
UNIT 2 INTRODUCTION TO VEDAS AND UPANISADS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit – is to present a general outline of the origin and development of Vedic literature and its epistemological position in the different philosophical schools of India. Vedas have been held as the primary source of a structured society that is believed to pave way for a religious growth and induce a philosophical quest. The various concepts and doctrines of the Vedas can find its relevance in today's world. In this unit, we shall briefly analyze the Vedic literature and its concepts.

By the end of this unit you should be able:

- to gain a general idea of the vast Vedic literature and their content
- to understand the historical growth of religious practices in the Vedic background
- to learn the important concepts that led to the rise of Indian Philosophical systems
- to grasp the relevant concepts of the Vedas and appreciate its relevance in the modern world.

2.1 VEDAS AND ITS CONTENTS

Vedas or the source of knowledge, is also referred to as the *Sruti* or that which is heard, *Apauruseya* or that which is not authored by a human, and *Shastra* or that which serves as a guide through its teaching. The words 'Agama' and 'Amnaya' are synonyms of the Veda. Since

Veda is considered as a revelation it is termed as the 'primary' source of knowledge. The content of the Vedas that has come down to us for centuries is said to have been heard by the sages in deep meditation and these sages are therefore known as '*mantradrastas*' or the 'seer of the mantras'. They transmitted this received knowledge orally to the next generation. Thus, in a generation of oral transmission, the Vedas are preserved. Though we have lost many of the Vedic mantras, we have managed to preserve this tradition to some extent. Moreover, the orally transmitted vedic mantras were made available in writing too and the oldest available written literature is considered to be the Rig Veda. Even though the written or printed material is not considered as the preservation of the Vedic tradition, since oral practise alone is the method to preserve the Vedas, however, the written records give a wider scope for analysis of the historical development of the Vedic tradition. Let us now briefly see the content of the Vedas.

The word 'Veda' generally refers to 'Mantras' and 'Brahmanas'. Mantras are hymns in praise of gods who are invoked in a ritual and Brahmanas are those portions which give various instructions on the performance of rituals. Based on this, Veda is said to be of two kinds, Mantras and Brahmanas. An anthology of mantras is known as 'Samhitas' and the Brahmana portions are an elaboration and are treated as the commentary to the Samhita portions. The Brahmana portions are further divided into three, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanisads. The Brahmana portions primarily teach the nature of ritual (*yaga*) and thus the word Brahmana also means '*yajna*' (ritual). The Aranyakas are so named because it deals with meditation which are generally taken up while living in forest (*aranya*). The Upanisads reveal the Absolute Truth, which provides the means to liberation and is popularly known as the 'Vedanta'. Primarily the source with the four portions, namely, Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and the Upanisad is known as the Veda. But popularly the ritualistic and meditative portions (or at times only the ritualistic portions) came to be known as Veda and the philosophical discovery in the Upanisads got a distinct identity. Therefore, we say, the Veda and Upanisads. (But upanisads are also part of the Vedas.)

As to the historical data of the origin and development of the Vedas, we have many divided views among the historians and researchers, however here we provide a particular view.

1. Age of the Rig Veda Samhita (2500 to 1500 B.C)
2. Age of the Later Samhitas, Brahmanas and Upanisads (1500 to 500 B.C)

Veda is one source with three forms and this is often referred to as '*Veda Trayi*' or Three Vedas. The Rig, the Yajur and the Sama – are the three Vedas. In such references, the meaning of the Veda refers to the 'creation' and the three Vedas means the threefold creation of *Agni* or Fire (Rig), *Vayu* or Air (Yajur) and *Aditya* or Sun (*Sama*). The '*Atharva*' refers to the '*soma*' or the essence without which the above three cannot survive. The popular view is that the Sage Vyasa segregated the Vedic hymns, that is, the mantra-samhitas into four, viz., Rig Samhita, Yajur-Samhita, Sama-Samhita and Atharva-Samhita and thus we say there are four Vedas.

For a Vedic ritual to take place, it requires four *Rtviks* (roughly translated as Priests). They are:

- i) *Hota* – one who invokes the deity of a particular ritual by employing the invocatory hymns as found in the Rig-Samhitas and the collections of such hymns is referred to as Rig Veda. This is said to have been taught by Vyasa to Pela.
- ii) *Adhvaryu* – one who performs the rituals as enjoined and the relevant mantras are in the Yajur-Samhita and the collection of this is known as Yajurveda which was taught to Vaimshampayana by Vyasa.
- iii) *Udgatha* – one who sings in high intonation and maintains the rhythm of chanting as given in Samaveda and this is taught by Vyasa to Jaimini.
- iv) *Brahma* – one who takes care of the entire proceedings of the ritual and suggests compensatory acts in case of omissions and commissions and this was taught to Sumantu by Vyasa.

Thus, the four Vedas were propagated through these four disciples of Vyasa.

2.2 A GENERAL SURVEY OF THE VEDIC LITERATURE

We shall briefly deal with the Vedic literature and their contents beginning from the Rig Veda. Each Veda, as we had already mentioned, consists of four portions, namely, Samhita, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanisads. Here, we shall deal with these four portions of each Veda in a nutshell.

Rig Veda:

The word 'Rig' means praise or eulogy. The collection of Rig is known as Rig Veda. It is set in metrical form. The Rig is considered as the oldest record of revelations and the language of the *Rig* is considered as the most ancient.

There are five branches of Rig-Samhita and they are:

1. *Shakala*
2. *Vaskala*
3. *Ashvalayana*
4. *Samkhya* and
5. *Mandakayana*

Rig-Samhita contains *Suktas* and *Mandalas*. *Sukta* means that which has been received from a reliable source and it is of four types:

- a. *Richi Sukta*: a collection of hymns revealed through the Sages
- b. *Devata Sukta*: a collection of hymns in praise of gods

- c. *Chanda Sukta*: a collection of hymns in the same metrical form and
- d. *Artha Sukta*: a collection of hymns, wherein the meaning of the mantras gets concluded.

The Mandalas are the sections of the Rig-Samhita. There are ten Mandalas with fifty *anuvakas* or sub-sections which contain *suktas*. The *suktas* in turn contain the *mantras*. The two Brahmanas and Aranyakas of the Rig that are available are: Aitareya Brahmana and Shankyayana Brahmana; Aitareya Aranyaka and Shankyayana Aranyaka. The popular Upanisads of the Rig are Kausitaki and Aitareya upanisads.

Yajurveda:

It is widely popular with varied descriptions of the yajna or rituals and is found in prose form. There are two divisions of Yajur, namely Krishna Yajurveda and Shukla Yajurveda. The Krishna Yajur is a combination of mantras and brahmanas, whereas, the Shukla Yajur is predominantly mantra portions. Of the fifty branches of Krishna Yajur, we have today only four branches (Taittiriya, Maitrayani, Katha and Kapilashtakatha). The Shukla Yajur is further divided into Madhyandina branch and Kanva branch. There is only a slight difference in the rendering of the contents of these two branches of Shukla Yajurveda. The famous available brahmana of the Krishna Yajurveda is the Taittiriya Brahmana and that of Shukla Yajur is Shatapatha Brahmana. The main Aranyaka portions of the Yajurveda are Taittiriya Aranyaka and Brihadaranyaka (also contains upanisadic portions). The widely read Upanisads of the Krishna Yajurveda are Kathopanisad and Taittiriyopanisad. The upanisads of the Shukla Yajurveda are Brihadaranayka and the Ishopanisad.

Samaveda:

The Samaveda is the Rig Veda set in musical form. The Samaveda consists of two predominant parts, viz., the Archika part and the Ganam part. The Archika part is that which consists of meanings of the words and it is a collection of Rks. It is further divided into Purva Archika and Uttara Archika. The Purva Archika consists of six chapters and is divided into four parts as:

1. Agneya parva (consists of mantras related to Agni)
2. Aindra parva (consists of mantras related to Indra)
3. Pavamana parva (with mantras related to Soma) and
4. Aranyakas (on meditations)

The Uttara Archika is with nine chapters with various divisions that primarily deals with the practice of various rituals. The three main branches of Samaveda are Kauthuma branch, Ranayaniya branch and Jaiminiya branch.

The various intonations and method of singing in different pitches are mentioned in detail in the Samaveda. The musical form is broadly divided into four kinds:

- a. Veyaganam – the first five chapters of Purva-Archika are sung in Veyaganam.
- b. Aranyakaganam – The mantras of the Aranyaka portion are sung in Aranyakaganam.
- c. Oohaganam and d. Oohyaganam are the musical pattern of the Uttara-Archika portions.

Some of the important Sama-Brahmanas are Daivatam, Vamshabrahmanam, Tandyam etc. The available one Aranyaka of Samaveda is the Talavakara-Aranyaka. At the end of the Talavakara we find the Kenopanisad. The Chandogyopanisad also belongs to Samaveda.

Atharvaveda:

The Atharvaveda consists of nine branches and we have only two such branches available, namely, the Shaunaka branch and the Pippalada branch. There are three Samhitas of the Atharva, namely, Aashi, Acharya and Vidhiprayoga Samhitas. The only available Brahmana of the Atharvaveda is the Gopatha Brahmanam. It consists of two parts, Purvagopatha and Uttaragopatha. So far, we have not found any Aranyaka of the Atharvaveda. The three prominent upanisads of the Atharva are Prashnopanisad, Mundakopanisad and Mandukyopanisad.

Commentators of the Vedas:

The celebrated commentator of the Vedas, especially, the Brahmana portions is Sayana. Some of the other important commentators to various portions of the Veda like, Samhita, Aranyakas etc., are Skandasvami, Narayana, Madhavabhata, Venkatamadhava, Anandatirtha, Uvvata, Halayudha, Ananta and others. The commentaries help us in understanding the import of the Vedic words. The commentators reveal the changing conditions in their interpretative commentaries.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1) Give a brief outline of the Vedas and its Contents.

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2) Give an account of the Vedic Literature and Its Commentators.

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2.3. SOME IMPORTANT VEDIC CONCEPTS - I

Now, we shall briefly embark upon the varied topics found in the four portions of the Vedas and then derive certain important concepts that serve as the foundation of Vedic Religion and Philosophy.

Samhitas:

In the Rig-Mandalas, we find mention of many worldly affairs especially related to human life. Various aspects like the earliest mention on marriage and ancestral worship is seen in the Rig. The importance of charity (*dana*) is highlighted in the Rig-Suktas. Some of the thought-provoking and paradoxical suktas of the Rig Veda are Nasadiya Sukta (10-129), Purushasukta (10-90), Hiranyagarbha Sukta (10-121) etc. The Yajur-Samhitas prescribes the procedures for performance of daily and occasional duties of an individual. The Atharva-Samhitas mark the beginning of ancient ruling and administration. There are descriptions of many actions like conquering an enemy, gaining wealth etc. We find discussion on Science especially on medicine, disease and cure. The Ayushya-Sukta of Atharva is quite well-known for it is the prayer for long healthy life.

Brahmanas:

By the time the Brahmana part of the Vedas developed the society has undergone a well-defined stratification with a common goal. In this period, performance of rituals for the individual and total benefit dominated the scene that was based on the Vedic designation in the form of *varna* (class) and *ashrama* (stage of life). The ritual or the *yajna* symbolises an integrated personality for a harmonious life. In a ritual, there are two types of oblations, one is the thought at the mental level and the other is the speech. The thought alone is expressed as the speech in a ritual and the same holds good in life too which aids in a harmonious living.

Aranyakas:

In the development of Aranyaka portions, we find well-defined concepts of Time. There is the mention of the transcendental and the empirical time, where the empirical time slot is compared to the perennial flow of waters. There is a description of various seasons and their effects on the health of living beings. The importance of study of one's own scripture and fivefold compulsory acts (*pancha-mahayajna*) are found in this portion. The fivefold compulsory acts are: worship of gods, worship of lineage of teachers, worship of ancestors, service to humanity and service to the animal and plant kingdom. We find here the description of meditation on *prana* or vital breath. Since this portion primarily concentrates on bringing about a serene mind, varieties of *vratas* or vows are prescribed. The Upanisads deal with the philosophical enquiry into the nature of the ultimate truth and reveal the liberating knowledge. We shall deal with the Upanisads a little later in this unit.

Vedic gods:

The hymns in praise of various deities have given rise to polytheism, henotheism and gradually to monotheism. The gods are presiding deities of various powers of natural forces. The primary gods mentioned in the Vedas are 33 gods, that is, 8 *Vasus*, 11 Rudras, 12 *Adityas* and 2 *Ashvinis*. The presiding deity of all gods is said to be Indra. The importance of all the gods led to polytheistic tendency. But, gradually, there rose the need to provide importance to one deity and thus lord of all beings was described as *PrajaPati*. Later, in the Upanisads we find the one absolute termed as Brahman.

2.4. SOME IMPORTANT VEDIC CONCEPTS - II

Here, we shall analyze some five specific important concepts that we derive from the above mentioned varied topics of the Vedas. The following concepts have served as the strong foundation for Indian Thinking and have highly influenced the religious and philosophical domains.

Sat and Asat

The fundamental quest of any thinking mind is to arrive at the prime cause of this vast multifarious creation. The Vedic seers had tried to find answers and have presented them in a riddled language. In this connection, the concept of *Sat* (Existent principle) and *Asat* (Non-existent principle) are described. We find statements in the Veda that say, ‘there was *Sat* prior to the creation’ and there is another statement that says ‘there was *Asat* prior to the creation’. Such statements have given rise to various theories on the cause of creation. For instance, some consider that prior to creation there must be a *sat* principle, an existent principle since from an existing thing alone something can originate. Others hold the view that if there had been *sat* prior to creation, there will be the difficulty in stating the cause of that *sat*, hence it is said ‘nothing’ (*asat*) was there before creation. Now, these two fundamental concepts of ‘*Sat*’ and ‘*Asat*’ gave rise to divided opinions which formed the foundation of Indian Philosophical systems in later period.

Mutual Triad

Another important concept is the mutual triad that has been derived in the Vedas based on the observation of Nature and its reaction. The simple concept derived from nature is the cyclic process in a chain and disturbance in any part of the chain ruins the entire process gradually or immediately. Based on this vital observation, the Vedas present the mutual triads, that is, the *adhyatmika* (individual), *adhibhautika* (the universe) and *adhidaivika* (the presiding principle). For instance let us take the five sense organs of knowledge and understand them at these three levels.

<i>Adhyatmika</i>	<i>Adhibhautika</i>	<i>Adhidaivika</i>
Eye (sense of sight)	Sense objects of colour	Surya (Sun)
Ear (sense of sound)	Sense objects of sound	Dik (God of Directions)

Skin (sense of touch)	Sense objects of touch, like hard, soft etc.	Vayu (Air)
Tongue (sense of taste)	Sense objects of taste, like sweet, sour etc	Varuna (Waters)
Nose (sense of smell)	Sense objects of smell, like fragrance of rose etc.	Asvinis (Twin-gods)

For knowledge to take place, we need a functioning sense organs at the individual level, there must be the sense objects available in the external world, and also the need for the grace of the presiding deities. Only when this triad mutually functions, the knowledge of the world is gained. This concept of triad forms the basis of religious faith and practices.

Law of *Karma*

Another vital doctrine that evolved from the Vedas is the Law of *Karma*. It is initially referred to as '*Rta*' or the cosmic order and later termed as '*Satya*' or the invariable Truth. Further, it came to be widely known by the word '*Karma*'. *Karma* refers to both action and result of action. It works on certain universal principles, according to the Vedas. That is, every action gives result and every result is reaped through various experiences. The concept of *Dharma* is the primary determinant of *karma*. Hence, we find lot of importance given to *dharma* in the Vedas. The *Karma* and *Dharma* are inseparable factors of the rhythmic flow of the universe and all its beings. The ethical and moral codes come under *dharma* and the performance of the moral codes (as prescribed or its violation, that is, *dharma* and *adharma*) comes under *karma*. Here too a cyclic process is indicated wherein one performs *karma*, reaps *karma phala* (result) and that again leads to performance of *karma*. This chain, is said to continue not only in the present birth but is a chain with countless past births and future births. Thus, we have the theory of transmigration.

Theory of Transmigration

According to this theory, an individual being under the law of *karma*, assumes different physical bodies, that is, takes several births. This concept of the Vedas is imbedded in every religious act and ritual. An individual constantly tries to remove the past accumulated *adharma* (demerit) and seeks to nourish *dharma* (merit) in the present birth, which is believed to determine the future birth. The religion focuses on a *dharmic* living to ensure a safe future birth, whereas, the philosophers seek to exit from the cycle of births and deaths.

Vedic Designation

Apart from the religious and philosophical fervour, the Vedic society is also designed with a hope for a harmonious living. In this view, the Veda suggests the classification of a society based on the aptitude (*guna*) and profession (*karma*) of an individual, which is known as *Varna*. The

other classification is based on the stage of life an individual passes through and it is known as *Ashrama*.

Vedas visualises the aptitude of the individuals broadly as four: knowledge-oriented, action-oriented (which is again in three ways, action for protection and administration and action for trading and commerce) service-oriented with skilled and semi-skilled actions. These four broad aptitudes are essential for any society and these aptitudes when designed into a profession, their functioning would take care of the individual interest and the interest of the society at large. The Vedas groups this as *varna* and names them as *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* respectively. But, unfortunately in the fading of the Vedas, the vision of the Vedas too diminished and took the cruel form of caste system by which we are unable to free ourselves even in this 21st century.

From the stand of the different stages of life, again the Vedas classifies them into four, as the student-life (*Brahmacharyam*), married-life (*Grhastham*), retired-life (*Vanaprastham*) and mendicant-life (*Sanyasam*). These four are known as *Ashramas*. The four stages need not be compulsory; depending on the aptitude of an individual one may move from the first *ashrama* to the third or at times to the fourth. The dharma and karma prescribed in the *varna-ashrama* scheme vary which take care of the general duties and the specific duties, thus making the concept of dharma more complex and complicated.

2.5 UPANISADS

The Upanisads are the prime source of many philosophical conclusions. The word Upanisad can be split as *upa+ni+sat*; to mean ‘*upa*’ – approaching a teacher; ‘*ni*’ – for knowledge; ‘*sat*’ – to attain liberation. Of more than 1180 upanisads, the popular and widely studied are the ten Upanisads, namely, Isa, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya and Brihdaranyaka. We shall briefly see the important doctrines as found in these upanisads.

The Upanisads present Brahman as the absolute reality and the substratum of the universe. Brahman is revealed as both the material and intelligent cause of the universe. Upanisads employ two ways of defining Brahman, one in its own nature (*svarupa lakshana*), that is, Brahman as the Consciousness, Existent and Bliss principle. The second definition is from its accidental attributes (*tatastha lakshana*) wherein Brahman is shown as the substratum of origination, sustenance and resolution of the universe. Various methodologies are used by the Upanisads to arrive at the absolute reality and one such method we find in the Aitareya Upanisad is known as superimposition and negation (*adhyaropa* and *apavada*). The world and its objects are superimposed initially and after the revelation of the non-difference between the effect and its material cause, the world is negated as non-existent in the substratum. Further, there is the description of the world, the individual self and the creator of the universe in the Upanisads. The method of moving from the gross to the subtle is employed in the Taittiriya Upanisad. Here, the nature of self is analysed beginning from the gross physical body leading to the subtlest Consciousness. Some important images like the chariot and bow-arrow, are presented in

Kathopanisad and Mundakopanisad respectively. The Upanisads uniformly present the triple means to a seeker of truth, they are, listening to the scriptures (*shravana*), pondering on the teaching so as to remove doubts and misconceptions (*manana*) and dwelling on the teaching (*nididhyasana*). Mostly, the Upanisads are set in a dialogue between a teacher and a disciple and the teaching is gradual and progressive. The various Upanisads consistently deal with one subject-matter of that absolute truth.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Examine some of the Basic Concepts of the Vedas that influenced the religious and philosophical thinking of India.

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2) What is the role of the Upanisads? Give an outline of the contents of the Upanisads.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

Vedas or the source of knowledge, is also referred to as the *Sruti*. The content of the Vedas that has come down to us for centuries is said to have been heard by the sages in deep meditation and these sages are therefore known as '*mantradrastas*' or the 'seer of the mantras'. The word 'Veda' generally refers to 'Mantras' and 'Brahmanas'. Mantras are hymns in praise of gods who are invoked in a ritual and Brahmanas are those portions which give various instructions on the performance of rituals. The Aranyakas deals with meditation which is generally taken up while living in forest (*aranya*). The Upanisads reveal the Absolute Truth, which provides the means to liberation and is popularly known as the 'Vedanta.' The Vedic Literature is vast with several branches and sections. The Vedic concepts and doctrines have highly influenced the religious and philosophical thinking of India. Some of the concepts are the definition of *Sat* and *Asat*. The most influential concepts are the law of karma and the concept of dharma that reflect the social condition of Vedic period.

The Upanisads employ two ways of defining Brahman, one in its own nature (*svarupa lakshana*), that is, Brahman as the Consciousness, Existent and Bliss principle. The second definition is

from its accidental attributes (*tatastha lakshana*) wherein Brahman is shown as the substratum of origination, sustenance and resolution of the universe. The Upanisads uniformly present the triple means to a seeker of truth; they are, *shravana*, *manana* and *nididhyasana*. Mostly, the Upanisads are set in a dialogue between a teacher and a disciple and the teaching is gradual and progressive.

2.7 KEY WORDS

- Veda:** source of knowledge
Samhita: a collection of mantras or *suktas*
Brahmana: that portion which prescribes rules and regulations for rituals
Aranyaka: it gives the detail of meditations
Upanisad: it conducts a philosophical quest

2.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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