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 *rśis* (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 up the date of the Vedas. The dates assigned to it 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 *Rg-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 *Sruti*, ‘what is heard’. And, they have been mainly utilized in the performance of Yajñas and Yāgas (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 *Rg-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 Udgātr-priest, the singer, was named as *Sāma-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 sacrifical process.

As per the annals of the Hindu orthodoxy, the great sage Krṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa is said to have effected this division by collecting all the Mantras extant during his time, and editing them into four groups: Rk, Yajus, Sāman and Atharvan. He taught them to his four chief disciples: Paila (*Rg-veda*), Vaiśampāyana (*Yajur-veda*), Jaimini (*Sāma-veda*) and Sumantu (*Atharva-veda*). This is how these four Vedas took shape.

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The Vedas are divided in another way too: Mantra and Brāhmaṇa. Saṃhitā is the name given to the collection of the Mantras. The Brāhmaṇa includes in itself two more sections, the Āranyaka and the Upaniṣad. If the Mantras comprise the hymns, the Brāhmaṇas contain liturgies in prose. The Āranyakas teach about meditations based on symbolical interpretations of the liturgical rites. The Upaniṣads may roughly be classified as philosophical treatises dealing with the ultimate problems of life.

Conventionally speaking, it is the Saṃhitā that is indicated by the word Veda. For instance, Rg-veda means only the Rk-saṃhitā or the Rg-veda-saṃhitā. The Brāhmaṇas, the Āranyakas and the Upaniṣads of the Rg-veda have different and independent names and are considered more like its appendages.

These Saṃhitās, in course of time, branched off, leading to the formation of Śākhās or recensions. The origin of these Śākhās probably lies in the fact that each of the principal sages like Paila or Vaiśampāyana 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.

Rgveda-saṃhitā

Of all the four Vedic Saṃhitās, the Rgveda-saṃhitā is the oldest and has a pre-eminent place in the Vedic literature. It is a collection of Śūktas or hymns revealed to various Rsis 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 Śākhās, only 5 are known to be extant: Śākala, Bāṣkala, Āśvalāyana, Śāṅkhāyana and Maṇḍukeya. Except for the order of arrangement of the Śūktas 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 Aṣṭakas. Each Aṣṭaka is again subdivided into eight Adhyāyas, and the Adhyāyas 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 Aṣṭaka 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 Aṣṭakas.

In the second method, the whole Saṃhitā has been divided into ten Mandalas. The Maṇḍalas are subdivided into Anuvākas, the Anuvākas into Śūktas and the Śūktas into Mantras. The number of Anuvākas is 85, that of the Śūktas 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 Śūktas into the ten Maṇḍalas. The six Maṇḍalas (2 to 7) contain Śūktas revealed to the Rsis of the same generic group (vamśa). For instance, if the seers of the Śūktas in the 2nd Maṇḍala belong to the lineage of Grtsamada, those in the 3rd belong to the descendants of Viśvāmitra and so on.

The 1st and the 8th Maṇḍalas contain respectively the Śūktas of Śatarcins and
Pragāthas. The Sūktas of the 9th Mandala are all in praise of a single deity — Soma Pavamāṇa — and are classified according to their metres. The last, the 10th, Mandala, is a miscellany of Sūktas inclined more towards metaphysical subjects.

The topics dealt with in the Rgveda samhitā 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 Ādityas, Indra and Prajāpati. These deities are assigned to the three regions of the earth (prthvi), 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, ekam sat, vipraḥ 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, Varuṇa 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 Vedanta including Jñāna (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-vāda or monotheism and not polytheism, as is often mistakenly assumed. However, advocacy of Sagunopāsana [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 Vedantic literature.

Though the existence of the soul as an external entity is accepted and amṛtatva 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 Sūktas 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 amṛtatva (immortality) as the goal of life accepted. Vāṇa system had already taken roots. Monogamy, polygamy and

\[\text{vide 7.58.2; 10.114.5; 2.1.11; 8.1.27; 2.13.6 also.}\]

2.
svayamvara 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 Rṣi, the Devatā and the Chandas of any Mantra before using it in the religious rites. Then only will they be effective. Rṣi 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 Rṣis exceeds 800 whereas the number of Chandas is 19 including the minor variations.

The Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and the Upaniṣads of this Veda are:
1. Aitareya and Kaśītaki Brāhmaṇas;
2. Aitareya and Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyakas; and,
3. Aitareya and Kaśītaki Upaniṣads.

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 Kṛṣṇa and the Śukla, 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 Kṛṣṇa, the Black one. In contrast, the latter being entirely in poetry, is Śukla, the White one. This is the first explanation. Being more ancient, the former is rather difficult to comprehend and so is Kṛṣṇa or Black. The latter is of more recent origin and hence easier to grasp. So it is Śukla, the White one. This is the second explanation. The Yajurveda that was revealed to Yājñavalkya by Sūrya (the Sun-god) came to be known as Śukla ('the Bright') and, in contrast to that, the earlier one was called Kṛṣṇa ('the Black or Dark') by the followers of Yājñavalkya, who had fallen out with his Guru Vaiśampāyana, the first promulgator of the Yajur-veda. This is the third explanation.

Though the Kṛṣṇa-yajurveda-samhitā is reputed to have had 85 Śākhās or recensions, only four are available now:
a. Taittirīya;

The Taittirīya-samhitā, which is widely prevalent in South India, has 7 Kāṇḍas or books, 44 Prāparaṇakas or chapters, and 651 Anuvākas or Mantras. It deals mainly with the detailed descriptions of sacrifices like Pauroṣaḍa, Yājamāna, Vājapeya, Rājasūya, Darśapūrnamāsa, and Somayāgas.

The other three Śākhās 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 Taittirīya-samhitā are the Taittirīya-brāhmaṇa, Taittirīya-āraṇaka and the Taittirīya-upaniṣad. The well-known Kaṭhopaniṣad also belongs to the Kṛṣṇa-Yajurveda, but to the Kaṭha recension.
The *Sukla-yajurveda-samhitā*, also known as the *Vājasaneyi-samhitā*, is said to have been collected and edited by the famous sage Yājñavalkya. It is entirely in verse and resembles the *Ṛgveda-samhitā* in form. However, there are no Sūktas in this. Though 17 Sākhās of this Samhitā are said to have existed, only two — the *Kārṇa* and the *Mādhyandīna* — 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, 303 Anuvākas, and 1,975 Mantras.

Like the *Taittirīya-samhitā*, this Samhitā also deals mainly with sacrifices like Agniśoma, Vājapeya and Rājasūya.

The *Satapatha-brāhmaṇa*, the biggest of the Brāhmaṇas, and the *Brhad-āranyaka* are the Brāhmaṇa and the Āranyaka attached to the *Sukla-yajurveda*. *Īśavāsyopaniṣad* and *Brhadāranyakopaniṣad* are the Upaniṣads of this Veda.

**Sāmaveda-samhitā**

The *Sāmaveda-samhitā* has been highly extolled in our holy books. However, it is not considered as an independent work. ‘Sā’ means Rk, a Mantra of the *Ṛgveda*. ‘Ama’ means various kinds of musical notes. Hence a Sāman is a Mantra of the *Ṛgveda-samhitā* set to music. All such Mantras of the *Ṛgveda* which are useful to the Udgaṭ-priest, have been brought together in this work.

Though it is said to have 1,000 Sākhās, only three are available now: *Kauthuma*, *Rāṇāyanīya* and *Jaiminiya*.

This Veda is divided into two parts: Ārciķā and Uttarārckiķā. 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-samhitā*. 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 *Sāmaveda*, 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 *Sāmaveda*.

There are several varieties of singing the Sāmans and they are given special names like Rathantara-sāma, Brhat-sāma and so on. It is a difficult art to learn and needs expert guidance.

Nine Brāhmaṇas are attached to this Veda. *Tāṇḍya-mahā-brāhmaṇa* is the biggest and the most important of them.

Only one Āranyaka of this Veda is available now: *Talavakāra* or *Jaiminīya Āranyaka*.

Two well-known Upaniṣads, the *Chāndogya* and the *Kena* [also called *Talavakāropaniṣad*] are also attached to the *Sāmaveda*.

**Atharva-veda-samhitā**

Also known as *Brahmaveda*, since it is assigned to the Brahma-priest, the *Atharva-veda-samhitā* has some special features because of which it stands apart from the other three Vedas, specially from the *Ṛgveda-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 Upaniṣads 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 Śākhās
of this Veda are known to have existed,
but only two are extant: Pippalāda and
Śaunaka. It is only the latter that is
available in a complete form.

The Ātharva-veda-samhitā 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 Rgveda-samhitā.

This Veda designates God the
Absolute not only as Brahma but also
by some interesting names like Skambha,
Ucchiṣṭa and Vṛtya 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 iapās
(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 Āṅga (Bengal). The Varna
system had been well-established. The
first three Varnas were called Āyas, and
the last as Śūdras. But people lived in
harmony. Kings were powerful. Trade
and commerce were prosperous though
agriculture was the mainstay of the
people. Sometimes the Brāhmanas 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 Rgvedic times.

No Āraṇyaka of the Atharva-veda has
come to light so far. Only one Brāhmana,
the Gopatha - brāhmana, has been
discovered. The three well-known
Upaniṣads — the Praśna, the Mundaka
and the Māndūkya — belong to this
Veda.

As already stated, the Vedic Samhitās
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-pātha, krama-pātha,
jaṭā-pātha, and ghana-pātha, which are
all various chanting modes.

The Vedas, considered apauruṣeya
[not man-made but revealed], are rather
difficult to understand due to the archaic
form of language and terminology. Hence,
the six Vedāṅgas [limbs of Veda], six
subsidiary sciences that help unfold the
Vedic wisdom, came into existence. They
are: Śikṣā, Vyākaraṇa, Chandas, Nirukta,
Jyotiṣa and Kalpa. Śikṣā deals with the
modes of chanting. Vyākaraṇa is Vedic
grammar. *Chandas* is concerned with the details of the metres of Vedic poetry. *Nirukta* gives the meanings and explanations of Vedic words. *Jyotisa*, 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 Sūtras or aphorisms, has four branches — *śravaṇa, gṛhya, dharma* and *śulba* — and deals with all aspects of sacrificial rites and smaller religious rites performed at home.

In understanding the Vedic literature, Bhāṣyas or commentaries have done yeomen service. There have been a galaxy of commentators over the centuries, among whom Śāyanācārya (14th cent.) holds a unique place, not only because of sheer volume of work but also because of the quality.

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

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**THE HYMN OF CREATION**

Existence was not then, nor non-existence,
The world was not, the sky beyond was neither.
What covered the mist? Of whom was that?
What was in the depths of darkness thick?

Death was not then, nor immortality,
The night was neither separate from day,
But motionless did *That* vibrate
Alone, with Its own glory one —
Beyond *That* nothing did exist.

—from the ‘Nāsadīya Sūkta’, *Rg-veda*, 10.129
[Translated by Swami Vivekananda. For the complete text, see the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 6:178]