

An introduction to Vedas

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*This document
contains a brief
introduction to
the Vedas.*



A. Origin of Vedas and their expansion:

Out of the four Vedas, namely, Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda, the first three alone are used in practice and that is why those three Vedas are called the triad or **trayee**. Here again, as Hinduism was originally based on the performance of fire sacrifices, called yagas and yagnas, the mantras of Yajurveda were used for pouring oblations in the fire, Rigveda was used for praising the Lord / praising the Gods, in the form of prayers, and Samaveda was being sung to tunes. **“YAJUSHA YAJETA, RICHA STOYATE, SAMNA GAYATE”**. Actually Samaveda may not be considered as an independent Veda as the major portion of the mantras was taken from the Rigveda and set to tunes. In fact, people who wanted to study Samaveda, had to study music for about 2-3 years, and only then were they allowed to recite the Vedas.

The Samaveda contains the mantras for white magic also. The Atharvaveda contains amongst various subjects, some mantras for black magic in the form of certain kriyas / rituals for getting our enemies killed, invoking serious ailments in their body, etc.

In the Ekagni Kanda, which is a part of one of the Vedas, certain mantras have been given. These mantras are for different situations. For example, if a reliable servant or cook has given a notice that he wants to go home or the servant leaves for home on leave and later

communicates that he does not want to return to the job, by chanting some of the specific mantras, the servant himself will come forward, express his change of mind and rejoin.

There are also mantras for farmers to protect the crops from various things such as insects, calamities, etc. In such cases, before the farmers start sowing the seeds, a Brahmin from the village who knows the relevant mantras writes it on four palm leaves or copper plates and these are kept buried in the north, south, east and west of the plot of land. No insecticide was required as no insects would attack the crops. These are all lost to the world as the present day priests or scholars are not aware as to which mantra is to be used for which effect.

Vedas consist of 3 portions. Each Veda is divided into:

1. **Samhita:** This is a collection of all the mantras which are to be used at various occasions in one's lifetime. During a man's lifetime, there are supposed to be 16 samskaras or rituals. Say for example: jatakarma (as soon as the child is born, he /she is purified), namakarna (giving a name), investing the child with a sacred thread (upanayanam ceremony), marriage ceremony, and ultimately funeral, etc. The various mantras to be chanted at each occasion are all in this collection called Samhitas. As all these Samhitas came from Guru to disciple by rote¹, and no ancient writings are available. They are known as Shrutis (those that come from generation to generation by hearing and getting by rote). India being a big country, even though the same Vedas were repeated in each state, like Maharashtra, Bengal, Orissa, etc., there have been some minor changes in the versions of the Vedas repeated in various places and each one of them is called an ascension [sākha]. There were 1000 such ascensions in Samaveda and 100 in Yajurveda, etc., but in due course many of them have been irretrievably lost to the world. In each Veda, only two to three sākhas are available currently. The most important of them is Taittiriya shakha in Krishna Yajurveda. Similarly, in Samaveda, two or three are available like Rarayana sakhya, Kanva [Madhyandina] sākha, etc.
2. **Brahmana:** The second part of the Vedas [for each Veda] is called Brahmana. And each Veda has its own Brahmana like shatapatha brahmana, gopatha brahmana, etc. The Brahmanas were considered as a commentary on the samhitas. These brahmanas specify as to which mantras in the samhita are to be recited on specific occasions like marriage, funeral, etc. and the various yagas [fire sacrifices].

¹ Rote means by memory.

There are two different categories of Yajurveda – 1] Krishna Yajurveda and 2] Shukla Yajurveda, i.e. black and white. The difference is because in Krishna Yajurveda the Brahmana is mixed up in the samhita itself while in the Shukla Yajurveda, the samhitas and brahmanas are separated. Further, originally there was only Krishna Yajurveda, but a sage called Yagnavalkya who was annoyed with his Guru, vomited back the entire Krishna Yajurveda (this is a literary expression which is to be understood as discarded) which he had learnt from his uncle, Sage Vaisampayana and did tapasya for several years and got a new Yajurveda known as Shukla Yajurveda from the Sun God.

3. **Aranyakas:** The third part of the Vedas is called “Aranyakas” of which form a part of Upanishads. The Aranyakas were mainly meant for those who went to the forest and wanted to conduct yagas and yagnas mentally through imagination as they never had huge wealth to conduct them physically. The Upanishads, which are part of it, contain a description of the indescribable and inconceivable ultimate Supreme Being called the **Brahman** and the ways to reach it. In fact, in the non-dualistic philosophy (Advaita), propounded by Adi Shankara, the word Vedas (scriptures) was meant to connote only Upanishads while certain cults like Arya Samaj, etc. consider the Samhitas only as the main Vedas. The Upanishads contain conversations between Guru and disciples and also contain the knowledge obtained through the direct experience of the sages.

The Samhita portion and a few of the Upanishads are chanted with upward accentuation known as udatha in some places, anudatha [downward accentuation] in some other places, and swarita [neutral] in other places. The books contain notations of the syllables that have to be with upward accent, those with a downward accent, and those in a neutral way. If the pronunciation of the Vedas is done wrongly in any place, it could result in calamity, not only for individuals but for the entire world, and that is why the pronunciation of every syllable correctly is extremely important. It is also warned in the books related to the Vedas that none of the mantras should be sung like a song, nor should it be mixed with any other sound like the weeping of a child, or conversations between audience, etc. It is also prohibited to play on any musical instrument like the veena, harmonium, etc. while chanting these mantras. The entire Samhitas are based on sound effect and the effect should not be distorted or changed or adulterated by other sounds.

Even though the pronunciation and versions may vary from North India to South India, whatever is traditionally accepted in the individual’s state of birth and the state in which he grew up is acceptable in that region – as per an allied text called Pratisakhya, which is a text supplementary to the Vedas.

The Samhitas are called the Karmakanda [ritualistic text], the Brahmana is called the Upasanakanda [meditation, worship, etc.] and the Upanishads are called the Jananakanda [the book of the Ultimate Knowledge].

As the Vedas were to be preserved in their pristine purity of pronunciation without any mistakes in phonetics creeping into them, some unique methods of chanting them were promulgated like two words at a time and several number of times again and again were adopted and Max Mueller had praised eloquently about them. The Vedas are chanted in various series as pada, krama, ghana, jhata, etc. While pada and krama methods are very commonly taught in various schools called pathasalas, very few graduate to the higher methods of chanting like ghana and jhata. While in South India, all these methods are well preserved by a good number of priests, I have not personally come across such experts in North India during my stay of 65 years there. To crown it, a particular branch of practitioners of 19th century origin chant the Vedas uniformly in a sing song way during their havan ceremony without following the rules of udatha, anudatha, etc.

B. Essentials for learning the Vedas

In order to learn the Vedas, there are six limbs [texts] which are to be mastered first before venturing to learn the Vedas. The six limbs are:

1. Siksha [phonetics]
2. Vyakarna [grammar]
3. Chhandas [the various figures of speech, etc.]
4. Nirukta [special dictionary for the special meanings of vedic words]
5. Jyotisham [astrology]
6. Kalpa [the elaborate methods of various types of puja / worships]

The aforesaid six limbs are more relevant to the samhitas portion of the Vedas. These six limbs have been explained below.

Siksha: The text on siksha like Panini siksha deal with how important it is to pronounce as per the notations and how certain heavy consonants like 'bha', 'kha', etc., are to be pronounced and how the Vedas should be read, etc. For instance, it is told that one should not chant the mantras in a very hurried manner but in a moderate way. While doing the chanting, one should not move one's head up and down, etc. according to the specified tunes. One should not sing the Vedas in musical ragas or tunes.

This is specifically mentioned in the following verse in Siksha Shastra:

Geeti Seeghree Sirahkambee Likhita Pathaka ----- Pathakadhamah

The above verse means that the one who sings the Vedas like a song; or the one who goes on chanting very quickly; or the one who during recitation keeps nodding ones' head; or the one who recites the Vedas from a book or a written manuscript and not by heart; such people are considered as the worst type of reciters of Vedas.

Vyakarna: This is essential for splitting the compound words while chanting as any wrong splitting will lead to calamities.

Chhandas: Even though according to Sage Pingala², there are several thousands of **alankaras** which are used as Chhandas in Sanskrit poetry, only about six or eight of them are used in the Vedas, like anushtup, tryashtup, jagati, gayatri³, etc. The purpose of these is to limit the number of syllables in each line and also to specify the number of syllables of long duration and short duration, etc. This limitation is essential for us to catch hold of the infinite cosmic energy and bring it for our use just as a limited vessel like a bottle is used for bringing the holy water of the immense expanse of Ganges from Haridwar.

Nirukta: The Vedic Sanskrit language is not like a normal language. The words, including personal nouns, have got deeper meanings including their true esoteric import. The Vedic meanings for the words are given in Nirukta.

Jyotisham: The purpose of astrology was not originally meant to find out as to when one becomes prosperous, when one gets a promotion, and one meets with an accident, etc. It was meant to find out the appropriate time which will be conducive and lead to success for the performance of yaga or yagnaya .

Kalpa: People accustomed to rituals will have to do formal worship of various Gods everyday [called panchayatana puja] where 5 gods are worshipped with Shiva in the form of Banalinga [which is available in Omkareshwar or Narmada river; these are all stones], Vishnu in the form of Saligrama, Sun in the form of a Crystal, the Divine Mother in the form of a specific red stone and Lord Ganesha in another form of red stone – all available in different rivers. In addition we have seasonal worships at the time of specific festivals like the birthday of Rama, Krishna, etc., so the detailed method of worship in all these cases and the various fasts to be undertaken [vratas], etc., is available in the Kalpasutras, for instance in Parasurama Kalpasutra.

² He wrote books on Chhandas.

³ Infact Gayatri mantra is a mantra appearing in a meter called Gayatri.

Only after having mastered all these six limbs, is one authorised to learn the Vedas.

The one question which haunts most of the women in India is why ladies are prohibited from chanting the Vedas. The Vedas contain many portions, basically sound effects, which work like laser beams and pierce the womb/impair fertility. In fact in the ancient editions of Vedas, it is written in many places that the pregnant women sitting and listening should vacate that place and move out. I have seen this effect in the case of a colleague's daughter in law. Further there are hymns which can transform a female into a male by altering the hormones. No woman for that matter is prevented from reading the Vedas quietly. All prohibitions and injunctions are all in the sole interest of the persons who chant and no chauvinistic approach is intended.

C. Principal reference books for followers of Advaita

In the Upanishads and Vedas, the various chronological creations of the sky, the earth, the fire, the air, etc. are given in different sequences. In this way, there are certain small variations in the description of events in various Upanishads. Further, in the six systems of philosophy, like sankhya, etc., who also believe in the indisputable authority of the Vedas, they argue that the Upanishad mantras refer only to the primordial nature called prakrti or pradhan and not to a Supreme entity called Brahman. In order to reconcile the variations in the Upanishads and also to establish the real purport of the Upanishads, the Brahmasutra was written by the oldest of sages known as Veda Vyasa. As the Brahmasutra was in mnemonic formulae, in due course of time, people were unable to interpret the meanings. Hence, the great stalwarts like Adi Shankara, Ramanuja, etc., have written detailed commentary on them called Bhashya. In due course people were not able to understand even those commentaries and certain authors like Vachaspati Misra, Govindananda etc wrote commentary on the Bhashyas known as Bhamati, Ratnaprabha, etc.

Hence in respect of people who are after Knowledge, the main Bible is a triad consisting of:

- The ten principal Upanishads
- The Brahmasutra [no doubt along with its commentaries], and
- The Bhagawad Gita⁴ [which is a deemed Smriti].

When the original inhabitants like the maharishis of yore, began to form societies or villages and lead a communal life, the rules and regulations for regulating them in the interest of the entire society were formed by various maharishis and kings and they were all known as Smritis. The texts were all based on the basic tenets of the Vedas and were called Smritis. They were called Smritis because they were all written on various subjects like partitioning

⁴ Bhagwad Gita with commentary of Adi Shankaracharya is preferred. Also the book on Bhagawad Gita by Swami Chidbhavananda is good and is available in Chennai.

of family property, marriages of girls, and conduct and behaviour towards various elders, etc., in normal life or in specific stations of life like monkhood. In Advaita philosophy, we hold only the Vedas (shrutis) and smritis as authority and Puranas or mythologies are considered as subordinate to them. It is some of the dualistic sects who accept the Puranas or the mythology also as an authority.

D. Upanishads

There were around 108 Upanishads some decades ago, but currently there are some more manuscripts since that have been found out and it is expected that there are more than 180 Upanishads.

Among them, the principal ones are only ten Upanishads belonging to different Vedas:

1. Isavasya Upanishad
2. Kena upanishad
3. Kathopanishad
4. Prasnopanishad
5. Mundakopanishad
6. Mandukyopanishad
7. Aitareyopanishad
8. Taittiriya Upanishad
9. Brihadaranyakopanishad
10. Chandogyopanishad

E. Other reference books

There are some other good reference books for Advaita followers. These include Ashtavakra Gita and Yoga Vasishtha. However, these are all supplementary. These have not been recognised in earlier days. In the modern days, however, these are being recognised as excellent texts on philosophy.

However, when Adi Shankaracharya had written bhashyas and discussed at length about Advaita, he had quoted several books. However, Ashtavakra Gita and Yoga Vasishtha have not been quoted by him anywhere and the reason is not known. It could be because they were meant for advanced sadhaks.

This is one reason why these other reference books are not considered as authentic as per the old tradition. However, these are highly scientific, logical and rational. In the modern days with the trend of people coming from science and other technological backgrounds,

these books are considered excellent. It is not so easy to implement some of the writings. For example: When you tell a man to sit without any thoughts, rarely is one able to do it. These are extremely good to hear and if implemented, like a short duration crop, within a short time you get the produce. Even though it is difficult, it is something that I would call the direct path.

F. Systems of Philosophy

Vedas are the basis on which the six systems of philosophy have been founded. Vedanta means the final purport of the Vedas.

The schools of thought in the philosophy which are based on the authority of the Vedas are the following:

1. and 2. Sankhya and Yoga
3. and 4. Nyaya (Logic) and Vaiseshika
5. and 6. Purvamimamsa and Uttarmimamsa (Advaita)

Except Advaita, none of the other 5 systems accept a single God or Supreme Being [Atman]. All of them advocate multiple soul theories and the methods of practice as also the theories expressed therein do not seem to be either logical or scientific and have many loopholes which could not be plugged.

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