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Peculiarities of Śara and Vibhīdaka with special reference to Śrauta sacrifices

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Abstract

Usually, the grass used as base while setting a sacrificial fire is 'Kuśa' and 'Idhma' is made from the wood of Palāśa and Khaira trees. However, all the Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis have been prescribed by the Śruti to use 'Śara' grass and 'Vibhīdaka' wood respectively for these purposes. The Śrauta literature also clearly bans the use of 'Śara' and 'Vibhīdaka' in any other religious rites. Why are then these prescribed for the Abhicāra? Many scholars explain this prescription based on similarity of lexical terms (Śabdasāmyatva). But do these plants have some specific characteristics that qualify them for being used specifically in these Iṣṭis? This research article tries to delve into this in detail.

Key words -

Śara, Vibhīdaka, Śrauta, Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis, Idhma, Barhi

Introduction-

Śrauta is a Sanskrit word that means associated with Śruti. One who has set up the sacred fires is called Āhitāgni Yajaman. He has rite to perform all Śrauta sacrifices. Once he sets up the three sacred fire it is required to offer sacrifices on the full-moon-day and new-moon-day. This full-moon and new-moon sacrifices is called Darśapūrṇamāseṣṭi. Kāmyeṣṭis are rites for special desires, these are variation of the Darśapūrṇamāseṣṭi.

Śrauta Kāmyeṣṭis are mainly of five types; Nitya (Regular), Naimittika (Occasional), Kāmya (Based on some desire), Prāyaścittātmaka (For repentance) and Abhicārātmaka (As a corrective effort to solve a problem). It is very natural for a person to wish for the defeat of one's enemy, protect oneself from him and trouble him instead. A person even takes 'Yātvātmaka' efforts to achieve this objective. Śruti calls these 'Yātvātmaka' efforts for defeating the enemy as 'Abhicāra'. The deities to be worshipped and the offerings to be used are different in the Śrauta Kāmyeṣṭis as per the desire. Along with the offerings, even the vessels to be used and the instruments are stated to be different for different types of desire.

Barhi means the layer of grass that is spread in a specific way on the sacrificial altar. It is also called 'Kuśa' or 'Darbha'. Sacrificial vessels and offerings are kept on this layer of pious grass. Normally, 'Kuśa' grass is used for this layering in Śrauta sacrifices. If Kuśa is not available, any other grass except the seven types namely Śuka, Śara, Śīrya, Balvaja, Mutava, Nala and Lunṭha or Kuṅṭha are allowed. Mr. Gonda propounds that these types must have been banned due to some specific characteristics in these grasses that are harmful. Depending on the desire for which the Iṣṭi is performed, different types of grass have been prescribed to be used for layering. In Abhicāra Iṣṭi, 'Śara' grass has been prescribed as a rule. In all Abhicārātmaka Iṣṭis 'Śaramayam barhi...' (T.S. 2.1.5) is prescribed in Samhitā as well as Śrauta Sūtra. (Sat.Ś.S. 22.2.11) The reasons for why the otherwise banned 'Śara' grass is prescribed in this Iṣṭis have been analyzed as follows:

1. What does 'Śara' mean: Grass or arrow?

1.1 There is a lore in Śatapath Brāhmaṇa (1.2.4.1) that the ‘Vajra’ which Indra used to kill Vṛtra, got divided into four parts. The fourth part got further divided. It fell on the ground and got converted into ‘Śara’ grass. The wood of the same grass is used to make arrows. This grass being made from the fragments of Vajra is used for layering because arrows kill the enemy. This has been interpreted linguistically. According to analogy, therefore, ‘Śara’ i.e., grass that signifies an arrow is prescribed for layering of the sacrificial fire.

1.2 Bhatta Bhaskaracharya calls ‘Śara’ a special grass. The commentary clearly states that layering be done by this grass.

Even according to Sayanacharya, ‘Śara’ means a special grass. He however explains it as शरासः शरा वेणुदण्डसदृशाः अन्तश्छिद्रास्तृणविशेषाः इति¹ which means that leaves or grass that are hollow from within like bamboo is expected to be used here. ‘Śara’ means a plant that has hollow shoots and that should be used for the layering. It is not specified here whether the grass or the arrows made from that should be used for layering, but it is mentioned that the material used for layering in Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis should be cut at both the ends. This rule has been prescribed in Sūtra texts.² This suggests that the ‘barhi’ expected here should be one with leaves.

Both the scholars have interpreted the meaning of ‘mayat’ affix componential while explaining the term ‘Śaramaya’. According to Bhatta Bhaskaracharya, components of ‘Śara’ grass are its leaves but Sayanacharya interprets it as grass that was generated from the ‘Vajra’.

1.3 If the ‘mayat’ affix is interpreted as an inflection, ‘Śaramaya’ would mean a product of ‘Śara’ grass i.e. an arrow made from it. Mr. Gonda also mentions that arrows were made from this grass.³ So, the layering must have been supposed to be made of arrows. Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭi is particularly performed

¹ Commentary of Sayanacharya on Rg 1,148.4

² उभयतः परिच्छिन्नं शरमयं बहिराभिचारिकेषु। Kau.Ś.S 47.1

³ Sacchurum śara, a sort of reed uses for arrows. Gonda. 1985. p 50.

for killing the enemy and arrow is a primary weapon for killing. Even today, layering for Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis is traditionally seen to be made up of arrows.

2. Which plant is exactly called the ‘Śara’? What are its properties?

2.1 Śara is a special type of grass that is used for making arrows. Mr. Kashikar has described that it can be broken easily. Even according to Mr. Gonda, ‘Śara’ is a special type of grass used to make arrows. He has translated it in English as Sacchurum śara, a sort of reed, which means a thin type of grass that grows tall. It has several segments. This stalk is very thin and delicate or thick and strong like a bamboo.

2.2 Even Amarkośa¹ classifies ‘Śara’ grass in the category of segmented herbs. The other names in Sanskrit for this are ‘Bāṇa’, ‘Tejana’, ‘Bhadramuñja’. In Hindi it is called ‘Sarkaṇḍā’ and in Marathi it is called ‘Kaṁpikā’. According to Ayurveda, ‘Śara’ grass nullifies poison and boosts energy. Medicinal uses of ‘Śara’ grass have been mentioned in Kauṣika Sūtra too.²

2.3 Even in Dīkṣaṇīyeṣṭi, the host is tied a waistband of ‘Śara’ or ‘Muñja’ grass. The reason stated for it is the same that ‘Śara’ is like a Vajra that protects the host from enemy in the form of hunger. Properties of ‘Śara’ and ‘Muñja’ grass are quite similar. Both the plants belong to the same botanical family. ‘Śara’ and ‘Muñja’ are also given as alternatives in some Vedic rites, but Muñja is not a forbidden grass and it is not found to be given as an alternative to ‘Śara’ in Abhicāreṣṭi.

One can state from this that ‘Abhicāra’ means killing of the enemy and taking this meaning of the term into consideration, it is prescribed to be used as ‘Śaramaya Barhi’ in Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis. Similarly, ‘Śara’ grass proves to be poisonous for the enemy and power-boosting for the host. Hence, it is prescribed to be used in Abhicāreṣṭi. ‘Śara’ grass is powerful like the Vajra and

¹ Amarkośa 2.972

² विद्या शरस्यादो यदिति मुञ्जशिरो रज्ज्वा बध्नाति। Darilabhashya on Kau.Ś.S 25.6.

protects the host from enemies. This is reinforced in accordance with the properties of the 'Śara' grass too. Therefore, even if 'Śara' is banned in other spiritual rites, it proves to complementary to the desire of the host in Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis.

3. What is Idhma?

3.1 Idhma means a group of sacrificial twigs that have numerical variations according to branch differences. Usually, Khadīra and Palāśa twigs are used in sacrifices for making Idhma. If these are not available, twigs of any other tree except Vibhīdaka, Tilvaka, Bādhaka, Nīpa, Nīm̐ba, Rājavar̐kṣa, Śālmālī, Alaru, Dadhittha, Kovidāra-Śleṣmātaka may be used.¹ The question that arises here too is that Idhma of Vibhīdaka i.e. the Behḍā tree is prescribed for the Abhicāreṣṭi which is otherwise banned for the purpose. Along with 'Śarmaya Barhi', Idhma of Vibhīdaka is another specialty of Abhicāreṣṭi.

4. Properties of Vibhīdaka:

4.1 'Vibhīdaka' or 'Vibhītaka' are the two terms alternatively used to indicate the plant. The meaning of Vibhīdaka is 'विभीत्यू नाम विशेषेण भीत्यू च' which means something that can penetrate the enemy and kill him. Therefore, according to similarity of words, scholars feel that Vibhīdaka or Behaḍā is used in Abhicāreṣṭi.

4.2 The botanical name of Vibhīdaka is Terminalia Billerica and it is known as 'Behaḍā' in Marathi. It is very significant in Ayurveda. The combination of Hirḍā, Āwala and Behaḍā plants is known as Triphala in Ayurveda. Behaḍā wasn't used separately in the times of Caraka and Sushruta. It was always used as a component of Triphala.² Its fruits are used in Triphala. According to the fruit, Behaḍā is classified into two types.

¹ विभीतक-तिल्वक-बाधक-नीप-निम्ब-राजवृक्ष-शाल्मल्यऽलरु (रत्तु)-दधित्थ-कोविदार-श्लेष्मातक-वर्ज सर्ववनस्पतीनामिध्मो यथार्थं स्यात्। Go.G.S. 1.5.15

² Kashikar, 1974, pp160-61

4.3 According to the description of the fruit of Behaḍā found in several books, apparently these fruits have some specific properties. There is a description in Ṛgveda that says that Behaḍā leaves attract the mind.¹ The Nirukta also states that fruits of Behaḍā mesmerize the mind.² Right from the times of Ṛgveda, these fruits are used as dice in the game of ludo. Perhaps the destruction that this game causes to human beings brought negativity to Behaḍā. However, these fruits are used as a medicine for sleep (as narcotic) even today. Besides, these fruits also have some properties that affect man's mind and so these are used for psychoactive drug even today.³ These fruits have the property of changing one's mind and so people of Lodha clan consume these fruits.⁴

4.4 As the fruits are said to have these properties, there are certain beliefs about even the plant of Behaḍā. This is a huge tree that gives shade but there is a belief in the south that demons stay in this tree, and it is still believed by people from south and middle India that if someone stands under the tree they are possessed by ghosts. Specifically for this reason, wood of Behaḍā tree is not used for construction in south and middle parts of India. Due to this belief, this tree is called Kalidṛma (tree of the devil), Kalki (devil), Bhūtāwāsa (abode of the ghosts), Dharmadweṣī (one that hates religion), Dharmaghna (anti-religious). In the 63rd chapter of Bṛhatsamhitā, the tree of Behaḍā has been banned to be used for construction of a house. Even the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa states that while performing the final rites of a person, the corpse should not be kept near a Behaḍā tree.⁵

We can infer from this that not just similarity of terminology, but 'Vibhīdaka' seems to have been prescribed because of some of its specific

¹ विभीदको जागृविर्मह्यमच्छान्। Ṛg. 10.34.

² विभीदको विभेदनाञ्जागृतिर्जागरणान्मह्यमच्छदत्। Ni. 9.8

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terminalia_bellirica

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terminalia_bellirica - "These kernels are eaten by the Lodha people of the Indian subcontinent for their mind-altering qualities". Pal, D.C. Jain, S.K. Oct-Dec 1989. pp 464-470

⁵ Śa.Br. 13.8.1.16

properties. It boosts the mental strength of the host but destroys the enemy and hence it fulfills the desire of the host in an Abhicāreṣṭi.

5. Observations:

- Though the properties of Muñja and Śara grass are similar and though they are prescribed as alternants to each other in some rites, in Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis, only 'Śara' is prescribed for layering and not 'Muñja'.
- 'Śarmaya barhi' means layering of 'Śara' grass for the sacrificial fire or layering of arrows made from that grass. Both seem to be acceptable.
- Though Behaḍā is medicinal there are many negative connotations associated with the plant.

6. Conclusion:

All these references stated above explain that Barhi or layering of 'Śara' grass and 'Idhma' of 'Vibhīdaka' is not prescribed just because of similarity of terms but because both have the property of boosting the mental power and enthusiasm. People of Vedic era was aware of these medicinal properties. Śara is supposed to give energy like the Vajra and Vibhīdaka has the potential of changing one's mind and increasing mental powers which are necessary for killing the enemy. Thus, 'Śara' and 'Vibhīdaka' seem to have been prescribed for Abhicārātamaka Iṣṭis due to their two-fold utility of being beneficial for the host and harmful for the opponent. Therefore, it won't be wrong to say that this prescription is complementary for the 'Yātvātmaka' part of Abhicāra. This will help us to find out more references to unfold the roots of modern science in Indian Knowledge Systems.

Abbreviations-

Go.G.S.- Gobhila Gṛhyasūtra

Ni.- Nirukta

T.S.- Taittirīya Samhitā

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