

## A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE VEDAS

### PREFACE

The Vedas are the basic scriptures of Hinduism. However, not much has been written about them in English, giving a brief but panoramic view of the whole Vedic literature in simple style. Hence this attempt.

In addition, this booklet tries to:

1. Show that the Vedas contain all the ideas that appear in later literature pertaining to Vedānta, bhakti and allied sciences;
2. Clear the misconception that they teach polytheism, tribal beliefs like totemism or nature worship.

If the study of this little book can rouse the curiosity of the reader to know more about them, the writer feels gratified.

Swami Harshananda

## Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation

अ, a-o in son,	ठ ṭ h-th in ant-hill
आ , ā -a in master,	ड ḍ -d in den
इ i-i in if,	ढ ḍ h-dh in godhood
ई ī -ee in feel,	ण ṇ -n in under
उ u-u in full,	त t-t in French
ऊ ū -oo in boot,	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ -somewhat between r and ri,	द d-th in then
	ध dh-the in breathe
ए e-ay in May,	न n-n in not
ऐ ai-y in my,	प p-p in pen
ओ o-o in oh,	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
औ au-ow in now,	ब b-b in bag
क k-k in keen,	भ bh-bh in abhor
ख kh-ckh in blockhead,	म m-m in mother
ग g-g (hard) in go,	य y-y in yard
घ gh-gh in log-hut,	र r-r in run
ङ ṅ -ng in singer,	ल l-l in luck
च c-ch in chain,	व v-v in avert
छ ch-chh in catch him,	श ś -sh in reich (German)
ज j-j in judge,	ष ṣ -sh in show
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog,	स s-in sun
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French,,	ह h-in hot
ट ṭ -t in ten,	
◦ ṁ -m in sum,	:ḥ -h in half

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## INTRODUCTION

The word `Veda', derived from the root vid (`to know'), indicates a vast body of sacred and esoteric knowledge concerning the eternal spiritual values revealed to the great ones called ṛ ṣ is (men of wisdom, sages) in the depths of their meditation. The Hindu religious tradition has accorded the Vedas the highest place in its canonical literature. As such, they are revered as the basic scriptures of Hinduism.

It is extremely difficult to fix the date of the Vedas. The dates assigned by the various scholars vary as widely as 25,000 B.C. to 1000 B.C. However the general consensus among most of the Indian scholars is to consider the Harappa-Mohenjodaro culture (c. 4000 B.C. ) to be a later phase of the Vedic culture. This places the date of the Ṛ g-veda, the earliest of the Vedas, around 10,000 B.C.

For centuries, the Vedas have been handed down to the posterity by oral tradition. Hence the name ś ruti, `what is heard'. And, they have been mainly utilized in the performance of yajñas and yā gas (sacrifices), which were the most common form of early Vedic religion. Such utilization of the Vedas in the sacrificial processes naturally led to its division based upon the convenience of the chief priests conducting the sacrifices.

A compilation of all the hymns used by the hotā -priest to invite the various deities to the sacrifice became the Ṛ g-veda. All the liturgical parts of the Vedas, useful to the adhvaryu-priest, the chief executor of the sacrificial rites, brought together, formed the Yajur-veda. Collection of all the musical chants, especially those associated with the Soma group of sacrifices, and to be sung by the udgā ṛ -priest, the singer, was named as Sā ma-veda. The rest, a sort of miscellaneous appendix and addenda, became the Atharva-veda and was assigned to the brahmā -priest, considered as the supervisor over the whole sacrificial process.

As per the annals of the Hindu orthodoxy, the great sage Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Dvaipā yana Vyā sa is said to have effected this division by collecting all the mantras extant during his time, and editing them into four groups: Ṛ k, Yajus, Sā man and Atharvan. He

taught them to his four chief disciples: Paila (Ṛ g- veda), Vaiś ampā yana (Yajur-veda), Jaimini (Sā ma-veda) and Sumantu (Atharva-veda). This is how these four Vedas took shape.

The Vedas are divided in another way too: Mantra and Brā hmaṇ a. Saṁ hitā is the name given to the collection of the Mantras. The Brā hmaṇ a includes in itself two more sections, the Íraṇ yaka and the Upaniṣ ad. If the Mantras comprise the hymns, the Brā hmaṇ as contain liturgies in prose. The Ā raṇ yakas teach about meditations based on symbolical interpretations of the liturgical rites. The Upaniṣ ad may roughly be classified as philosophical treatises dealing with the ultimate problems of life.

Conventionally speaking, it is the Saṁ hitā that is indicated by the word Veda. For instance, Ṛ g-veda means only the Ṛ k-saṁ hitā or the Ṛ g-veda-saṁ hitā . The Brā hmaṇ as, the Ā raṇ yakas and the Upaniṣ ads of the Ṛ g-veda have different and independent names and are considered more like its appendages.

These Saṁ hitā s, in course of time, branched off, leading to the formation of ś ā khā s or recensions. The origin of these ś ā khā s probably lies in the fact that each of the principal sages like Paila or Vaiś ampā yana had several disciples. These disciples or their successors might have done some editing and readjustment of the Vedic mantras to suit the needs of the rites which they had to perform and upon which local culture too might have exerted its influence.

A brief account of the contents of the four Vedas may now be attempted here.

## **Ṛ GVEDA-SAMHITĀ**

Of all the four Vedic Saṁ hitā s, the Ṛ gveda-Saṁ hitā is the oldest and has a pre-eminent place in the Vedic literature. It is a collection of sū ktas or hymns revealed to various ṛ ṣ is or sages at different periods of time. Consequently we can notice a variety of styles of language, grammar, ideas as also historical and cultural factors.

Though it is said to have had 21 ś ā khā s, only five are known to be extant: Ś ā kala, Bā ṣ kala, Ā ś valā yana, Ś ā ṇ khā yana and Mā ṇ ḍ ū keya. Except for the order of arrangement of the sū ktas there do not seem to be any substantial variations among them.

Since ancient days, two methods of dividing this Veda are in vogue. In the first, it is divided into eight aṣṭākas. Each aṣṭāka is again subdivided into vargas, containing mantras. This mode of division has been done obviously with a view to facilitating memorization, since the number of vargas in each aṣṭāka and the mantras in each varga are more or less the same. A total of 10,552 mantras are spread over 2,024 vargas, included in the 64 adhyāyas of the 8 aṣṭākas.

In the second method, the whole Saṁhitā has been divided into ten maṇḍalas. The maṇḍalas are subdivided into anuvākas, the anuvākas into sūktas and the sūktas into mantras. The number of anuvākas is 85, that of the sūktas 1,028, the total number of mantras being, of course, the same.

The latter method seems to be the more ancient one and has universal approval among the modern Vedic scholars.

There seems to be some method and order in the arrangement of the sūktas into the ten maṇḍalas. The six maṇḍalas (two to seven) contain sūktas revealed to the ṛṣis of the same generic group (varṇśā). For instance, if the seers of the sūktas in the second maṇḍala belong to the lineage of Gr̥tsamada, those in the third belong to the descendants of Viśvāmitra and so on.

The first and the eighth maṇḍalas contain respectively the sūktas of Śatarcins and Pragāthas. The sūktas of the ninth maṇḍala are all in praise of a single deity-Soma Pavamāna-and are classified according to their metres. The last, the tenth maṇḍala, is a miscellany of sūktas inclined more towards metaphysical subjects.

The topics dealt with in the Ṛgvedasaṁhitā fall roughly into three groups. The first group deals with the deities like Agni, Indra, Varuṇa, and others. The second group is concerned with philosophical speculations like the origin of the universe and the real nature of human beings. The third group deals with several secular subjects like marriage, wars of kings, eulogy of generosity and so on.

The Vedic deities are usually enumerated as 33-8 Vasus, 11 Rudras, 12 ḍityas, Indra and Prajāpati. These deities are assigned to the three regions of the earth (pṛthivī), heavens (dyaus) and the intermediary space (antarikṣa). Though they appear like personifications of forces of nature, they are all actually facets of Brahman, the Supreme Truth. The mantra in which the well-known statement, ekaṁ

sat, viprā ḥ bahudhā vadanti [‘Truth is one; sages call It by various names.’] (1.164.46) occurs, is proof enough of this fact.\* However, it may be noted that Indra, Agni, Varuṇ a and Mitra have been given the pride of place in the hymns.

Coming to the philosophical speculations of this Veda, we find that it is the origin and repository of almost all the later ideas of Vedā nta including jñā na (knowledge) and bhakti (devotion), though some of them are in a seed form. This forces us to concede that it is not a book of laudatory hymns only as some try to make it out.

As already pointed out above, it teaches eka-devatā -vā da or monotheism and not polytheism, as is often mistakenly assumed. However, advocacy of saguṇ opā sanā (worship of God with form and qualities) is predominant.

God creates this world out of Himself (10.81.2-4) and rules over it (10.82.1; 6.19.10; 6.45.20). He is omnipresent (1.13.10), omniscient (6.7.6; 8.25.9) and omnipotent (6.30.1; 2.29.3; 3.59.1). He is ever perfect (6. 24. 7; 6. 11. 4). But He is infinitely compassionate (2. 34. 5) and easily approachable by the devotees (8. 32. 15). He is our dearest friend (10. 80. 2) and grants us immortality (6. 45. 6; 5. 47. 7).

As regards the actual process of creation, we find two streams of thought, creation and evolution, both of which have been found in the later Vedā ntic literature.

Though the existence of the soul as an eternal entity is accepted and amṛ tatva or immortality is prayed for, the life here and now is not relegated to the background. Life here and life hereafter have been nicely harmonized.

From the group of sū ktas dealing with the secular side of life, we can get an inkling into the nature of the society of those times. Social life was permeated by spiritual consciousness. But people strongly believed in samanvaya or harmonizing the life of this world with the one in the next. Satya (truth) and dharma (righteousness) are extolled and amṛ tatva (immortality) as the goal of life accepted. Varṇ a system had already taken roots. Monogamy, polygamy and svayaṁvara system (that of a bride choosing her husband)-all existed side by side. Agriculture and animal husbandry were the chief means of livelihood. Equitable distribution of wealth was advocated. Civilization was well-developed and fine arts encouraged. Priests and kings were powerful. System of sacrifices had evolved to a high degree of perfection.

Hindu tradition strongly advocates a knowledge of the ṛ ṣ i, the devatā and the chandas of any mantra before using it in the religious rites. Then only will it be effective. Ṛ ṣ i is the sage to whom the mantra was revealed; devatā is the deity to whom the mantra is addressed; and chandas is the metre in which it is composed. According to one calculation the number of ṛ ṣ i exceeds 800 whereas the number of chandas is 19 including the minor variations.

The Brā hmaṇ as, Ā raṇ yakas and the Upaniṣ ads of this Veda are:

1. Aitareya and Kauṣ ṭ i taki Brā hmaṇ as;
2. Aitareya and Ś ā ṇ khā yana íraṇ yakas; and,
3. Aitareya and Kauṣ ṭ i taki Upaniṣ ads.

### YAJURVEDA-SAMHITĀ

It is a collections of yajus, the mantras in prose which are specially useful to the adhvaryu-priest in the performance of sacrifices.

The Yajurveda Samhitā is in two major forms: the Kṛ ṣ ṇ a and the Ś ukla, meaning the Black and the White. It is rather difficult to explain why these two major branches got these names. Though a Samhitā [and hence should have been purely in poetry] the former is a mixture of prose and poetry and hence not pure. So, it has been called Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, the Black one. In contrast, the latter being entirely in poetry, is Ś ukla, the White one. This is the first explanation. Being more ancient, the former is rather difficult to comprehend and so is Kṛ ṣ ṇ a or Black. The latter is of more recent origin and hence easier to grasp. So it is Ś ukla, the White one. This is the second explanation.

Though the Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Yajurveda Samhitā is reputed to have had 85 ś ā khā s or recensions, only four are available now: a.Taittirī ya; b.Maitrā yaṇ ṭ i ya; c. Kaṭ ha; d.Kapisthala.

The Taittirī ya Samhitā which is widely prevalent in South India, has 7 kā ṇ ḍ as or books, 44 prapā ṭ hakas or chapters, and 651 anuvā kas or mantras. It deals mainly with the detailed descriptions of sacrifices like Pauroḍ ā ś a, Yā jamā na, Vā japeya, Rā jasū ya, Darś apū ṇ amā sa and Somayā gas.

The other three ś ā khā s are not so well-known though they too deal with

similar sacrifices. The last of these, the Kapisthala, as available now, seems to be incomplete.

Associated with the Taittirī ya Saṁhitā are the Taittirī ya Brāhmaṇa, Taittirī ya Āraṇyaka and the Taittirī ya Upaniṣad. The well-known Kaṭhapaniṣad also belongs to the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda, but to the Kaṭha recension.

The Śukla Yajurveda Saṁhitā, also known as the Vājaseyī Saṁhitā, is said to have been collected and edited by the famous sage Yājñavalkya. It is entirely in verse and resembles the Ṛgveda Saṁhitā in form. However, there are no sūktas in this. Though 17 śākhās of this Saṁhitā are said to have existed, only two—the Kāṇva and the Mādhyandina—are available now. The former, more prevalent in the South, has 40 adhyāyas or chapters, 328 anuvākas or sections, and 2,086 mantras. The latter, more common in the North, has 40 adhyāyas, 328 anuvākas, and 1,975 mantras.

Like the Taittirī ya Saṁhitā, this Saṁhitā also deals mainly with sacrifices like Agniṣṭoma, Vājapeya and Rājāsūya.

The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the biggest of the Brāhmaṇas, and the Bṛhadāraṇyaka are the Brāhmaṇa and the Īraṇyaka attached to the Śukla Yajurveda. Īśāvāsyapaniṣad and Bṛhadāraṇyakapaniṣad are the Upaniṣads of this Veda.

## **SĀMAVEDA-SAMHITĀ**

The Sāmaveda Saṁhitā has been highly extolled in our holy books. However, it is not considered as an independent work. 'Sā' means ṛk, a mantra of the Ṛgveda. 'Ama' means various kinds of musical notes. Hence a 'sāman' is a mantra of the Ṛgveda Saṁhitā set to music. All such mantras of the Ṛgveda which are useful to the udgātṛ-priest, have been brought together in this work.

Though it is said to have 1,000 śākhās, only three are available now: Kauthuma, Rājāyanīya and Jaiminīya.

This Veda is divided into two parts: Ārcikā and Uttarārcikā. The former contains 585 mantras and the latter 964, making a total 1,549. Out of these, except 75 mantras, the rest are taken from the Ṛgveda Saṁhitā. As many as 272 mantras have

been repeated twice. If these repetitions are also taken into account, then the number of mantras becomes 1,821. Another recension puts it at 1,875.

Unlike the mantras of the other three Vedas, the mantras of the Sā maveda, known simply as sāmans, have seven svaras or musical scales, identical with the seven scales of classical music. It can thus be inferred that the origin of Indian classical music lies in the Sā maveda.

There are several varieties of singing the sāmans and they are given special names like Rathantara-sā ma, Bṛ hat-sā ma and so on. It is a difficult art to learn and needs expert guidance.

Nine Brā hmaṇ as are attached to this Veda. Tā ṇ ḍ ya-mahā -brā hmaṇ a is the biggest and the most important of them.

Only one Ā raṇ yaka of this Veda is available now: Talavakā ra or Jaiminī ya Ā raṇ yaka.

Two well-known Upaniṣ ads, the Chā ndogya and the Kena [also called Talavakā ropaniṣ ad ] are also attached to the Sā maveda.

## **ATHARVA-VEDA-SAMHITĀ**

Also known as Brahmaveda, since it is assigned to the brahmā -priest, the Atharva-veda-samhitā has some special features because of which it stands apart from the other three Vedas, specially from the Ṛ gveda Samhitā . It deals more with the things here and now, than the hereafter, and with the sacrifices which are a means to them. Major part of this Veda is concerned with diseases and their cure, rites for prolonging life, rites for fulfilling one's desires, building construction, trade and commerce, statecraft, penances and propitiatory rites, as also black magic, though high philosophical ideas much nearer to those of the Upaniṣ ads are also found. Even the literary style is more sophisticated. Hence it is that some scholars believe that this work is chronologically of a later origin and was admitted into the comity of Vedic literature at a later date.

From the ancient times, nine ś ā khā s of this Veda are known to have existed, but only two are extant: Pippalā da and Ś aunaka. It is only the latter that is available in a complete form.

The Atharvaveda Saṁhitā is divided into 4 prapāṭhakas or books, comprising 20 kāṇḍas or chapters. Each kāṇḍa is again subdivided into sūktas or hymns, and the sūktas into mantras. There are 6,077 mantras, in 736 sūktas spread over 20 kāṇḍas in 4 prapāṭhakas. The last kāṇḍa, i.e., the 20th, has borrowed heavily from the Ṛgveda Saṁhitā .

This Veda designates God the Absolute not only as Brahman but also by some interesting names like Skambha, Ucchiṣṭa and Vrātya which are peculiar only to it. The whole universe has emerged out of Him due to His will and is established in Him. He is the Lord of the whole creation. The sun, called 'Rohita' (the 'Red One') is a symbol of His power. And He is the indwelling spirit of human beings also. Those who realize this, go beyond all fear. This Veda also refers to heaven and hell, as also virtue and sin. The qualities like satya (truth), dīkṣā (discipline) and tapas (austerity) that help man to attain perfection are also mentioned.

This work gives us an interesting picture of the society of its times. The land in which the people lived, extended from Gāndhāra (Afghanistan) to Magadha (Bihar) and Vaṅga (Bengal). The varṇa system had been well-established. The first three varṇas were powerful. Trade and commerce were prosperous though agriculture was the mainstay of the people. Sometimes the brāhmaṇas were harassed by the powerful kṣatriya kings. The cow was highly venerated and godāna (gift of a cow) was considered meritorious. The institution of marriage was similar to that in the Ṛgvedic times.

No Āraṇyaka of the Atharva-veda has come to light so far. Only one Brāhmaṇa, the Gopatha Brāhmaṇa, has been discovered. The three well-known Upaniṣads-the Prasāna, the Muṇḍaka and the Māṇḍūkya -belong to this Veda.

## EPILOGUE

As already stated, the Vedic Saṁhitās had to be committed to memory and were passed on orally from generation to generation. Even now they have been preserved in a pure form. This was possible only due to the unique system of chanting that had been evolved, consisting of pada-pāṭha, krama-pāṭha, jaṭā-pāṭha,

and ghana-pā ṭ ha, which are all various chanting modes.

The Vedas, considered 'apauruṣ eya' (not man-made but revealed), are rather difficult to understand due to the archaic form of language and terminology. Hence, the six Vedā ṅ gas (limbs of Veda), six subsidiary sciences that help unfold the Vedic wisdom, came into existence. They are: Ś ṭ kṣ ā , Vyā karaṇ a, Chandas, Nirukta, Jyotiṣ a and Kalpa. Ś ṭ kṣ ā deals with the modes of chanting. Vyā karaṇ a is Vedic grammar. Chandas is concerned with the details of the metres of Vedic poetry. Nirukta gives the meanings and explanations of Vedic words. Jyotiṣ a, though a work of astronomy, is more directly concerned with the times and periods suitable for the performance of the Vedic sacrifices. Kalpa, in the form of sū tras or aphorisms, has four branches ś rauta, gr̥hya, dharma and ś ulba. It deals with all aspects of sacrificial rites and smaller religious rites performed at home.

In understanding the Vedic literature, bhā ṣ yas or commentaries have done yeomen service. There have been a galaxy of commentators over the centuries, among whom Sā yaṇ ā cā rya (14th cent.) holds a unique place, not only because of the sheer volume of work but also because of the quality. Mention may also be made of some of the other commentators: Skandasvā min (7th century A.D. ); Veṅ kaṭ a-mā dhava (11th century A.D. ); Bhaṭ ṭ abhā skara (11th century A.D. ) and Ā nandatī rtha (Madhvā cā rya) (13th cent. A.D. ). However, their bhā ṣ yas as available now are incomplete.

A study of the Vedas is a fascinating and highly rewarding experience.