



# Atharvavedic Nationalism: Exploring Socio-Political Foundations and Cultural Perspectives in Vedic Thought

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## Abstract:

This paper delves into the deep-rooted nationalism reflected in the *Atharvaveda*, an ancient Vedic text. It explores how the *Atharvaveda* presents the motherland, *Pr̥thivī*, as a sacred entity, imbuing it with divine reverence, pride, and emotional significance. This research examines the multifaceted concept of nationalism, encompassing emotional, political, and social dimensions as articulated in the Vedic hymns. The paper highlights the notion of the nation as an organic entity, its protection, and the role of leadership in ensuring national strength. Through the *Pr̥thivīSūkta*, the work addresses the intricacies of Vedic thought concerning territorial affection, national unity, and the harmonious relationship between the king, his ministers, and the people. This study also traces the ideals of national security, political governance, and collective unity within the context of ancient Indian civilization, offering a comprehensive understanding of Vedic nationalism and its lasting influence on contemporary nationalist discourses.

**Keywords:** *Atharvaveda*, Nationalism, *Pr̥thivīSūkta*, Vedic Thought, Socio-Political Foundations, Cultural Perspectives, Indian Governance, Vedic Hymns, National Security, Political Unity, Ancient India, Vedic Society.

## I. Review of Literature

The concept of nationalism in Vedic literature, particularly in the *Atharvaveda*, has been a subject of scholarly attention. Existing studies emphasize the *Pr̥thivīSūkta* as a profound hymn celebrating the glory of the motherland and its natural and cultural wealth. Scholars like S. Radhakrishnan and A.C. Das have explored the socio-political dimensions of Vedic thought,

highlighting the Vedic seers' devotion to the motherland, regional unity, and ecological harmony. The hymn has been regarded as a precursor to modern nationalist ideologies, forming an emotional and cultural foundation for collective identity. Research also delves into the political frameworks of the Vedic period. The *Atharvaveda's* references to kings, ministers, and organizational hierarchies are noted by historians such as R.N. Dandekar. Their studies examine the processes of royal consecration, the king's empowerment through sacred rituals, and the roles of *sabhās* and *samitis* in governance. These aspects reflect the political organization and social cohesion integral to Atharvavedic nationalism.

Scholars have also studied the militaristic and protective dimensions in the *Atharvaveda*, where kings are portrayed as divine protectors akin to Indra, ensuring security and victory. Cultural perspectives, including references to rivers, mountains, and the symbolism of the motherland as a nurturing force, are integral to existing interpretations of Vedic nationalism. The literature underscores that the *Atharvaveda* offers a holistic view of nationalism, interweaving socio-political, cultural, and spiritual elements, thus providing a fertile ground for exploring its relevance in contemporary nationalist discourse.

## II. Introduction:

Nationalism, as a modern political concept, finds its roots in the shared ideals, values, and identity of a nation. However, the seeds of nationalist sentiment can be traced back to ancient texts, including the *Atharvaveda*, one of the oldest sacred scriptures of the Vedic tradition. The *Atharvaveda* is not only a religious text but also a profound exploration of the socio-political and



cultural ideals that shaped ancient Indian society. Among its many hymns, the *PrthivīSūkta* stands out as an extraordinary reflection of the connection between the people and the land they inhabit, encapsulating the emotional, political, and social dimensions of nationalism.

In the *Atharvaveda*, the motherland (Pṛthivī) is revered as a sacred, living entity, nurturing all forms of life and providing for the needs of her children. The hymn describes a sense of territorial affection and devotion, laying the emotional foundation for a unified nation. This nationalistic sentiment is further strengthened through the vivid portrayal of the king as a protector of the people, akin to the deity Indra, who ensures the security and welfare of the state. The relationship between the king, the ministers, and the people is articulated in such a way that the governance of the nation is seen as an integrated, harmonious system of social cooperation, political leadership, and spiritual guidance.

Furthermore, the *Atharvaveda* highlights the importance of community unity and social cohesion, with references to various assemblies (*sabhas*) and councils (*samitis*), all of whom are viewed as the progeny of Brahmā, signifying their divine connection and duty to maintain harmony. The social base of nationalism is thus rooted in the collective responsibility to preserve the integrity and prosperity of the nation.

This paper aims to analyze these elements of Vedic nationalism through a detailed exploration of the *PrthivīSūkta* and other relevant hymns in the *Atharvaveda*, examining their political, social, and cultural implications. By understanding the ancient conceptualization of nationalism in the *Atharvaveda*, we gain valuable insights into the foundations of Indian thought and governance that continue to resonate in modern nationalist discourse.

### The Concept of National Sentiment in Vedic Saṁhitās

Our ancestors thrived in a well-organized nation, where their lives were nurtured and developed. They fought numerous battles to protect their land, civilization, and culture. To ensure their safety and security, they appointed a leader or king who served the people with utmost dedication. Several institutions such as *sabhā*, *samiti*, and *vidatha* were established to assist the king. Military strength was employed to confront elements that threatened the nation's independence and culture.

The sages (*ṛṣis*) sang praises of the nation and the motherland. To ward off crises that could jeopardize the nation, they invoked the might of

various deities such as Indra, Varuṇa, Agni, Sūrya, Mitrāvaruṇa, and the AśvinīKumāras through hymns of adoration. Thus, the protectors of Indian culture, the sages, illuminated not only the social, religious, economic, and cultural aspects of life in the Vedic *Samhitās* but also imbued them with the spirit of patriotism and devotion to the homeland. This allows us to evaluate the national consciousness of that era.

The sages realized that for collective and dignified governance, it was essential to remain loyal to one's motherland and nation. Consequently, they filled the hearts of the people with love for their nation by openly extolling the virtues of their land and homeland in the Vedas. The echoes of these praises continue to inspire a sense of pride within us even today. The natural self-esteem and pride that sages and the populace felt for their homeland including its land, people, culture, civilization, history, religion, literature, art, philosophy of life, mountains, forests, rivers, coastal regions, and literary achievements constitute what we can call national sentiment.

National sentiment is a sacred feeling, a pure inner consciousness. It inspires self-respect and self-sacrifice but never promotes the humiliation of another nation, not even in dreams. It teaches the philosophy of "live and let live," emphasizing self-defense without advocating aggression against other nations. National sentiment is characterized by self-esteem, not arrogance. It is free from narrowness and inhumane tendencies. It conveys the universal message of unity: "*sarvebhavantsukhinah*" (May all beings be happy). This is the seed of national sentiment as expounded by our ancestors and sages in the Vedic *Samhitās*.

The first indication of considering one's country or birthplace as a mother is found in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>1</sup> Our sages reverently referred to the Earth or birthplace as the mother, as evidenced by many hymns in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>2</sup> In certain instances, the term "motherland" (*mātrbhūmi*) is used. Addressing the land as "mother" fosters a sense of intimacy among Indians born on this sacred soil. Inspired by this sentiment, we forget distinctions of "mine" and "others," or the divisions of small and large, and see everyone as children of the same mother. We take pride in dedicating ourselves to the protection and development of this life-giving Earth, our Mother. The earliest references to this sentiment are found in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>3</sup>



### National Sentiment in the *Atharvaveda*

While the *Rgveda* holds historical significance, the *Atharvaveda* is deeply imbued with political and emotional richness. Among the *Vedas*, it provides the most profound insights into national thought and sentiment. The *Atharvaveda* reflects the evolution of national consciousness and patriotism during a later period than the *Rgveda*. It also contains references to various kings and nations.

### The Heartfelt Teachings of Patriotism in the *Atharvaveda*

During the Atharvavedic era, a natural love for the nation and a desire for its prosperity were deeply ingrained in the collective psyche of the people. A Vedic *ṛṣi* expresses a passionate prayer for the nation in one mantra, declaring: "Grant me a nation".<sup>4</sup> After the attainment of a nation, the *ṛṣi* seeks strength for its protection and governance: "Grant me strength for its safeguarding and sustenance."<sup>5</sup> The *ṛṣi* also prays for the nation to be endowed with the brilliance of the sun: "Bestow upon it the radiance of the sun."<sup>6</sup>

A devoted patriot, expressing unwavering loyalty to the nation, declares: "May I slay enemies, conquer them, and become the sovereign of both my nation and others."<sup>7</sup> In another *mantra*, the *ṛṣi* describes the ideal attributes of a nation, expressing a vision of devotion: "May my nation be one where rivers flow abundantly, where cool ocean shores embrace the land, where verdant plants, trees, and rocky hills adorn the terrain. May the earth, rich with varied hues and diverse crops, cradle my nation."<sup>8</sup>

Through this poetic homage to the beauty of nature, the *ṛṣi* vividly conveys a profound love for the nation. The *ṛṣi* further extols the land where the seasons spring, summer, monsoon, autumn, winter, and late winter cycle through the year, bringing joy to the people: "That is my motherland."<sup>9</sup>

### Homage to the Nation's Natural Beauty and Strength

The *ṛṣi* reverently acknowledges the diverse natural features of the motherland, expressing a deep sentiment of patriotism: "Our motherland, invincible and unharmed, safeguarded by a powerful king like Indra, shall remain steadfast. May it remain replete with happiness, its people endowed with every resource for prosperity."<sup>10</sup> The *ṛṣi* further prays: "May peace prevail throughout the nation. May harmony reign in every institution, and may all individuals speak to one another with love."<sup>11</sup> Not only this, the *ṛṣi* considers himself a child of the earth and offers a heartfelt prayer for a

benevolent nation, free from sins: "O Earth, grant me a nation that is auspicious in all respects. Cleanse me of my sins."<sup>12</sup>

### A True Expression of National Spirit

Thus, the *ṛṣis* of the Atharvavedic era celebrated their motherland and nation with fervent reverence, deeming it worthy of worship. Several hymns in the *Atharvaveda* are devoted to political thought, the glorification of the motherland's unique attributes, love for its natural wealth, the promotion of unity and peace, and the pursuit of self-governance and development. Through these hymns, the Atharvavedic *ṛṣis* authentically expressed their profound national spirit.

### National Thought in the *Atharvaveda*

The *Atharvaveda* is not devoid of national thought. Numerous mantras mention the attainment of a nation, self-rule, protection of the nation, destruction of enemies, methods of achieving victory, mutual love and harmony, establishment of peace, and praise of the nation. In one mantra, the emperor is compared to the motion of the sun, and reverence is offered to self-rule. It is emphasized that the nation or self-rule is a permanent entity, whereas emperors come and go. Just as the sun rises, advances, and eventually sets, similarly, kings or emperors rise, ascend to power, and later relinquish their position. Yet, the nation remains eternal.

In the *Atharvaveda*, the past is not forgotten. Respect and reverence are extended even to former emperors.<sup>13</sup> The sages express their desire for the attainment of a nation free from enemies and inspired by Indra.<sup>14</sup> With the desire to ensure the nation's welfare, the priest performs the coronation of the national leader, offering heartfelt blessings. The priest advises the leader to protect the nation wholeheartedly, govern the people righteously, provide equal opportunities for individual progress, and conduct himself with brilliance such that the citizens praise him sincerely.<sup>15</sup>

To ensure the nation's prosperity and the destruction of enemies, specific *mantras* and talismans (*manis*) were employed. The priest would tie these talismans onto the arms of the national leader, blessing him so that the nation could prosper, and its enemies could be vanquished.<sup>16</sup> For instance, a talisman called *Parnamani* was tied to ensure the leader's commitment to the nation and its welfare.<sup>17</sup>

If the emperor became incompetent, cowardly, or self-centered, the people would dethrone him. Upon repentance for his negligence and selfish acts, he could be reinstated as the king.



This context is illustrated in various mantras where dethroned kings, termed *aparuddha* or *niruddharājā*, are mentioned.<sup>18</sup>The *Atharvaveda* also includes blessings from priests aimed at the prosperity of the nation. Both the citizens and the king are equally enjoined to serve the nation.<sup>19</sup>

To protect the nation from external enemies, all possible measures were taken, including the appointment of guards in all directions.<sup>20</sup>The protector of the nation was likened to the sun. Just as the rising sun dispels night and darkness, the ascension of a king brings peace and strength to the citizens.<sup>21</sup>

In a well-governed nation (*suraṣṭra*), people find opportunities for growth.<sup>22</sup> Enlightened citizens contribute to the development of the king, and the king is instructed to treat his subjects with fatherly affection.<sup>23</sup> Objects won in battle were integrated into the national wealth, ensuring their collective utility.<sup>24</sup>The national leader was ever-vigilant in serving the people. Soldiers were even deployed at night to safeguard the nation's assets, including cattle, sheep, horses, and other resources, from political thieves or external threats.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the *Atharvaveda* portrays a vision of a secure, prosperous, and robust nation enriched with ideal administrative systems. The aspiration for a well-functioning and flourishing nation, as depicted in the *Atharvaveda*, testifies to the national awakening of the sages and statesmen of that era. The ideal of a well-administered nation reflects their profound understanding of governance and societal welfare. This vision continues to inspire the principles of governance and national service today.

### Expansion of the Spirit of Unity

The *Atharvaveda* acknowledges the essential need for mutual harmony and goodwill among the people to ensure the protection and development of the nation. Therefore, it emphasizes organization and unity, considering them as indicators of a nation's nobility, brilliance, and strength.<sup>26</sup>In one *mantra*, mutual affection is encouraged, akin to the love a cow shows for her calf.<sup>27</sup>For national unity, the focus has been placed on familial unity, as excellent families create an excellent nation.<sup>28</sup> Another *mantra* highlights the apex of unity by envisioning everyone as one in their nourishment and togetherness.<sup>29</sup>

During the Atharvavedic period, such organization was so pivotal that various rituals were performed to nurture it. These rituals invoked the forces of air, animals, birds, and water to proclaim the strength of organized living.<sup>30</sup>Prayers were offered to the deities to inspire a united way of

life.<sup>31</sup> Unity was deemed desirable in every sphere of life. The *Atharvaveda* envisions an ideal nation by fostering equality and harmony in civilization, culture, language, literature, education, communication, responsibilities, and the religious, economic, and social domains. A sage fervently wishes for cooperative effort and collective progress.<sup>32</sup>

Unity of spirit is seen as an essential element for nation-building. The *Atharvaveda* aspires for a unified mind, heart, thought, and speech among individuals. This vision bore fruit, leading to the establishment of a unified way of life during that period.<sup>33</sup> The Vedic sages achieved this unity amidst linguistic and religious diversity through heartwarming and simple literary inspiration.<sup>34</sup> Thus, people began to experience mutual interconnectedness. As a result, their motherland flourished, and its glory expanded. To instill unity across all societal sections, everyone was referred to as a child of Mother Earth, emphasizing their fundamental oneness:

“*mātābhūmihputroaham prthivyāḥ*”<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, the contemporary nation was inclusive and ensured the welfare of all social classes Brahmins, *Kṣatriyas*, *Vaiśyas*, *Śūdras*, and *Niśādas*.<sup>36</sup> This harmonious integration of mutual unity and cooperative living stands as a testament to the national spirit of the Vedic sages.

### The Development Plans of the Nation

The seers of the *Atharvaveda* were deeply conscious of the development and welfare of their nation. They made continuous efforts to ensure that their land remained abundant in wealth and resources. Significant attention was devoted to agricultural activities.<sup>37</sup> For instance, precautions were taken to protect crops from pests like mice and locusts.<sup>38</sup> Efforts were made to enhance the fertility of the soil, ensuring the production of higher yields.<sup>39</sup>

Vasiṣṭha, as a royal priest, undertook the responsibility of the comprehensive development of the nation. The nation took pride in the leadership of such benevolent seers. Similarly, the citizens admired the patriotism and dedication of both the king and the priests. Their vigilance and wisdom led to the downfall of the nation's adversaries and contributed to the constant growth of national strength, valor, and enthusiasm. These leaders inspired the citizens to imbibe the spirit of patriotism and remain devoted to the nation. The military organization in the nation was well-structured, with an excellent arsenal and courageous soldiers. These warriors were thoroughly skilled in



the art of warfare. In battle, they strategically targeted the key figures of the enemy forces first, followed by neutralizing other soldiers wherever necessary.<sup>40</sup> The victory achieved by the sage Kākāyana over enemy forces stands as a remarkable example. Similarly, in another hymn, the *Nilimban-Triṣandhi mantra* of the seer Bhṛgvagīnra is noteworthy for its military insight and strategy.<sup>41</sup>

To ensure uninterrupted national development and the sustained welfare of the nation, collective peace and prosperity were earnestly desired. The aspiration was that all citizens would remain joyful and that an atmosphere of happiness and harmony would prevail everywhere.

### Devotion to the Motherland

The sages of the *Atharvaveda* were deeply devoted to the motherland. They regarded the motherland as their everything—heaven, space, mother, father, and even the divine. In the Earth, envisioned as the Mother, they perceived their past and future. Consequently, they gratefully extolled the virtues of their motherland: *Kalyānakāriṇī*, *śaktipadāyini*, *yogakṣetrakāriṇī*, and *annadāyini*—the motherland was seen as the provider of welfare, strength, spiritual progress, and sustenance. Living in her embrace, they experienced perpetual renewal and bliss. They believed that the motherland was the ferry for the river of life and the provider of abundant nourishment. Thus, they often sang the praises of her virtues. They prayed to live a full hundred years in the lap of their motherland.<sup>42</sup> The sages had faith that the motherland endowed her children with vigor and strength, granting a prosperous nation where wise offspring could roam freely. They also sought the fulfillment of all their desires from their beloved motherland.

### Aspiration for the National Animal - The Cow

The sages of the *Atharvaveda* considered the nurturing and protection of cows essential for safeguarding and enhancing physical and mental vitality. They ensured grazing grounds for cows and protected them from thieves and slaughterers.<sup>43</sup> The cow, as a national symbol, was also bestowed as a gift to Brahmins. Recognizing the role of cows in creating ideal and robust citizens, the sages revered and served them with the devotion of a mother. They expressed their allegiance to the nation through various hymns dedicated to cows. As a result, the nation saw an abundance of milch cows, and the *Atharvaveda* mentions rivers flowing with milk.<sup>44</sup> This passage exemplifies the Atharvavedic vision of a prosperous nation rooted in devotion to

the motherland and the preservation of its cultural and natural wealth.

### Atharvavedic Nationalism:

In the *Atharvaveda*, the Vedic seers extol the glory of the motherland, weaving a hymn of nationalism. The vastness of the motherland, its unique features, and its abundant treasures have been celebrated with reverence. The pride of the nation resonates profoundly in these hymns. In this context, the *PrthivīSūkta* of the *Atharvaveda* holds immense significance. This hymn vividly describes regional affection and devotion to the motherland. The natural and divine wealth, rivers, mountains, flora, fauna, and their unique attributes, along with the crops born from the womb of the motherland, inspire a sense of surrender by identifying oneself as her child. This forms the emotional foundation of nationalism. The internal strength of the nation finds expression in references to the king, ministers, and their diverse organizational frameworks. The king's deposition, reinstatement, blessings, and empowerment through *mantras* and sacred objects have been detailed. The roles of the priest, including participation in the battlefield, conducting royal consecrations, and offering prudent counsel to the king, constitute the political foundation of nationalism.<sup>45</sup>

The *Atharvaveda* also mentions various assemblies (*sabhās*) and councils (*samitis*) in villages and towns, along with their members. To foster mutual unity and harmony, all are described as the progeny of Brahmā. This underlines the social foundation of nationalism, strengthening bonds among the people. The *Atharvaveda* speaks emphatically about national security, triumph in wars, and the annihilation of enemy forces. The king is envisioned as a symbol of Indra, with prayers for the protection of the subjects from all directions. Even today, the role of the Vedic king inspires the welfare of the nation.<sup>46</sup> The close relationship between the king and the army ensured victories. In the *PrthivīSūkta*, the glory of the motherland, its unique characteristics, and its essence have been vividly portrayed. Scholars have recognized this hymn as a form of the national anthem of the time.

### III. Conclusion

The exploration of Atharvavedic Nationalism reveals a profound understanding of nationalism deeply rooted in Vedic thought. Through the hymns of the *Atharvaveda*, particularly the *PrthivīSūkta*, the concept of the motherland is elevated to a divine and sacred status, emphasizing its vastness, beauty, and unique qualities. The



emotional connection to the motherland, symbolized by the identification of individuals as her children, forms the emotional foundation of nationalism. This sense of devotion and reverence extends to the natural and divine wealth of the land-rivers, mountains, fauna, flora, and the crops born from the motherland's soil which together shape the Vedic vision of a prosperous and harmonious society. The *Atharvaveda* offers insights into the political foundations of nationalism by underscoring the roles of the king, ministers, and their respective institutions in fortifying the nation. The duties of the king, along with his interdependent relationship with the army, were considered critical to maintaining the internal strength and security of the nation. This is clearly reflected in the *Atharvaveda's* invocation of the king as a symbol of Indra, praying for the protection and prosperity of the nation. Furthermore, the *PrthivīSūkta* outlines the imperative for national unity and peace, wherein assemblies, councils, and villages were all conceived as being connected through their collective identity as the progeny of Brahmā. The *Atharvaveda* also highlights the importance of social harmony and the maintenance of unity within the nation. The framework of mutual respect and cooperation within various societal structures forms the social foundation of nationalism. The emphasis on unity, mutual cooperation, and collective identity underscores the necessity of working together for the nation's well-being.

In conclusion, Atharvavedic Nationalism offers an integrative and holistic perspective on the socio-political and cultural dimensions of the Vedic understanding of the nation. The intricate interplay of devotion to the motherland, the king's political role, and the collective unity of society provides a comprehensive vision of a unified and prosperous nation. As the *PrthivīSūkta* resonates with the hymn of national pride and identity, its influence continues to inspire modern interpretations of nationalism, reminding us of the enduring relevance of Vedic thought in shaping socio-political ideologies in contemporary society. The *Atharvaveda* thus stands as a monumental source, offering both a historical and philosophical foundation for understanding the roots of nationalism in the Indian cultural and spiritual ethos.

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