

## The Vedas

The word Veda literally means knowledge, the knowledge par excellence or supreme knowledge. The Veda is considered to be the divine truths revealed to the seers (Rishis) from time to time during their long-term penance and samadhi. The great seers or Rishis perceived reality at the two levels of visions-in its essential form and then in its transcendental manifestation.

Another name of Veda is Shruti, as Veda was directly heard from God (or because of getting traditional method of word of mouth and then learning it by heart). Commentator on Veda, Saayanaacharya, defines Veda as "A book, which reveals the knowledge of supernatural methods for the achievement of the desired and avoidance of the undesirable."

The Hindus consider Veda as the original and prime source of their cultural life. For them, since the time immemorial, Veda is the word of God. In effect, the thinking and feelings of Hindus are controlled and regulated by the Veda. It is almost impossible to perceive and fully understand the ethos of spiritual and cultural lives of Indians without having an insight into Veda.

The themes appearing in the Vedas are not ephemeral. They are eternal and are relevant to the humanity for all times to come. One can get possessed and spellbound and eventually ecstatic by the articulate illustrations and majestic details of the natural beauty. The magnificent accounts of glorious sunrise, torrential rains and thunder and lightning have no match in other literatures of the world.

According to Veda, a seeker of truth has full freedom to follow his path, provided he is clear in his mind as to what he wants. The word Veda literally means knowledge and then the knowledge par excellence or supreme knowledge. This knowledge was not derived from a particular scripture or prophet but came into being in course of several millennia. This knowledge continued incessantly being transmitted from centuries to centuries from generation to generation by word of mouth. According to tradition, since Veda is revelation, it is *apaurusheya*, i.e., not of human origin.

The Hindu religious tradition has accorded the Vedas the highest place in its 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 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 Rig-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 *yajnas* and *yagas* (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.

**The Four Vedas:** A compilation of all the hymns used by the *hota*-priest to invite the various deities to the sacrifice became the **Rig-veda**. All the liturgical parts of the Vedas, useful to the 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 *udgatr*-priest, the singer, was named as **Sama-veda**. The rest, a sort of miscellaneous appendix and addenda became the **Atharva-veda** and was assigned to the *brahma*-priest, considered as the supervisor over the whole sacrificial process.

As per the annals of the Hindu orthodoxy, the great sage Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa is said to have effected this division by collecting all the mantras extant during his time, and editing them

into four groups: Rig, Yajus, Saman and Atharvan. He taught them to his four chief disciples: Raila (Rig-veda), Vaisampayana (Yajur-veda), Jaimini (Sama-veda) and Sumantu (Atharva-veda). This is how these four Vedas took shape.

#### **Other Methods of Division-**

The Vedas are divided in another way too: Mantra and Brahmana Samhitaa is the name given to the collection of the Mantras. The Brahmana includes in itself two more sections, the Aranyaka and the Upanisad. If the Mantras comprise the hymns, the Brahmanas contain liturgies in prose. The Aaranyakas teach about meditations based on symbolical interpretations of the liturgical rites. The Upanisad may roughly classified as philosophical treatises dealing with the ultimate problems of life.

Conventionally speaking, it is the Samhitaa that is indicated by the word Veda. For instance, Rig-veda means only the Rik-samhitaa or the **Rik-veda-samhitaa**. The Braahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanisads of the Rig-veda have different and independent names and are considered more like its appendages.

These Samhitaas, in course of time, branched off, leading to the formation of Sakhaas or recensions. The origin of these sakhaas probably lies in the fact that each of the principle sages like Paila or Vaisampaayana 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 is attempted here.