

## « The Essence of Vedas »

By Deepak Bansal

The Vedas stand as the bedrock of Indian civilization, embodying a vast compendium of spiritual, philosophical, and cultural wisdom that has shaped the subcontinent's ethos for millennia. This essay aims to unpack the essence of the Vedas, traversing their cultural structure, defining characteristics, key concepts, ritualistic practices, and their enduring influence on contemporary culture.

### A. Cultural Structure of Vedas

The term "Vedas" originates from the Sanskrit word for knowledge, "to know," signifying their role as repositories of sacred wisdom. Their composition dates back to post-Indus Valley Civilization, around 1500 BCE, marking a significant period of spiritual and intellectual ferment. The authors of the Vedas remain largely anonymous, attributed to sages of Indo-Aryan descent.

These texts are primarily oral traditions, meticulously preserved and transmitted across generations, with Ved Vyas credited for their compilation into written form. This transformation from oral to written is a monumental achievement in preserving the Vedas' integrity and ensuring their transmission to future generations. The Vedas are categorized as Śruti, meaning "that which is heard," indicating a belief in divine revelation to ancient seers during states of deep meditation, thereby shaping the cultural and spiritual landscape of the time.

### B. What are Vedas?

At their core, the Vedas are a collection of hymns and verses integral to various rituals and ceremonies. These texts have been interpreted through multiple lenses:

- **Traditional:** Rituals aimed at maintaining societal order.
- **Western:** Practices honoring Mother Nature.
- **Geopolitical:** Reflecting the Indo-Aryan migration and cultural assimilation.
- **Psychological:** Offering insights into the human psyche, akin to the interpretations of Carl Jung.

The Vedas serve as a confluence of hymns, prayers, rituals, and philosophical musings. Each Veda, with its unique focus, contributes to a holistic understanding of human existence and the natural world.

- **Rig Veda:** As the oldest of the Vedas, it is a treasure trove of hymns dedicated to various deities, reflecting the society's spiritual aspirations and its understanding of the divine.
- **Sama Veda:** It emphasizes the musical chanting of hymns, showcasing the importance of sound and rhythm in connecting with the divine.
- **Yajur Veda:** This text provides detailed instructions for rituals and sacrifices, highlighting the procedural aspects of Vedic practices.

- **Atharva Veda:** It stands out for its focus on more earthy concerns, including healing, protection spells, and societal welfare, demonstrating the Vedas' relevance to daily life

These texts culminate in the Upanishads, philosophical treatises that delve into the essence of existence, challenging and expanding upon the earlier ritualistic interpretations. However, some of the Indian philosophers like Sri Aurobindo challenge this notion and provide a commentary where each of the hymns can be translated into a psychological process of changing oneself.

### C. Key Concepts of Vedas

The Vedas, with their rich tapestry of hymns and philosophical musings, introduce several key concepts that form the bedrock of Vedic cosmology and spirituality. These concepts not only reflect the advanced thinking of ancient seers but also offer a comprehensive understanding of the cosmos, deities, and the human condition.

#### Heliocentric and Geocentric Worldview

The Vedas articulate a dualistic representation of the cosmos, delineated into two primary realms: an Upper Zone (*upari-budhana*) of the solar world of perpetual light and a Lower Zone of the earthly domain characterized by the cyclical alternation of day and night (*aho-ratri*).

- **Upper Zone (Heliocentric):** This realm is described as a constant beacon of light and essence, where the divine principles and solar deities reside. It represents an unchanging, eternal order, embodying the highest ideals and spiritual truths. This world is beyond the reach of temporal changes, symbolizing the ultimate reality and the source of all creation.
- **Lower Zone (Geocentric):** In contrast, the terrestrial world is a dynamic domain where the forces of light and darkness engage in an eternal play. It is marked by the regular cycles of day and night, mirroring the human experience of growth, decay, and renewal. This realm is inhabited by a diverse array of beings, including gods, mortals, and demonic entities, each playing a role in the cosmic drama. The interplay between light and darkness in this zone is metaphorically depicted as a celestial game, wherein the sun is periodically ensnared by the forces of darkness, necessitating divine intervention to restore its liberating light.

These two zones are further divided into three distinct layers, each representing different aspects of existence. For example, the Geocentric realm is divided into the earthly plane (matter), the intermediary realm (life force), and the celestial domain (mind or spirit), illustrating a sophisticated understanding of the universe's layered structure.

#### Cosmological Concepts

The Vedas introduce profound cosmological ideas that explain the origin and structure of the universe:

- **Aditi and the Solar Gods-** The Infinite Mother: Central to Vedic cosmology is *Aditi*, the boundless void from which all existence emerges. She is revered as "The

Undivided One," a primordial goddess who embodies the infinite potentiality of the cosmos. From her, seven divine emanations (or solar gods) are born, representing the core principles that govern the universe. Additionally, a singular entity, referred to as the "dead egg" (*Martanda*), emerges from Aditi's lower aspect. This entity symbolizes the Earth, possessing the latent capacity to ascend to divinity, illustrating the interconnectedness of all cosmic entities and their potential for transformation.

- **The Sacrifice of *Purusha*:** Another pivotal concept is the cosmic sacrifice of *Purusha*, the Supreme Being, whose self-immolation gives birth to the manifest world. This sacrificial act generates the moon from *Purusha*'s mind, the sun from his eyes, and the social order (*varnas*) from his body, symbolizing the cosmic origin of natural phenomena and societal structures.
  - From his mouth emerges *Brahmans*, the priests
  - From his hands emerges *Kshatriya*, the warriors
  - From his thighs emerged *Vaishyas*, the businesspeople
  - From his feet emerged *Shudras*, the workers

This narrative has been interpreted as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of the cosmos and society, potentially laying the groundwork for the caste system in India, though its interpretation and application have been subjects of extensive debate.

## Ideals as Gods

The Vedas personify philosophical ideals as deities, imbuing them with attributes that reflect higher principles and virtues:

- **In the Upper Zone:** The solar deities emanating from Aditi represent lofty ideals. Notable among these are *Mitra* (Love), *Varuna* (Wisdom and Vastness), *Aryaman* (Nobility and Power), and *Bhaga* (Bliss), each embodying qualities that transcend mundane existence and invite contemplation of the divine virtues.
- **In the Lower Zone:** This realm features deities associated with more tangible aspects of life and the natural world. *Indra*, the god of thunder and rain, symbolizes the dynamic force of the divine mind. Other deities like *Ila* (Imagination), *Saraswati* (Inspiration), *Sarama* (Intuition), and *Dakshina* (Discernment) represent faculties essential for intellectual and spiritual growth, while the *Rishis*, or sages, embody the power of the spoken word, highlighting the importance of knowledge and communication in the Vedic tradition.

These concepts reveal the Vedas' intricate understanding of the cosmos, society, and the individual, presenting a worldview that integrates the material and the spiritual, the immanent and the transcendent. Through these teachings, the Vedas offer a profound insight into the nature of reality, inviting seekers to explore the depths of existence and the heights of spiritual attainment.

## Process of Vedic Rituals

Vedic rituals, or Yajnas, intended to maintain cosmic order and seek divine favor, are complex ceremonies involving offerings through the fire god *Agni*, who serves as a priest.

These rituals offer clarified butter (Ghritam/ Ghee), intoxicating substance (Soma), and sacred chants (Riks), invoke various deities to bestow blessings of knowledge (cows), power (horses), and prosperity (gold and offsprings).

In this practice of rituals, everything from the fire, priests, words, offerings, and being offered are divine, and are part of Vedic hymns. These practices underscore a profound interaction with the divine, where the material and spiritual coalesce in the act of sacrifice, seeking to align human endeavors with cosmic principles.

#### **D. Cultural Context Now**

The Vedas have laid the foundation for all subsequent Indian wisdom traditions, influencing the development of spiritual practices, philosophical inquiries, and cultural norms. While the original texts do not explicitly outline the pantheon of Hindu gods as known today, many Vedic deities evolved into principal figures within Indian Wisdom Traditions, illustrating a dynamic evolution of spiritual understanding. The heliocentric concepts found in the Vedas suggest an advanced comprehension of astronomical phenomena, influencing later scientific and philosophical thought.

Moreover, the Vedas have contributed to various fields of knowledge, including Ayurveda and the martial arts, through the Upavedas, which apply Vedic wisdom to practical domains. This synthesis of spiritual and temporal knowledge underscores the Vedas' comprehensive approach to understanding the universe and human existence.

In contemporary times, the Vedas continue to resonate, offering insights into ethical conduct, spiritual fulfillment, and the pursuit of knowledge. Their emphasis on dharma (righteousness), the importance of societal order, and the quest for transcendental knowledge through meditation and rituals remain relevant, guiding individuals in their spiritual and worldly pursuits.

The essence of the Vedas, thus, transcends their historical context, embodying a timeless wisdom that continues to influence and inspire. They are not merely ancient texts but living traditions that offer profound insights into the nature of reality, the cosmos, and the human spirit. In exploring the Vedas, one engages with the foundational texts of one of the world's oldest continuous spiritual traditions, a journey that enriches our understanding of human history, spirituality, and the quest for knowledge. Through the Vedas, we glimpse the intellectual and spiritual horizons of ancient sages, whose insights into the nature of existence, ethical living, and the pursuit of the divine continue to illuminate the path for seekers of truth across the ages.

#### **Reference:**

- a) Aurobindo, Sri. The Secret of the Vedas
- b) Banerji, Debashish. "The Vedic Mystery Schools." YouTube video