

# The System of State Governance in the Vedic Age and its Current Relevance : A Study

Anirban Chakraborty

## Abstract

The Vedas are the source of Hindu culture, the pinnacle of Āryan civilization. The etymological meaning of the word 'Veda; is knowledge. But this knowledge is not worldly knowledge, it is the enlightened wisdom revealed in the heart of the Vedic sage. Along with spiritual theories, various images of the social system of the time have been reflected in Vedic literature. The Vedic Saṁhitās give an insight into the contemporary political situation. A study of the four Saṁhitās provide detailed information about the election of kings, royal duties, cabinet formation, finance and taxation policies of that period. When discussing the administration system of the modern state, it is seen that Vedic principles have been followed in some places directly and in some places indirectly. Objectives of this paper are: to explore the governance system of the Vedic period, to make a comparative study between the system of state governance in the Vedic age and the modern era, and to explore the relevance of principles and values of Vedic governance in present political system.

## Full Paper

In the twenty-ninth chapter of the Atharvaveda, the words *Rāṣṭra* and *Deśa* are mentioned. The use of the plural in the word state shows that there were many states at that time. However, details about the names and size of those states are unavailable. In the ninth *mantra* of the ninth *sūkta* of the nineteenth chapter of the Atharvaveda, it is said :

*Nakṣatramulkābhihatam śamastu naḥ śaṁ nobhicārāḥ śamu santu kṛityāḥ|*  
*Śaṁ no nikhātā valgāḥ śamulkā deśopasargāḥ śamu no bhavantu ||*

Here by the word '*Deśopasargāḥ*' a prayer has been made to protect the country from impending crisis, natural calamities and divine projects. This prayer is equally relevant in the current system of state governance.

## Comparative Study of the System of State Governance

The smallest unit of modern state administration is the village. In that village there is a village leader, who is elected and on him rests the responsibility of village justice. '*Grāma- pañcāyatas*' are formed with a few villages. A block is made up of a number of *pañcāyatas*' and a district is made up of a number of blocks. This same principle was observed in Vedic period also. But with the change of era, change of name is observed. Even at that time the village was the smallest unit of the political system. The head of that village was called '*Grāmaṇī*'. He was duly elected. The *Grāmaṇī* had the right to participate in the election of the king, that's why he was called '*Rājakṛt*' –

*Ye rājāno rājakṛtaḥ sūtā grāmaṇyaśca ye|*  
*Upastīnparṇa mahyaṁ tvaṁ sarvānkrṇvabhito janān||*

-Atharvaveda 3.5.7

He had the right to judge all matters of the village. In the fifteenth to twenty-ninth mantras of the fifteenth chapter of the Yajurveda, he is compared to a general called '*Senānigramanyau*'.

A '*Viś*' was made up of a number of villages. The head of the *Viś* was called '*Viśpati*'. In the Ṛgveda *Viśpati* was called '*Purapālaka*' –

In modern times this *Viśpati* - the head of the gram panchayat, is known as *Purapitā* (Mayor) of the municipality.

A `jana' or `Janapada' was made up of a number of *Viś*. The modern name of this *Janapada* is District. In the Ṛgveda and Atharvaveda there is a mention of twenty *Janapadas* – *Tvamētān jana rājāna dvirdaśa*. The state was made up of many *Janapadas*. Here a slight contrast is seen between the Vedic and the modern state formation. At that time a `Rāṣṭra' (country) was formed with a few *Janapadas*, now a state is formed with a few districts and a country is formed with a few states. Although the size of the *Janapada* was larger than modern district. As a result, there were difficulties in governance and repeated attacks by foreign enemies. In modern governance, additional measures have been adopted to govern and protect against foreign attacks.

In the Vedic period, the king was elected through the state election system. In the Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda there are *sūktas* on the election of kings. In the 173<sup>rd</sup> *sūkta* of the tenth chapter of the Ṛgveda, addressing the king as Lord, *Ṛṣi* said – ‘ O king, I appointed you to the throne. Be thou lord of this town, be thou steadfast, till the people desire thee. May your kingdom not perish. You remain steadfast in this place. Remain still in this place like Indra and hold this kingdom.’ Almost a similar thought is found in the first verse of fourth *sūkta* of the third chapter of the Atharvaveda. It is said there – *Ā tvā rāṣṭram saha varcasodihī prānviśāṃ patirekarāt tvam vi rāja*. In next *mantra*, it mentions more clearly that the subjects coming from the different directions may choose you for the kingdom — *Tvām viśo vbr̥ṇatām rājyāya, tvāmimāḥ pradīśaḥ pañca devīḥ*. (AV 3.4.2). This *mantra* of the Atharvaveda shows that in Vedic period the election process was carried out by consensus. The one who was considered the best by the people in terms of virtue, valor, *prajānurānjana*, was chosen as the king — *Viśvāḥ pṛtanā abhibhūtaram naram, sajūṣṭatakṣurindram jajanusca rājase*. (AV 20.54.1). The election of the king was for one hundred years. So, it is said in Atharvaveda – ‘*daśamīmugraḥ sumanā baśeḥa*.’ The coronation of the chosen king is also mentioned in the ninth and tenth chapters of the Yajurveda.

In modern times, the election process is done according to public opinion. The person who is elected is addressed as minister rather than king. After the election, he is also crowned with an oath-taking ceremony. However, at that time the king was elected for a hundred years, but now five-year elections are held. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa says in the context of taking an oath - *Yāṃ ca rātrimajāyeham, yāṃ ca pretāsmi, tadubhayamantareṇeṣṭāpūrtam me lokam sukṛtamāyuh prajāṃ br̥ṇjūthāḥ, yadi te druhyeyam iti*. - It means, ‘-if I commit injustice and treachery against the country and the people, then on the night I was born and on the night I will die, all the good deeds I have done between the two will be lost, I will be deprived of heaven, life and children.’ This proves that betraying the subjects and the country was considered as a heinous crime of the king.

After the election of the king, those who assisted to the king were known as `Rājakṛt' or `Ratnina'. In Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa, we find the names of eleven *Rājakṛts* - 1) *Senāpati*, 2) *Purohita*, 3) *Mahiṣī*, 4) *Itihāsa Lekhaka*, 5) *Grāmaṇī*, 6) *Āya-byāyadhikāri*, 7) *Koṣādhykṣa*, 8) *Rājasva-adhikārī*, 9) *Āya-vyaya-nirikṣaka*, 10) *Aranyapāla*, 11) *Viśiṣṭa Vārtāvāhaka*. These eleven people can be called ministers of the king. Similarly in recent times also different ministers are appointed to look after different departments. For the convenience of administration, many departments have been divided, hence the number of ministers today is more than in the Vedic period.

The names of several kingdoms are found in the Vedic *saṃhitās*. Although the existence of all the states is not seen at present. However, from these we get a clear idea of what was given importance in the state governance of the Vedic period. A few states are briefly discussed below.

- **Jānarājya** – We find the name of Jānarājya in Yajurveda and Taittiriya saṃhitā. It says – *Imaṃ devā asapatnaṃ subaddhaṃ mahate kṣatrāya mahate jyeṣṭhyāya mahate jānarājyāyāyendrasyendriyāya.* (Yajurveda 9.40) ‘May the anointing of the king for the accomplishment of the great *Kṣātrabala*, for the great state, for the best public kingdom, for all kinds of *vibhūti* equal to Indradeva, for the protection of the people without enemies. The administrator of this kingdom was called *Jānarājā*.
- **Adhirājya** – It is mentioned in Ṛgveda - *mograṃ cetāramadhirājamakran.* Its administrator was called *Adhiraja*.
- **Vipra-rājya** – *Viprarajya* is described in Ṛgveda and Atharvaveda – -‘*Satyah so asya mahimā gr̥ṇe śabo yajñeṣu viprarājye.*’ Here ‘*Viprarajya*’ refers to the realm of knowledge. In this state special emphasis was placed on *yajña* and Vedic activities.
- **Samaryarājya** – In the 110<sup>th</sup> *sūkta* of the ninth chapter of Ṛgveda, we can know about *Samrajya* – *anu hi tvā sutam soma madāmasi, mahe samaryarājye/ Bājān abhi pavamāna pra gāhase //*  
The word ‘*Sam*’ means excellent and the word ‘*Arya*’ means ‘*Vaiśya*’. That is, this kingdom was the kingdom of *Vaiśyas* or traders. Economic prosperity and military strength might be observed in this state.

The above states do not find any existence in the modern state system of administration. Yet a complete picture of Vedic governance emerges beautifully before us through these states.

Now we will discuss about the judiciary system. In the Vedic age, the king was the supreme administrator. What he judged was the last word, but in recent times the greatest of administrations has been the judiciary. In present time the judge of the court will take ultimate decision. Not only that, if the litigant is not satisfied with the trial, he can go to a higher court. There was no such way in the Vedic age. Even in recent times there are commanders, they protect their responsibilities in different departments. If a person is found guilty, the job of the *Sena* (Police officer) is to take him as a prisoner and send him to court. Although this was the same principle at that time, the king had the final say. That is, even if the king was elected by the people, the monarchy was more important than the republic. But now the Republic is more important, which is compatible with the Constitution. Here no person in the administration can supersede the constitution. This carries the message of a sovereign republic.

The structure of the state and the system of the state governance has undergone many changes. In the current political context, we see a picture of apathy and degradation of values. Pursuing Vedic state formation cannot be our only aim. We have to follow Vedic political ideals and values for healthy society and citizen protection. The duty of an ideal King has been beautiful described in Arthaśāstra - The happiness of the king lies in the happiness of the people; he should see his own interest only in the interest of the people. The interest of the king is not in the one who is dear to himself, his interest is in the one who is dear to the subjects.

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