

Hack thy Śepa - Crush thy Muṣka: Threats from the Atharvaveda

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Among the spells in the Atharvaveda (AV) are observed a considerable number of those with intimidating and coarse language. Many are exercised both to imprecate curses upon the human perpetrators of sexual misconduct and to ward off the nightmares caused by incubi and succubi. The objective of this paper is to examine the linguistic peculiarities of a few spells employed to make a man impotent and to exorcize the incubi known in the AV as *Gandharvas*.

Such peculiarities lie in several areas including the selection of nominal and verbal paradigms, syntactical structure and rhetorical devices. For instance, *śepa* (membrum virile), but never *śepha*, and *muṣka* (testis) are oftener found than their equivalents in the *Śaunakīya* AV such as *meḍhra*, *pasas* or *bhasad* and *vr̥ṣaṇa* or *aṇḍa* respectively. Likewise, it is remarkable to observe that '*muṣka*' usually used in the above sense has also been exerted to denote 'pudenda muliebre' (AVŚ. 8.6.5; 6.138.4, 5) though its usage there as a dual (*muṣkābhyām*) forces us again to cast doubts thereon. As regards the person deictic finite verbs, the most commonly seen are the first person present tense forms or potentials (*chinadmi*, *bhideyam* etc.) and second person imperatives (*bhindhi*, *kṛdhi* etc.). For signifying both 'to crush' the testes or 'to hack' the penis of an offender, the inflections from the stem *√bhid* are frequently applied while those from *√han*, *√pīd*, *√chid*, *√mṛd* and *√śī* are not as common as the former. Another vital facet is the metaphoric usage of some specific terms alluding to their semantic conventionalities. For example, *śara* and *naḍa* / *nala* (viz. reed) act as euphemistic substitutes for the male organ or urinary duct in certain healing spells (1.3.7, 8) but in dysphemistic sense in the imprecations (6.138.5). Given the spells to emasculate a man, the sense-pregnant terms such as *klība* (eunuch), *opaśin* (lit. pillow-sitter), and *kurīrin* (girly-dresser) connote that crushing the testes and hacking the penis make him sexually impotent and/ or an effeminate. Moreover, the term '*vadhri*' (viz. having destroyed testicles) whose etymology (**√vedh-*, Skt. *√vadh*) itself has the primary Vedic meaning is of considerable significance in that context because its use (as if in 6.138), also supported by the way the compound '*muṣkabārha*' (viz. castrator) is employed (3.9.2), implies that the practice of emasculation already existed in the Vedic social milieu. This study would thus parse relevant spells to distinguish the prominent linguistic characteristics and further attempt to locate their original usages in the AV.