

A BIRD'S EYE-VIEW OF THE VEDAS

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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 ṛṣis (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 Śruti, '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 Udgātṛ-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 sacrificial process.

As per the annals of the Hindu orthodoxy, the great sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa is said to have effected this division by collecting all the Mantras extant during his time, and editing them into four groups: Ṛk, 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. Saṁhitā is the name given to the collection of the Mantras. The Brāhmaṇa includes in itself two more sections, the Āraṇyaka and the Upaniṣad. If the Mantras comprise the hymns, the Brāhmaṇas contain liturgies in prose. The Āraṇyakas teach about meditations based on symbolical interpretations of the liturgical rites. The Upaniṣad may roughly be classified as philosophical treatises dealing with the ultimate problems of life.

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

These Saṁhitās, 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-saṁhitā

Of all the four Vedic Saṁhitās, the *Rgveda-saṁhitā* is the oldest and has a pre-eminent place in the Vedic literature. It is a collection of Sūktas or hymns revealed to various Ṛṣis 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 *Māṇḍūkeya*. Except for the order of arrangement of the Sūktas 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 Vargās, containing Mantras. This mode of division has been done obviously with a view to facilitating memorization, since the number of Vargās 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 Vargās, included in the 64 Adhyāyas of the 8 Aṣṭakas.

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 (2 to 7) contain Sūktas revealed to the Ṛṣis of the same generic group (*varṁśa*). For instance, if the seers of the Sūktas in the 2nd Maṇḍala belong to the lineage of Ṛṣisamada, those in the 3rd belong to the descendants of Viśvāmitra and so on.

The 1st and the 8th Maṇḍalas contain respectively the Sūktas of Śatarcins and

Pragāthas. The Sūktas of the 9th Maṇḍala are all in praise of a single deity — Soma Pavamāna — and are classified according to their metres. The last, the 10th, Maṇḍala, is a miscellany of Sūktas inclined more towards metaphysical subjects.

The topics dealt with in the *Rgveda samhita* 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, viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti* ['Truth is one; sages call it by various names.'] (1.164.46) occurs, is proof enough of this fact.¹ 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 *Saguṇopāsanā* [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. Varna system had already taken roots. Monogamy, polygamy and

vide 7.58.2; 10.114.5; 2.1.11; 8.1.27; 2.13.6 also.

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 Ṛṣi, the Devatā and the Chandas of any Mantra before using it in the religious rites. Then only will they be effective. Ṛṣi 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 Ṛṣis 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 *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇas*;
2. *Aitareya* and *Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyakas*; and,
3. *Aitareya* and *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣads*.

Yajurveda-saṁhitā

It is a collection of Yajus, the Mantras in prose which are specially useful to the Adhvaryu-priest in the performance of sacrifices.

The *Yajurveda-saṁhitā* 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 Saṁhitā [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-saṁhitā* is reputed to have had 85 Śākhās or recensions, only four are available now: a. *Taittirīya*; b. *Maitrāyaṇīya*; c. *Kaṭha*; d. *Kapisthala*.

The *Taittirīya-saṁhitā*, which is widely prevalent in South India, has 7 Kāṇḍas or books, 44 Prapāṭhakaṣ or chapters, and 651 Anuvākas or Mantras. It deals mainly with the detailed descriptions of sacrifices like Pauroḍāśa, Yājamāna, Vājapeya, Rājasūya, Darśapūrnāmāsa, 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-saṁhitā* 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 *Śukla-yajurveda-saṁhitā*, also known as the *Vājasaneyī-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, 303 Anuvākas, and 1,975 Mantras.

Like the *Taittirīya-saṁhitā*, this Saṁhitā also deals mainly with sacrifices like Agniṣṭoma, Vājapeya and Rājasūya.

The *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa*, the biggest of the Brāhmaṇas, and the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* are the Brāhmaṇa and the Āraṇyaka attached to the *Śukla-yajurveda*. *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad* and *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* are the Upaniṣads of this Veda.

Sāmaveda-saṁhitā

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 Udgatṛ-priest, have been brought together in this work.

Though it is said to have 1,000 Śākhās, only three are available now: *Kauthuma*, *Rāṇāyanīya* 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 *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*, *Bṛhat-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 Āraṇyaka of this Veda is available now: *Talavakāra* or *Jaiminīya Āraṇyaka*.

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

Atharva-veda-saṁhitā

Also known as *Brahmaveda*, since it is assigned to the Brahmā-priest, the *Atharva-veda-saṁhitā* has some special features because of which it stands apart from the other three Vedas, specially from the *Ṛgveda-saṁhitā*. 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-saṁhitā* is divided into 4 Prapāthakas 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 Prapāthakas. The last Kāṇḍa, i.e., the 20th, has borrowed heavily from the *Rgveda-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 Aṅga (Bengal). The Varna system had been well-established. The first three Varnas were called Āryas, 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 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 Rgvedic 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 *Praśna*, the *Muṇḍaka* and the *Māṇḍūkya* — belong to this Veda.

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-pāṭha*, 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 — *śrauta*, *gṛhya*, *dharma* and *śulba* — and deals with all aspects of sacrificial rites and smaller religious rites performed at home.

In understanding the Vedic literature, Bhāsyas or commentaries have done yeomen service. There have been a galaxy of commentators over the centuries, among whom Sāyaṇācārya (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. □

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]