaspati, the mouth is Brahmā, the two ears are the Dyuloka and Pṛthivī, the two eyes are the Sun and the Moon, and the five vital airs (*Prāṇa*, *Apāna*, *Udāna*, *Vyāna*, *Samāna*) are considered to be the *Saptarṣi*.<sup>41</sup>

In the *Atharvaveda*, different names of food are found. Specifically, names of certain grains and pulses such as *yava*, *bṛīhi*, *māṣa*, *tila*, etc., are found.<sup>42</sup> These items were important in the diet and rituals of Vedic society. At that time, various types of dishes were prepared using *yava*.<sup>43</sup> During the Vedic period, *yava* was not just a raw grain but was actively used in cooking, and varieties of dishes were made from it. Apart from this, food items like *kṣīravāna*, *dadhivāna*,

*drapsavāna*, *madhumāna*, *padhuparka*, *rasavāna*, *apavāna*, etc., were prepared for the gods and guests. Additionally, *puroḍāśa* was prepared as a food offering for the gods. *Puroḍāśa* was an essential part of Vedic yajñas, signifying the deep connection between food, ritual, and spirituality. This *puroḍāśa* was offered to the deities in the yajña as *haviḥ*.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

The study reveals that dress and ornaments formed significant components of Atharvavedic life and culture. Clothing served practical purposes such as protection and modesty, while also carrying social, economic, and symbolic meanings. References to garments, textile materials, and wool-related expressions demonstrate knowledge of clothing and material culture. Ornaments, particularly those made of gold, reflected beauty, wealth, prestige, and social position. Terms such as *niṣka*, *rukma*, *pravarta*, and *hiranyahasta* further show the diversity of adornment and gold-related imagery. The use of ornaments by men as well as women indicates that adornment was a broader cultural practice rather than something exclusively associated with women. Thus, the *Atharvaveda* provides valuable evidence for understanding the material culture, aesthetic values, and social practices of the Vedic period.

The study of the contents of the *Atharvaveda* reveals a broad picture of socio-cultural life in the Vedic period. It relates not only to religious and ritual aspects but also to the position of women, family relationships, clothing, ornaments, food and other aspects of everyday life. The position of women occupies an important place in that period. The various terms used for women and wives indicate their significant role in family and social life. Women were associated with household responsibilities, marriage, childbirth, religious duties and the welfare of the family. The study also reveals that dress and ornaments formed significant components of Atharvavedic life and culture. Clothing served practical purposes such as protection and modesty, while also carrying social, economic, and symbolic meanings. References to garments, textile materials, and wool-related expressions demonstrate knowledge of clothing and material culture. In this Veda, terms such as *niṣka*, *rukma*, *pravarta* and *hiranyahasta* reflect personal adornment and gold-related imagery in relation to beauty, prestige and social identity. The use of ornaments by both men and women demonstrates that ornamentation was a wider cultural practice. The food system described in the *Atharvaveda* also reflects important aspects of social and cultural life. Food was understood in relation to health, strength, nourishment and longevity. The *Atharvaveda* mentions different grains, pulses and food preparations and emphasises the importance of eating with a positive attitude and sharing food with others. Thus, the combined study of women, dress, ornaments and food presents a more comprehensive picture of Atharvavedic society.

## Notes and References

1. *praiṣā yajñe nividaḥ svāhā śiṣṭāḥ patnībhir vahateha yuktāḥ* - *Atharvaveda*, 5.26.4.
2. *saṃhotraṃ sma purā nārī samanaṃ vāva gacchati / vedhā ṛtasya vīriṇī indrapatnī mahīyate* - *Atharvaveda*, 20.126.10.
3. *striyo hi dāsa āyudhāni cakre* - *Rgveda*, 5.30.9.

4. *caritraṃ hi ver ivācchedi parṇam ājā khelasya paritakmyāyām / sadyo jaṅghām āyasīm viśpalāyai dhane hite sartave praty adhattam - Ṛgveda, 1.116.15.*
5. *indrāṇy etu prathamā ajītāmuṣitā puraḥ - Atharvaveda, 1.27.4.*
6. *yathāhamasya vīrasya virājāni - Ṛgveda, 10.159.6.*
7. *aśādhāsi sahamānā ... sahasravīryāsi - Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā, 13.26; asapatnā sapatnaghñī jayanty abhibhūvarī - Ṛgveda, 10.159.5.*
8. *jāyed astam maghavan sed u yoniḥ - Ṛgveda, 3.53.4.*
9. *jāyatesyām apatyarūpeṇa patir iti jāyā - Sāyaṇabhāṣya on Atharvaveda, 6.78.3.*
10. *Manusmṛti, 9.8.*
11. *jāyantesyām apatyānīti janir jāyā - Sāyaṇa on Atharvaveda, 6.82.3.*
12. *putreṇotpattir janiḥ - Sāyaṇa on Atharvaveda, 6.82.3.*
13. *Atharvaveda, 14.1.58; 14.1.63; 14.2.7; 14.2.20; 14.2.28; 14.2.73.*
14. *samrājñy edhi śvaśureṣu samrājñy uta devrṣu - Atharvaveda, 14.1.44.*
15. *syonā bhava śvaśurebhyaḥ, syonā patye gr̥hebhyaḥ - Atharvaveda, 14.2.27.*
16. *eṣā te kulapā rājan - Atharvaveda, 1.14.3.*
17. *aditiṃ śūraputrām - Atharvaveda, 3.8.2.*
18. *Atharvaveda, 14.2.17-18.*
19. *Atharvaveda, 14.1.62.*
20. *Atharvaveda, 2.14.2; 3.10.13; 3.31.5; 5.13.8; 6.100.3; 6.133.4; 6.137.1; 7.13.1; 9.1.4; 9.2.5; 9.15.12; 10.1.25; 14.2.60; 18.1.53; 19.47.5.*
21. *abhi tvā manujātena dadhāmi mama vāsasā - Atharvaveda, 7.37.1.*
22. *vastrā putrāya mātaro vayanti - Ṛgveda, 5.47.6.*
23. *bṛhaspatiḥ prāyacchad vāsa etat somāya rājñe - Atharvaveda, 2.13.2.*
24. *rāyaś ca poṣam upasaṃvyayasva - Atharvaveda, 19.24.5.*
25. *vāsasaḥ - Atharvaveda, 14.1.27.*
26. *vasānas tārpyam cara - Atharvaveda, 18.4.31.*
27. *ūrṇamradāḥ pṛthivī - Atharvaveda, 18.3.49.*
28. *Ṛgveda, 5.5.4; Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā, 2.2.*

29. *āśasanam viśasanam atho adhivikartanam - Atharvaveda*, 14.1.28.
30. *kṣattā niṣkagrīvaḥ - Atharvaveda*, 5.17.14.
31. *Atharvaveda*, 6.22.2.
32. *Rgveda*, 1.66.6; *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā*, 13.40; *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, 2.3.2.3.
33. *haritou pravartou - Atharvaveda*, 15.2.5.
34. *Āpastambaśrautasūtra*, 19.23.11; *Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra*, 13.31.
35. *hiranyahasto vasu no rarāṇaḥ - Atharvaveda*, 7.115.2; cf. *Atharvaveda*, 18.4.56.
36. *manasānnādena annamatti - Atharvaveda*, 15.14.2.
37. *brahmaānnādena annamati - Atharvaveda*, 15.14.24.
38. *āyūṣe varcase balāya adomadam annam adidha - Atharvaveda*, 6.63.1.
39. *āyūṣmantah sahabhakṣāḥ syāma - Atharvaveda*, 6.47.1.
40. *etasmād vā odanāt trayastrīmśataṃ lokān niramimīta prajāpatiḥ / teṣāṃ prajñānāya yajñamasṛjat - Atharvaveda*, 11.3.52-53.
41. *tasyodanasya br̥haspatiḥ śiro brahma mukham / dyāvāpṛthivī śrotre sūryacandramasāvakṣiṇī saptaṛṣyaḥ prāṇayānāḥ - Atharvaveda*, 11.3.1-2.
42. *vṛhīmattaṃ yavamattaṃ atho māśam atho tilam - Atharvaveda*, 6.140.2.
43. *yavena vā kṣudham - Atharvaveda*, 7.50.7.
44. *puroḍāśam - Atharvaveda*, 20.23.3.