

THE VEDA

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I. Introduction

A. Some generalizations

1. The general view is that orthodoxy (Hinduism) is separated from other South Asian traditions because of the position of the Veda. In other words THE VEDA IS THE SIGN OF INDIAN ORTHODOXY. So a formula describing this arises:

Vedādhyānaṃ dharmah (The study of the Veda is *Dharma*)

This sentiment corresponds to that found in the Epics and the Purāṇas

2. Yet, there are a number of Hindu sects that do reject the Veda.
3. The thesis that the Veda is eternal and non-human is of later (post-Vedic) origin: in the Mīmāṃsā and of the Vedānta philosophical systems.
4. During the “renaissance of Hinduism” in the 19th century, the Vedas were viewed in a different way

a. Rammohan Roy inaugurated a modernizing (atheist) interpretation of the Upaniṣads, whose teachings he integrates with his belief. For the first time, a small fragment of the Veda becomes an element of living faith, at the cost of all that was the *raison d'être* of the ancient Veda, mythology and ritual, and which remains the necessary base of the Upanishads themselves.

Later, Rabindranath Tagore and S. Radhakrishnan arrived at a more or less humanistic synthesis, the former on a rather poetic plane, the latter on a philosophical one. For them, the Veda is only a backdrop on which the spiritual images of the Vedanta come to fix themselves.

5. For Dayānanda Sarasvatī and his Ārya Samāj, the hymns matter the most, with a very fundamental (and possibly aberrant) interpretation in the social and political sense.
6. For A. K. Coomaraswamy, starting from the Hymns and Brāhmaṇas, there is an outline of a *philosophia perennis*.
7. For Aurobindo, the Ṛg Veda is placed on a mystical basis.
8. Still others reject the Veda as such: Debendranath Tagore
Or ignore them (Keshab Chandra Sen).

A. Veda Today

1. The practices that are known as Vedic subsist in private prayer. The *mantras* of the Sanskrit language are, in part, of Vedic origin.
2. Among the most orthodox rites is the

sandhyā (always impregnated with āgamic elements), many *saṃskāras*, among which are the marriage and funeral rites; the *homa* also combining oblation in the fire with alien elements

II. Vedism

A. Hinduism a continuation of the Veda

B. Vedic religion consisted of

1. a highly developed mythology
2. lacked an absolute sovereign
3. distributed gods

- a. according to the region occupied by them,
- b. according to their relation with rites,
- c. according to the functions which they represented

4. General tendency was to attribute highest importance to the god who was being invoked by conferring on him attributes which commonly belonged to other gods (**Henotheism**)

5. There were gods who permanently occupied an honored and lasting place

- a. Indra (and his associates, the twin gods *Asvins*)
- b. Agni, god of fire
- c. Soma

6. Above the gods were abstract forces which were active: *Ṛta*, the force of order which correlated the cosmic and the human. Vedic prayer was to maintain order.

7. *Ṛg-veda* (1500 bce) contains this mythology and speculations

a. Later texts reveal other aspects: magic (= prayers of a compelling purpose) and ancient traces of cosmogonic speculation: *Atharva-veda*

b. From the later *Ṛg-veda* and later is found the theme of the primitive man, a cosmic giant who was immolated at the time of the First Sacrifice.

c. Other collections contain **formulas** to be recited during ceremonies and **explanations** and **commentaries** to clarify their usage (*Brāhmaṇas*)

8. Most texts were composed with a view toward sacrifice

a. Sacrifice was at the center of the Vedic religion: a succession of oblations and prayers, in which the culmination was reached when the offering was placed in the fire.

b. No temples nor idols; no prayers were disassociated from the cult

c. Rituals

(1) *Agnihotra*: simple daily oblation in the fire

(2) *Aśvamedha*: the horse sacrifice, wherein the king celebrated his victories

(3) *Rājasūya*: the coronation of the king

d. Descriptions of the sacrifices were in the *Sūtras*, texts in aphoristic style

9. Aspects of Vedism are unclear, but it is primarily a ritualistic religion in which the person defines faith as the conviction in the exactitude and effectiveness of the rite

a. Moral obligation demanded the exercise of good acts, of giving

b. Many of the primitive values of restraint and of the exchange of goods have been preserved in the Vedic religion

c. No clear perspective on the afterlife, though men beg that they may not "die-again."

C. 5th-4th c. bce: new texts, *Upaniṣads* or "Equivalences"

1. Do not abandon ancient modes of thought but introduce a sort of gnosticism which explains by way of parables that the *ātman* or individual soul is identical with *brahman* or the universal soul

2. This supreme truth leads to Liberation

3. From this perspective, the world of the gods, the external apparatus of cult tended to disintegrate

4. An allegorical ritualism develops: a religious form of an introspective type

5. After the *Upaniṣads*, a popular Hinduism developed.