

# Aitareya Āraṇyaka and the Origin and Development of the Mahānāmnī Verses

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## 1. Introduction

THE verses called Mahānāmnīs along with the mantras called Purīṣapadas occur in the khila portion of the *Ṛgveda* (5.4.1-11) for the first time. They also form the basis of the Mahānāmnīyarcika in the *Sāmaveda Saṁhitā*. They appear in the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* (AiĀ) and are usually considered the fourth book (āraṇyaka) of this text. We find references to these verses in other Vedic texts such as the *Ṣaḍvīṁśa Brāhmaṇa* (ŚBr),<sup>1</sup> *Bṛhaddevatā* (BD),<sup>2</sup> and *Śāṅkhāyana-Gṛhya-Sūtra* (ŚGS).<sup>3</sup>

The Mahānāmnīs are nine in number and basically eulogize the deity Indra. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* informs us that Indra created a “great self” with these verses and hence they are named Mahānāmnīs.<sup>4</sup> Although they appear as one of the khila hymns, it is interesting to note that Gārgya Nārāyaṇa, the commentator of the *Āśvalāyana Śrautasūtra*, mentions the Mahānāmnīs separately, together with some

<sup>1</sup> See for example, ŚBr 4.5.6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Macdonell translates, “Mahānāmnī stanzas are mystical (*guhya*) and they are addressed to Indra: whosoever repeats (them) obtains a day of Brahmā which lasts for a thousand years.” (BD 8.98)

<sup>3</sup> See ŚGS 2.12.13.

<sup>4</sup> *Indro va etābhir mahān ātmānam nīramīmīta tasmān mahānāmnīyo . . .* (AB 5.7.2). This is followed by another story telling why they are also called śakvarī (in spite of the fact that they do not have seven pādas and are in anuṣṭubh meter).

other verses.<sup>5</sup> Kashikar too, opines (1946: 902) that the khilas in general belong to some lost śākhā, other than the one redacted by Śākalya, and were collected later. The reason for the appearance of the verses in the *AiĀ* is disputable due to the problem of authorship of that text, which will be dealt with in brief at the outset.

## 2. Mahānāmnīs in the *AiĀ*

The fourth āraṇyaka is merely a collection of the verses called Mahānāmnīs and Purīṣapadas. The fifth, that is, the last āraṇyaka is in sūtra-style, and explains the Mahāvratā, which has already been dealt with in the first āraṇyaka. The difference in nature between the first three and the last two āraṇyakas gives rise to the question of their authorship. The repeated subject matter in the first and last āraṇyaka (i.e. the description of the Mahāvratā) shall also be considered while dealing with this question. The problem about the authorship of the *AiĀ* was put forth by Oldenberg (1886) and was argued by Keith (1909).

In his commentary on *AiĀ*, Sāyaṇa says<sup>6</sup> that it is not at all erroneous to discuss the same topic of Mahāvratā twice (i.e. in the first and the fifth āraṇyaka) because the two āraṇyakas differ from one another in the same way as a brāhmaṇa and a sūtra differ. The first āraṇyaka is a brāhmaṇa and the fifth is a sūtra. Therefore the first āraṇyaka explains the rites along with the arthavāda and this arthavāda is absent in the fifth āraṇyaka. We also find ample mantras from other Vedic schools in the fifth āraṇyaka. Thus the fifth āraṇyaka is a sūtra and not a brāhmaṇa.

<sup>5</sup> *etasya iti śabdo nivṛt-praiṣa-puroruk-kuntāpa-vāḷakhilya-mahānāmnī-aitareyabrāhmaṇasahitasya śākalasya bāṣkalasya cāmnāyadvayasya etad āśvalāyanasūtrāṇi nāma . . .* (from the commentary of Gārgya Nārāyaṇa on *Āśvalāyana Śrauta-Sūtra* I.1.1).

<sup>6</sup> *nāyaṇi doṣaḥ | sūtrabrāhmaṇarūpeṇa tayor vibhedāt | pañcamāraṇyakam ṛṣiproktāni sūtram | prathamāraṇyakāni tv apauruṣeyaṇi brāhmaṇam | ata eva tatrārthavādaprapañcena sahitā vidhayaḥ śrūyante | pañcame tu na ko 'py arthavādo 'sti | śākhāntaragatamantrāś ca bahava upalabhyante | tasmād athaitasya samāmnāyasya ityādidvādaśādhyāyivat mahāvratasya pañcaviṃśatim ityādi pañcamāraṇyakāni sūtram eva |*

Ṣaḍguruśiṣya — a commentator of the *Sarvānukramaṇī* — on the other hand, informs us in his *Vedārthadīpikā*<sup>7</sup> that the fourth āraṇyaka belongs to Āśvalāyana.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Oldenberg and Keith on the AiĀ

In his Introduction to the *Āśvalāyana-Gr̥hya-Sūtra*,<sup>9</sup> Oldenberg refers to the above-mentioned passage of Ṣaḍguruśiṣya, which states that the fourth āraṇyaka belongs to Āśvalāyana. He further quotes Sāyaṇa's commentary on the *R̥gveda*, which mentions Śaunaka as the author of the fifth āraṇyaka.<sup>10</sup> Thus it seems that the tradition ascribes the fourth āraṇyaka to Āśvalāyana, and the fifth one to Śaunaka.

Oldenberg states that it is impossible to assume with Ṣaḍguruśiṣya that the Mahānāmni verses were composed by Āśvalāyana. The term *āśvalāyanasūtrakam* used by Ṣaḍguruśiṣya is more appropriate for the fifth āraṇyaka written in sūtra style; the Mahānāmni verses can never be called "sutra". He says,<sup>11</sup>

There seems to me, therefore, to be little doubt as to the fifth āraṇyaka really being the text referred to by Ṣaḍguruśiṣya, though I do not know how to explain his setting down this book as the fourth.

He further quotes another reference from Sāyaṇa's commentary on the *Sāmaveda*, which ascribes the fifth āraṇyaka to Āśvalāyana, and not to Śaunaka. By taking these facts into consideration, he concludes,

Instead of asserting, therefore, that of the two last āraṇyakas of the Aitareyinas the one is ascribed to Śaunaka, the other to Āśvalāyana, we must state the case otherwise: not two āraṇyakas were, according to Sāyaṇa and Ṣaḍguruśiṣya, composed by those sūtrakāras, but one, viz. the fifth, which forms a sort of supplement to the great body of sūtras of that caraṇa, and which is ascribed either to Śaunaka or to Āśvalāyana.

<sup>7</sup> This passage from the *Vedārthadīpikā* was first published by Max Müller. However, the second revised edition (1860: 235-39) has been referred to for the present paper.

<sup>8</sup> *dvādaśādhyāyakanī sūtrānī catuṣkagr̥hyameva ca | caturthāraṇyakānī ceti hyāśvalāyanasūtrakam ||*

<sup>9</sup> See Oldenberg 1886: 153ff.

<sup>10</sup> *pañcamāraṇyaka auṣṇihatrikasitir iti khaṇḍe śaunakena sūtritām . . .*

<sup>11</sup> For details, see Oldenberg 1886: 156-58.

Keith in his edition of *AiĀ*<sup>12</sup> deals with the statements made by Oldenberg about the authorship of the fourth and the fifth āraṇyaka. He argues that Oldenberg's view that the Mahānāmnī verses cannot be called sūtra is not correct. Instead, he argues that the Mahānāmnī verses may not have been composed by Āśvalāyana, but merely collected by him, and the fourth āraṇyaka "is sort of *Āśvalāyana Saṁhitā* like the Śākala Saṁhitā".<sup>13</sup> He says,

With reference to Oldenberg's remark (p. 157) that *Āśvalāyanasūtrakam* cannot refer to the Mahānāmnīs, I would observe that the expression refers to the Śrauta and Gṛhya-Sūtras with the āraṇyaka IV thrown in.<sup>14</sup>

He concludes,

It is impossible to argue that in Ṣaḍguruśiṣya's eyes the term *caturthāraṇyakam* covered the fifth book also, for the two are quite distinct and cannot ever have been combined into one book.

— 1909: 21

As evinced elsewhere, some citations from the *Vedārthadīpikā* of Ṣaḍguruśiṣya, however, make it amply clear that the existing fifth āraṇyaka was in fact the fourth āraṇyaka in Ṣaḍguruśiṣya's eyes.<sup>15</sup> By the term *caturthāraṇyaka* Ṣaḍguruśiṣya meant the fifth āraṇyaka, and not the Mahānāmnī verses. This evidence shows that Oldenberg was correct in his conjecture regarding the authorship of the present fifth āraṇyaka.

Another first-hand source is the *Mokṣapadāvṛtti*, the commentary of Ṣaḍguruśiṣya on the *AiĀ* itself. This commentary was not available to both Oldenberg and Keith.<sup>16</sup> Ṣaḍguruśiṣya incorporates the Mahānāmnīs and Purīṣapadas as a *sakṛdukti-adhyāya*, an additional chapter at the end of the third āraṇyaka. He further counts the fifth (sūtra-style) āraṇyaka as the fourth. This commentary, thus, presents

<sup>12</sup> See Keith's Introduction (1909: 18ff.).

<sup>13</sup> Keith 1909: 18.

<sup>14</sup> Keith 1909: 20 fn.

<sup>15</sup> See Khare 2009 and 2010 for details.

<sup>16</sup> Even the present author was unable to refer to this commentary in his earlier articles.

a tradition in which the Mahānāmnīs and Purīṣapadas were not counted as a separate book, although they were part of the *AiĀ*.

Though this evidence strongly establishes the present fifth āraṇyaka as the fourth in the eyes of Ṣaḍguruśiṣya, the origin of the Mahānāmnī verses remains unclear. There is no confusion in the tradition regarding the authorship of the first three āraṇyakas: Mahidāsa Aitareya had composed them. The question remains only about āraṇyakas IV and V: Who was the author and why were the Mahānāmnī verses added in the *AiĀ*.

According to Keith, for understanding some details in the fifth āraṇyaka, a knowledge of the *Āśvalāyana Śrauta-Sūtra* is necessary. This indicates that the fifth āraṇyaka presupposes the *Āśvalāyana Śrauta-Sūtra*. Thus, it can be said that the present fifth āraṇyaka — which was known as the fourth āraṇyaka in the tradition of Ṣaḍguruśiṣya — would have been authored by Āśvalāyana.

The problem that still remains unsolved is why Sāyaṇa ascribed the fifth āraṇyaka to Śaunaka if it was composed by Āśvalāyana. A simple answer (that was in the mind of Keith) can be given to this question. Macdonell has explained that the *Bṛhaddevatā* was the work of some pupil of Śaunaka, but it was credited to Śaunaka. Similarly, it can be said that some part (i.e. the fifth Āraṇyaka) of the *Āśvalāyana Śrauta-Sūtra* was credited to his teacher Śaunaka. This again matches with the story recorded by Ṣaḍguruśiṣya,<sup>17</sup> that the sūtra of Āśvalāyana was better than that of Śaunaka. Therefore Śaunaka, out of affection for Āśvalāyana, removed his own sūtra and made his followers accept the sūtra of Āśvalāyana. Thus the statement of Sāyaṇa mentioning the fifth āraṇyaka as of Śaunaka instead of Āśvalāyana is not a major problem.

#### 4. Employment of the Mahānāmnīs in the Vedic Ritual

A plausible explanation for the inclusion of the Mahānāmnīs in the *AiĀ* can be given on the basis of the employment of the verses in the

<sup>17</sup> *śaunakasya tu śiṣyo 'bhūd bhagavān āśvalāyanaḥ |*  
*. . . sahasrakhaṇḍani svakṛtani sūtrani brāhmaṇasamībham ||*  
*śiṣyāśvalāyanapṛītyai śaunakena vipāṭitam |*  
*uktani tat tatkṛtani sūtram asya vedasya cāsto iti ||*

Vedic sacrifices. It is interesting to see whether there is any relation between the Mahānāmnīs and the fifth āraṇyaka.

It can be clearly seen that both the Mahānāmnīs and Mahāvratā are related with the sattra, i.e. the Gavāmayana sacrifice. Kashikar (1977: 126 fn.) states that the Pṛṣṭhastotra in which six sāmans (*gāyatra*, *br̥hat*, *rathantara*, *bhadra*, and *rājana*) are combined is called Mahāvratā. The sacrifice, in which this Mahāvratā Pṛṣṭhastotra is used, gets the same name, i.e. Mahāvratā. The Mahānāmnī verses are also related with the Ṣoḍaśin sāman.<sup>18</sup>

The Pṛṣṭhya-ṣaḍaha is a six-day sacrifice coming before the Mahāvratā sacrifice. If the Śākvara-pṛṣṭha is used on the fifth day of this sacrifice, then the stotrīya-tṛca of the Mahānāmnīs becomes necessary. The three verses are grouped together and are recited with a pause (*avasāna*) in between (i.e. by reciting one-and-a-half verses together, then taking a pause followed by the recitation of the remaining one-and-a-half verses). After the implementation of nine Mahānāmnīs in this way, the Purīṣapadāni verses are recited.

This makes clear that the Mahānāmnī verses are necessary for the hotṛ in the Pṛṣṭha-ṣaḍaha only when the Udgātṛ uses the Śākvara Pṛṣṭha. These verses may not have been part of the proper *Śākala Saṁhitā* earlier as they are required optionally.

Thus a suggestion may be given that at an earlier time the Mahānāmnīs were not part of any Saṁhitā or khilas. They were considered a separate group of verses. Further, the verses regarding the Mahāvratā were to be recited in the *araṇya* (wilderness).<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the part of the Āśvalāyana Sūtra related to the Mahāvratā came to be included in the *AiĀ*. Later on, the Mahānāmnī verses were added to the *AiĀ* by observing their use in the Śrauta sacrifice. As they are used in the Pṛṣṭhya-ṣaḍaha, before the Mahāvratā sacrifice, they were treated as the fourth āraṇyaka. Thus the former fourth āraṇyaka (i.e. sūtra part) became today's fifth āraṇyaka.

<sup>18</sup> *tasya mahānāmnīyaḥ ṣoḍaśisāma bhavanti || vajro vai mahānāmnīyaḥ | vajraḥ ṣoḍaśiḥ | vajreṇaivasmai vajraṁ praharati stṛtyai (ŚBr 4.5.6-7).*

<sup>19</sup> *araṇya eva etad adhyeyam ity abhipretyādhyetāro 'raṇyakāṇḍe 'ntarbhāvvyādhiyate (Sāyaṇa's commentary on AiĀ 5.1.1).*

## 5. Mahānāmnīs in the Later Vedic Texts

The *Ṛgvidhāna* mentions what may be considered secondary employment of the verses. It states that these verses in combination with some other mantras should be recited by a person to cause rain.<sup>20</sup> They are also said to have some beneficial powers and powers to destroy the enemies.<sup>21</sup>

We find references to several *vratas* (vows) to be followed by a brahmacārin. The four *vratas* mentioned in the *Gautama Dharmasāstra* are Mahānāmnī, Mahāvratā, Upaniṣad, and Godāna. A brief outline of the Mahānāmnī vrata is as follows:

This shall be performed in the 13<sup>th</sup> year of age from birth. After setting the sacred fire and performing ājyahoma, he should change the sacred thread. Then the teacher says: *mahānāmnīvrataṁ saivatsaraṁ cara. Cariṣyāmi*, replies the disciple. He should then live for one year by observing the regular rules set down for a brahmacārin, and without shaving his hair. After that he again follows the ritual of setting fire and offering a few oblations to various deities. The teacher shall then tie the cloth on the face of the disciple thrice and keep him in the same position for a night. Next day he shall teach the verses to the disciple. After reciting the verses, the teacher shall remove the cloth and the disciple shall see the risen sun. This ritual is further followed by some more acts and ends in the evening.

## 6. Conclusion

As noted in the beginning of the paper, the verses under discussion are found in the khila portion of the *Ṛgveda*. Taking into consideration the opinion of Gārgya Nārāyaṇa, it may be concluded that these verses, although included in the khila portion, formed a separate category. The ritual of the Mahānāmnī-vrata, which was especially crafted for learning the verses, supports this opinion in a way. As the verses are absent in the tradition of the *Yajurveda*, the sūtras of this Veda do not tell us anything about the Mahānāmnī-vrata. In connection with the

<sup>20</sup> *vṛṣṭīkamo japec caitā āpo hi ṣṭha sanātanāḥ | oṁkārapūrvā vyāhṛtayo madhucchandasa āditaḥ | | sūktāny ante mahānāmnīyaḥ saivhitā sāmṛtā smṛtā (Ṛgvidhāna 4.127-28).*

<sup>21</sup> *mahānāmnīyaḥ paraṁ brahma śukraṁ jyotiḥ sanātanam | sapatnagṛhnyas ca puṇyas ca pāvamānyaḥ parāḥ smṛtāḥ (Ṛgvidhāna 4.126).*

ritualistic employment of the Mahānāmnī verses, it may be concluded that these verses were recited as an option, to be selected by the Hotṛ according to the sāman sung by the Udgātṛ. This practice connects the verses with the Mahāvratā sacrifice.

The above-mentioned ritualistic practice as well as the tradition of learning these verses outside the village would have promoted the incorporation of the Mahānāmnīs and the sūtra portion related to the Mahāvratā (probably composed by Āśvalāyana) in the *AiĀ*. From the commentary of Ṣaḍguruśiṣya, we have at least one tradition before us that presents a different understanding of this text which supports the view that the authorship of the complete āraṇyaka cannot be credited to Aitareya Mahidāsa: The fourth and fifth books are later additions.

The Mahānāmnīs were also used by later Vedic texts such as the *Ṛgvidhāna* for some secondary purposes. Their employment in a rain charm would have been based on the fact that the verses praise Indra.

Several vratas and practices have vanished in the course of time. Similar is the case of the Vedavratas. Disciples learning the *Ṛgveda* by the traditional method learn the Mahānāmnī verses even today, but now usually they do not observe any vrata before beginning the process of learning.

## 7. Colophon

I am thankful to Prof. Timothy Lubin (Washington and Lee University) for his suggestions after the presentation at the 15<sup>th</sup> World Sanskrit Conference, New Delhi.

## Abbreviations and Primary References

<i>AB</i>	<i>Aitareya Brāhmaṇa</i> , ed. K. Agashe, 1896.
<i>AiĀ</i>	<i>Aitareya Āraṇyaka</i> , ed. A.B. Keith, 1909.
<i>BD</i>	<i>Bṛhaddevatā</i> , ed. A.A. Macdonell, 1904.
<i>Ṛgvidhāna</i>	<i>Ṛgvidhāna</i> , ed. M.S. Bhat, 1987.
<i>ṢBr</i>	<i>Ṣaḍvīṃśa Brāhmaṇa</i> , ed. B.R. Sharma, 1967.
<i>ŚGS</i>	<i>Śāikhāyana-Gṛhya-Sūtra</i> , ed. S.R. Sehgal, 1960.

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