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## Atharvaveda And Folk Traditions: Investigating Magical And Healing Practices In Ancient India

**Dr. Krishna Panda****Introduction**

The Atharvaveda, one of the four Vedas of ancient India, stands as a unique text within the Vedic corpus, primarily because of its focus on both ritual and practical aspects of daily life. Unlike the other Vedas, which are largely concerned with sacrificial rites and the metaphysical order of the cosmos, the Atharvaveda incorporates hymns and mantras aimed at practical concerns such as healing, protection, and the removal of evil influences. The Atharvaveda is often referred to as the "Veda of magical formulas" due to its extensive content on spells, charms, and incantations that were believed to influence the physical world.

In ancient Indian society, folk traditions played a central role in shaping everyday life. These traditions were deeply intertwined with the ritual practices found in the Atharvaveda, as both were concerned with promoting health, well-being, and prosperity. The Atharvaveda's influence on folk traditions is particularly significant in the domains of healing, protection against evil, and the management of natural forces. This paper seeks to explore the Atharvaveda's connection to folk traditions, particularly its magical and healing practices, and investigate how these traditions have evolved over time, maintaining their relevance in both ancient and contemporary Indian society.

**The Atharvaveda: An Overview**

The Atharvaveda is the fourth of the four canonical Vedas, and it differs from the other three Vedas (Rigveda, Yajurveda, and Samaveda) in terms of its content and its focus. While the other Vedas are largely concerned with hymns, rituals, and philosophical discourse, the Atharvaveda addresses the practical concerns of human life. Its hymns and mantras deal with the healing of diseases, protection from harm, the removal of obstacles, and the attainment of prosperity. It contains 20 books, and its focus on domestic life, magic, and medicine makes it particularly relevant for the study of ancient folk traditions.

The Atharvaveda contains numerous verses related to the practice of incantations and rituals that were believed to have the power to bring about desired outcomes. These include spells for curing diseases, protecting against evil spirits, ensuring the fertility of land, and gaining success in personal and social life. In addition to these practical aspects, the Atharvaveda also contains philosophical and cosmological hymns that explore the nature of the universe and the role of divine forces in shaping the world.

**Magical and Healing Practices in the Atharvaveda**

One of the most distinctive features of the Atharvaveda is its extensive content on magical practices and healing rituals. The Veda contains numerous hymns and mantras designed for healing, which are recited during rituals for curing various ailments and diseases. These rituals often involved the use of herbs, incantations, and the performance of specific actions that were believed to influence the body and mind in beneficial ways.

The Atharvaveda is particularly concerned with the removal of illness and the protection of individuals from supernatural harm. Diseases were often seen as manifestations of divine

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displeasure or the work of evil spirits, and the healing rituals described in the Atharvaveda aimed to restore the individual to a state of harmony with the divine order. The healing mantras in the Atharvaveda cover a wide range of ailments, including physical diseases, mental disorders, and spiritual imbalances.

In the context of folk traditions, these practices were not confined to the elite or priestly classes but were accessible to the common people. Folk healers, known as "vaidya" or "tantriks," would often perform rituals based on Atharvavedic mantras to cure illnesses or protect against evil influences. These healers used the same techniques described in the Atharvaveda, such as chanting specific mantras, using medicinal herbs, and invoking deities and spirits to bring about healing and protection.

### **Folk Medicine and Herbal Practices**

The Atharvaveda contains a wealth of information on the medicinal properties of plants and herbs, which were used extensively in ancient Indian folk medicine. Many of the remedies described in the Atharvaveda are still in use today, particularly in the field of Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine in India. Herbs such as turmeric, ginger, and various roots and leaves are mentioned in the Atharvaveda for their healing properties.

In the Vedic tradition, the relationship between humans and nature was seen as one of interconnectedness, and the use of plants and natural substances in healing rituals was an essential aspect of maintaining harmony with the cosmos. The Atharvaveda provides detailed instructions on how to prepare and use these herbs in healing rituals, often in combination with mantras and incantations to enhance their effectiveness.

Folk traditions have preserved these healing practices over millennia, and many of the rituals and herbal remedies found in the Atharvaveda continue to be part of India's rich tradition of alternative medicine. In rural areas, traditional healers still use the same methods described in the Atharvaveda to treat common ailments, demonstrating the enduring influence of this ancient text on contemporary healing practices.

### **Magical Protection and Folk Beliefs**

In addition to healing, the Atharvaveda also addresses the need for protection from harmful forces, including evil spirits, curses, and negative energies. Many of the hymns in the Atharvaveda are dedicated to invoking divine protection and removing obstacles that hinder personal and social progress. These protective spells were often used in everyday life, especially in the context of folk traditions, where people believed in the presence of malevolent forces that could disrupt their lives.

The folk traditions associated with the Atharvaveda often involved the use of amulets, charms, and other talismans to protect individuals from harm. These objects were inscribed

with mantras from the Atharvaveda and were believed to carry divine power that could ward off evil and protect the wearer from illness or misfortune. In rural India, these magical objects are still widely used, particularly during festivals and important life events such as marriages and births.

In the Atharvaveda, there are also detailed rituals for exorcising spirits and removing curses. These rituals were performed by priests or folk healers who were trained in the sacred texts and had knowledge of the specific mantras and procedures required to restore balance and remove negative influences. These practices were deeply rooted in the belief that the supernatural world had a direct impact on the physical and mental well-being of individuals.

### **The Relationship Between the Atharvaveda and Folk Traditions**

The magical and healing practices described in the Atharvaveda were not merely ceremonial but were also deeply embedded in the folk traditions of ancient India. Folk rituals, such as exorcisms, protection rites, and healing ceremonies, were all influenced by the teachings and mantras found in the Atharvaveda. These practices were accessible to the common people, and they played a vital role in everyday life, especially in rural areas where access to formal medical care was limited.

The integration of Vedic ritual practices with folk traditions demonstrates the adaptability and relevance of the Atharvaveda in ancient Indian society. The Vedic sages who composed the Atharvaveda understood the importance of practical rituals in maintaining personal and social harmony, and their teachings were designed to be accessible and applicable to the daily lives of the people. As a result, the Atharvaveda became an integral part of the folk culture of ancient India, influencing everything from healing practices to magical beliefs and rituals.

### **Contemporary Relevance of Atharvaveda in Folk Traditions**

While the influence of the Atharvaveda on folk traditions has waned in some parts of India, its legacy continues to be felt, especially in rural communities. Many of the magical and healing practices described in the Atharvaveda have been preserved and adapted into contemporary forms of folk medicine and spiritual healing. Folk healers continue to use mantras and herbal remedies derived from the Atharvaveda, ensuring the continuation of these ancient practices in modern times.

Moreover, the Atharvaveda's focus on the relationship between humans and the natural world remains highly relevant in contemporary discussions about sustainability and environmental health. The reverence for nature and the belief in the interconnectedness of all life forms, which is central to the Atharvaveda, aligns with modern ecological

principles that emphasize the importance of maintaining harmony with nature.

## **Contemporary Relevance of the Atharvaveda in Folk Traditions**

### **Introduction**

The Atharvaveda, one of the four Vedic texts that form the foundation of ancient Indian religious and philosophical thought, is distinct from the other Vedas due to its focus on practical and tangible aspects of life. While the Rigveda, Samaveda, and Yajurveda primarily concentrate on hymns, sacrifices, and philosophical discourses, the Atharvaveda offers a treasure trove of magical incantations, healing practices, and protective rituals. These practices are deeply rooted in the everyday concerns of people—illness, protection from evil, prosperity, and social harmony. Over time, the teachings and practices of the Atharvaveda have found their way into Indian folk traditions, influencing local healing systems, rituals, and protective rites. Even in contemporary times, many of its ideas and practices continue to shape folk traditions in rural and urban communities. This article explores the enduring relevance of the Atharvaveda in modern folk traditions, highlighting its impact on healing practices, protection rituals, and spiritual belief systems.

### **The Healing Tradition of the Atharvaveda**

One of the most prominent features of the Atharvaveda is its focus on healing. The Atharvaveda provides detailed descriptions of rituals, mantras, and herbs used to cure various ailments—both physical and psychological. The text contains a variety of remedies for common diseases, such as fever, digestive issues, and mental disorders, and emphasizes the importance of maintaining balance in the body and mind. These healing practices, rooted in the Vedic tradition, have had a lasting impact on folk medicine and continue to be practiced in India today.

Many of the medicinal herbs mentioned in the Atharvaveda, such as turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), continue to be central to Ayurvedic and folk healing practices. The Vedic knowledge of these plants' healing properties has been preserved through oral traditions and is applied in contemporary herbal medicine. Furthermore, the healing power of mantras in the Atharvaveda is also significant. The Vedic mantras, believed to have inherent spiritual and vibrational energy, are often used in folk healing practices to invoke divine assistance and restore health. These mantras are frequently recited by local healers or village priests during healing rituals to help restore physical and mental well-being.

The continued use of the Atharvaveda's healing mantras in modern folk traditions demonstrates its lasting relevance. In many rural areas of India, traditional healers, known as *vaidya* or *guru*, still rely on these ancient Vedic texts to treat

a variety of ailments. The integration of Vedic mantras with herbal medicine reflects the holistic nature of traditional Indian healing systems, which treat the body, mind, and spirit as interconnected.

### **Protection and Exorcism in Folk Rituals**

Another central theme of the Atharvaveda is its focus on protection from malevolent forces and the maintenance of social and cosmic order. The Atharvaveda contains numerous spells and incantations designed to protect individuals from illness, harm, and spiritual threats. These spells are meant to invoke divine power to ward off evil spirits, sorcery, and other malevolent influences that could disrupt an individual's well-being. These protective rituals, which were essential in ancient times, have become a crucial component of folk traditions and continue to be practiced today.

In contemporary folk traditions, the influence of the Atharvaveda is evident in the use of amulets, charms, and protective symbols. These objects are believed to carry the power of the Vedic mantras and are worn by individuals to safeguard against negative influences. Many of these amulets are inscribed with sacred symbols or mantras from the Atharvaveda, and they are often worn during significant life events such as childbirth, marriage, or important business ventures. The belief in the power of these protective objects continues to shape folk spirituality in India.

Exorcism rituals, which seek to expel malevolent spirits or energies from a person or place, also draw heavily from the Atharvaveda. These rituals are typically performed by priests or healers who recite specific mantras from the Atharvaveda to invoke divine protection and cleanse the affected individual or environment. The Atharvaveda's teachings about the power of sacred sound and spiritual invocations are still central to these folk exorcism practices, which continue to be performed in rural and urban communities across India.

### **Sacred Sound and Vibrational Healing**

A key element of the Atharvaveda's rituals is the use of sound and vibration to affect the material and spiritual realms. The Vedic mantras are believed to possess an inherent vibrational power that can influence the physical world. This concept of sound as a force for healing, protection, and spiritual elevation is central to many folk traditions in India. The use of mantras in folk healing practices, as well as in rituals for protection and exorcism, reflects the enduring belief in the power of sound to influence the body, mind, and spirit.

In contemporary times, this aspect of the Atharvaveda has gained renewed attention in the context of sound healing practices. Modern wellness practitioners, particularly in the

fields of yoga and meditation, have embraced the use of sound and vibration for therapeutic purposes. The chanting of Vedic mantras, as prescribed in the Atharvaveda, is believed to have a healing effect on the mind and body, reducing stress, enhancing mental clarity, and promoting emotional well-being. This practice of sound healing, based on ancient Vedic principles, is becoming increasingly popular in India and around the world.

### The Role of Atharvaveda in Folk Religion and Spirituality

Folk religion in India often incorporates elements of the Atharvaveda's teachings on protection, healing, and divine intervention. Local beliefs and customs are frequently infused with the Vedic understanding of the cosmos, particularly the concept of Rta, or cosmic order. The Atharvaveda's emphasis on maintaining harmony between humans, nature, and the divine has influenced many folk religious practices that focus on restoring balance and protecting individuals and communities from chaos and disorder.

Many folk deities, spirits, and natural forces are invoked in folk rituals using mantras from the Atharvaveda. These rituals are often conducted by village priests, shamans, or healers who possess a deep understanding of Vedic practices. The integration of Vedic mantras into local folk traditions highlights the adaptability of the Atharvaveda, which has remained relevant even as it has been absorbed into regional religious beliefs and practices.

The Atharvaveda also contributes to the folk religious calendar, with specific mantras and rituals being associated with seasonal festivals, agricultural rites, and life-cycle ceremonies. These rituals, which mark important transitions in the life of an individual or community, are often performed using Atharvavedic mantras to invoke divine blessings and ensure prosperity and protection.

### Influence on Ayurveda and Traditional Medicine

Another significant area where the Atharvaveda continues to influence contemporary folk traditions is in the field of traditional medicine, particularly Ayurveda. Ayurveda, India's ancient system of medicine, draws heavily from the Atharvaveda's knowledge of herbs, plants, and their therapeutic properties. Many medicinal plants mentioned in the Atharvaveda, such as ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), and tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), continue to be used in Ayurvedic practices for their healing properties.

Below is a comparative table listing 50 medicinal plants mentioned in the Atharvaveda, detailing their traditional uses as described in the text and their corresponding applications in modern pharmacology:

Comparative Table: Medicinal Plants in Atharvaveda and Modern Pharmacology

Sanskrit Name	Botanical Name	Atharvaveda Usage	Modern Pharmacological Application
Aghaviṣṭā	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> (Durva grass)	Protection against evil eye and malevolent forces	Antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory properties
Ajaśrīṅgī	<i>Gymnema sylvestris</i>	Enemy deterrent; disease prevention	Antidiabetic, appetite suppressant
Asrāvabheṣaja	<i>Imperata cylindrica</i>	Blood thinner; treats wounds and bruises	Hemostatic agent; wound healing
Asiknī	<i>Indigofera tinctoria</i>	Removes large scars; treats skin conditions	Antiseptic; used in dermatology
Kanakanaka	<i>Datura metel</i>	Antidote for snake bites	Analgesic; antispasmodic; toxic in high doses
Kandāviṣa	<i>Aconitum ferox</i>	Neutralizes poisons	Used in traditional medicine after detoxification; analgesic
Sanskrit Name	Botanical Name	Atharvaveda Usage	Modern Pharmacological Application
Kuṣṭha	<i>Saussurea lappa</i>	Treats rheumatism, TB, eye diseases, headaches	Anti-inflammatory; used in respiratory disorders
Kṣetriyanāśanī	Unknown	Cures hereditary diseases; heartburn	Potential genetic disorder treatments under research
Cipudru	<i>Pinus roxburghii</i>	Treats blood bile disorders	Antiseptic; used in respiratory ailments
Talāsā	<i>Borassus flabellifer</i>	Treats anorexia, dysentery, indigestion, TB	Nutritional support; antimicrobial properties
Trstā (Trstikā)	<i>Saccharum officinarum</i> (Sugarcane)	Rodenticide; pest control	Source of sugar; diuretic properties
Daśārka	Group of ten medicinal trees	Treats arthritis	Anti-inflammatory; joint health support
Pīṅgā	<i>Brassica nigra</i> (Black mustard)	Contraceptive; prevents miscarriages	Emmenagogue; stimulates menstruation
Pippalī	<i>Piper longum</i>	Treats rheumatism, cough, fever, dysentery	Digestive aid; respiratory tonic
Punarnavā	<i>Boerhavia diffusa</i>	Treats inflammation, stomach ailments; antidote for scorpion poison	Diuretic; anti-inflammatory; hepatoprotective
Paidva	Unknown	Antidote for snake bites	Potential antivenom properties under study
Prenī	Unknown	Enhances mutual love; good luck charm	Aphrodisiac properties in traditional medicine

Sanskrit Name	Botanical Name	Atharvaveda Usage	Modern Pharmacological Application	Sanskrit Name	Botanical Name	Atharvaveda Usage	Modern Pharmacological Application
Bhāṅgā	<i>Cannabis sativa</i>	Treats dandruff	Analgesic; psychoactive properties; regulated use	Nalada	<i>Vetiveria zizanioides</i> (Vetiver)	Subjugation rituals	Aromatherapy; cooling agent
Madhulā	<i>Madhuca indica</i>	Antidote for snake bites; mosquito repellent	Antimicrobial; used in skin conditions	Nībhārya	<i>Sinapis alba</i> (White mustard)	Protects pregnant women; uterine stimulant	Emmenagogue; stimulates menstruation
Rohani	<i>Cissus quadrangularis</i>	Repairs broken bones	Promotes bone healing; anti-inflammatory	Nyastikā	<i>Convolvulus pluricaulis</i> (Shankhpushpi)	Enhances memory; treats epilepsy	Nootropic; anxiolytic properties
Vacā	<i>Acorus calamus</i>	Treats abdominal pain, epilepsy, insanity	Nervine tonic; cognitive enhancer	Puruṣāhṇa	<i>Butea monosperma</i>	Enemy deterrent; treats skin diseases	Anthelmintic; anti-inflammatory
Alasālā	<i>Carthamus tinctorius</i> (Safflower)	Treats skin diseases	Anti-inflammatory; cardiovascular benefits	Palāśa	<i>Butea monosperma</i>	Used in rituals; treats diarrhea	Antidiarrheal; antimicrobial properties
Aśoka	<i>Saraca asoca</i>	Ritualistic uses; treats gynecological disorders	Uterine tonic; treats menstrual disorders	Madāvati	<i>Vitis vinifera</i> (Grapes)	Alcoholic preparation	Antioxidant; cardiovascular benefits
Ābaya	<i>Brassica juncea</i> (Mustard)	Treats eye diseases	Antimicrobial; used in poultices	Madugha	<i>Glycyrrhiza glabra</i> (Licorice)	Expectorant; treats sore throat	Anti-inflammatory; antiviral properties
Āsurī	<i>Brassica rapa</i>	Treats white leprosy	Antimicrobial; skin health support	Madhūka	<i>Madhuca indica</i>	Detoxification; treats skin diseases	Emollient; skin health support
Īta	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> (Peepal tree)	Used in bone fractures	Anti-inflammatory; antioxidant properties	Mahāvṛkṣa	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> (Banyan tree)	Treats cough, bronchitis, inflammation	Antidiabetic; antimicrobial properties
Indrāñī	<i>Argemone mexicana</i>	Antidote for poisons	Antimicrobial; toxic in high doses	Varaṇa	<i>Crataeva nurvala</i>	Treats urinary disorders	Diuretic; lithotriptic properties
Ucchuṣmā	<i>Mucuna pruriens</i>	Aphrodisiac; treats neurological disorders	Contains L-DOPA; used in Parkinson's disease	Vātikṛtanāśaṇī	<i>Piper longum</i>	Treats rheumatism	Anti-inflammatory; analgesic properties
Rājāta	<i>Madhuca longifolia</i>	Sweetening agent; treats snake venom	Nutritional; hepatoprotective properties				
Sanskrit Name	Botanical Name	Atharvaveda Usage	Modern Pharmacological Application				
Aukṣagandhi	<i>Commiphora wightii</i> (Guggul)	Anthelmintic; fragrant wood	Hypolipidemic; anti-inflammatory				
Kaṅkadantī	<i>Barleria prionitis</i>	Antidote for poisons	Antibacterial; anti-inflammatory				
Kabru	<i>Capparis zeylanica</i>	Treats biliary diseases	Hepatoprotective; digestive aid				
Kalmali	<i>Mallotus philippensis</i>	Laxative; treats intestinal worms	Anthelmintic; purgative properties				
Kīlāsanāśana	<i>Wrightia tinctoria</i>	Treats white leprosy	Antipsoriatic; skin disease treatment				
Kumuda	<i>Nymphaea alba</i> (White lotus)	Treats skin diseases	Antioxidant; used in cosmetics				
Kūdī	<i>Ziziphus jujuba</i> (Jujube)	Subjugation rituals	Sedative; immunomodulatory properties				
Keśavardhanī	<i>Eclipta alba</i>	Promotes hair growth	Hair tonic; liver support				
Krakoṣmā	Unknown	Antidote for poisons	Potential detoxifying properties under study				
Kībakraṇī	Unknown	Sterilization agent	Research needed for contraceptive properties				
Citti	Unknown	Treats nightmares	Possibly used for calming effects				
Naghāriṣā	<i>Cissampelos pareira</i>	Treats digestive disorders	Antispasmodic; diuretic properties				

These plants are commonly utilized in folk medicine as well, particularly in rural communities where access to modern healthcare may be limited. The traditional knowledge of these plants has been passed down through generations and is still employed in the preparation of herbal remedies, oils, and pastes for the treatment of various ailments. This continuity of knowledge between the Atharvaveda, Ayurveda, and folk medicine highlights the enduring relevance of the Vedic tradition in contemporary healing practices.

The Atharvaveda continues to hold immense relevance in contemporary folk traditions in India. Its teachings on healing, protection, and spiritual balance are deeply embedded in modern folk medicine, exorcism rituals, and religious practices. The Atharvaveda's emphasis on sound, vibration, and divine intervention remains a central element of folk healing, while its role in folk religion demonstrates the adaptability and enduring power of Vedic wisdom.

As modern society continues to seek alternatives to conventional medical and spiritual practices, the Atharvaveda's teachings on holistic healing, protection from malevolent forces, and maintaining cosmic order offer valuable insights. The continued use of its mantras in folk rituals and healing practices reflects a deep-rooted cultural tradition that remains relevant in the lives of many people today, ensuring the Atharvaveda's place in the ongoing spiritual and healing landscape of contemporary India.

## Conclusion

The Atharvaveda stands as a remarkable repository of ancient wisdom that offers insights into the magical and healing practices of ancient India. Its influence on folk traditions, particularly in the areas of medicine, protection, and the management of natural forces, has endured for thousands of years. The Atharvaveda's focus on the practical aspects of life, as well as its incorporation of magic, medicine, and ritual, has made it a foundational text for understanding the spiritual and cultural practices of ancient India.

Despite the passage of time, the practices derived from the Atharvaveda continue to play an important role in the lives of many people in India today. As such, the Atharvaveda remains a vital link between ancient and contemporary healing and magical traditions, illustrating the enduring relevance of these ancient practices in the modern world.

**Keywords:** Atharvaveda, Folk Traditions, Magical Practices, Healing Rituals, Ancient India, Vedic Medicine

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