



Modern knowledge of Indo-Aryan religio-social culture is based on Vedic literature created between c. 2000 - 600 BC. Thus we understand that the term 'Veda' is broadly used and means no single literature. There are four primary Vedas viz. *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharveda*. These Vedas are further discussed in *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Upanishads* and *Aranayakas*.

The word *Vid* (to know) is the Sanskrit root word of Veda which means knowledge. It is said that the Vedas were not created by men but it is part of the human journey. It is eternal in concept and functional in spirit. The Vedas are also known as *Shruti* which means one hears and then memorizes and transmits it verbally to the next generation for further retention and dissemination. Historian, V.D. Mahajan, wrote, "The purity of the Vedic texts was maintained as they were considered sacred ... Moreover hymns were memorized without being understood and when the people did not know their meaning, there were lesser chances of their being changed by substitution of new words or verses."

The Rig Veda is said to be the oldest of the sacred traditional Indian scriptures consisting of 1017 or 1028 hymns which have been further divided into 10 chapters. The Rig Veda has come from the word *Rik* (verse). Historical dating of the Rig Veda is not possible. Nevertheless it gives us an insight into the social, economical, political and religious life of the people of that period. The concept of creation of the universe to the idea of natural God emerged from this text for the first time.

Commenting upon the Rig Veda Dr. B.B. Das wrote, "In the Rig Veda Samhita we first come across the ideas of definite Gods as a normal evolution from the striking phenomenon of nature. The same Samhitas show that the development of the Aryan religion and philosophy proceeded along two well marked directions. On the one hand we find the ideal of propitiating the different Gods by means of worship which led to the religious sacraments known as *yajna* or sacrifice and the other was propounding the essence of philosophy." Furthermore, the author

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asserted that out of the nature Gods they conceived the idea of the highest spirit.

The next Veda is Samaveda which is defined as "Book of Chants". This name was derived from the word *saman* (prayers for singing). They are meant to be sung at the time of *soma* (sacrifice) by a cult of Brahmins called Udgatris.

The third Veda is the Yajurveda. Yaj means worship. This book of 'sacrificial prayers' lays down the code and procedures for the performance of religious rites. In common terms there are two parts of Yajurveda: Black Yajurveda which contains the *mantras* (chants) and the White Yajurveda deals with the prose of worship. Thus we find a systematic code of worship developed in the Yajurveda.

The fourth Veda is the Atharveda which deals with danger from evil spirits and prescribed formulae of magic to control demons and evil spirits. Scholars say that for a long time this was not acknowledged as Veda.

Vedas are further analyzed in Samhitas, Brahmanas, Upanishads and Aranayaks. To describe these let us borrow an explanation from the Indologist, Sir G.C.M. Birdwood, who wrote, "The Samhita comprises the *mantras* or hymns and proverbs. The Brahmanas describe the details of Vedic ceremonies for guidance of Brahmins (priests). The Jnana or Upanishads are the philosophical part. The Aranayaks belonging to the forests are intended for Brahmins in retreat and are closely connected with the Upanishads."

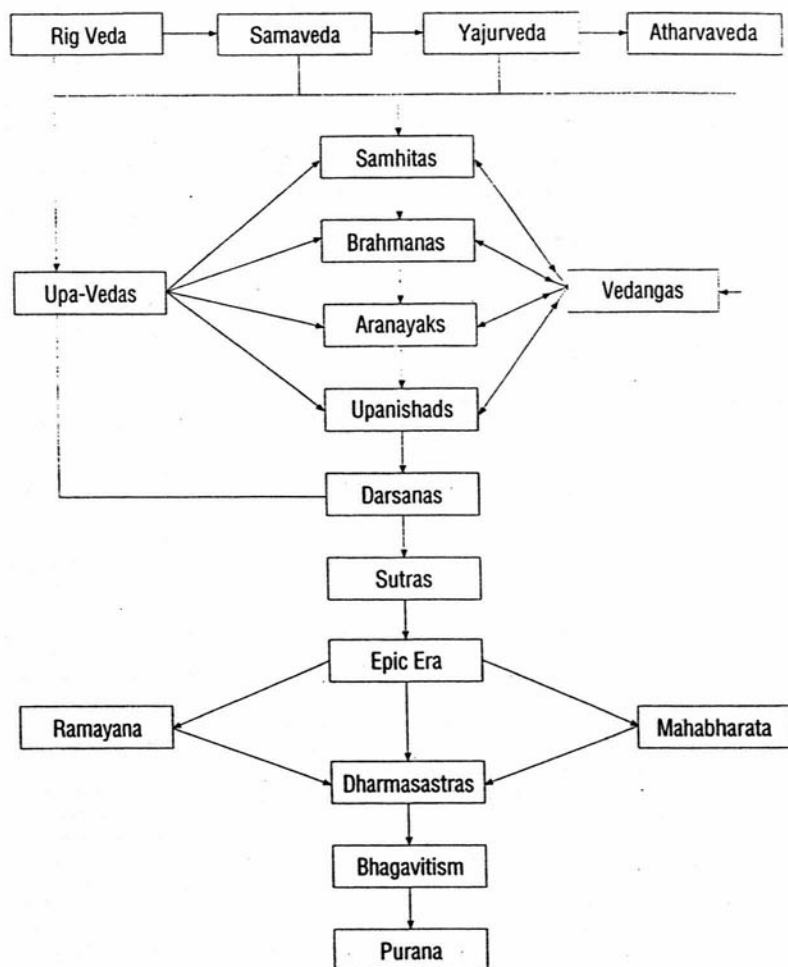
Then there are Upa Vedas (sub Vedas) of four types: Ayurvedas (Science of Medicine) derived from the Rig Veda; The Science of Music which originated from the Samaveda is also known as Gandharva Upaveda; Military Science is Dhamur Veda which originated from Yajurveda; Sthapatya Veda (Science of Mechanics and Architecture) originated from Arthaveda.

The Upanishads (c. 800 - 500 BC)

The Upanishads not only depict the zenith of knowledge but also shows the cultural growth of Indology.

The term Upanishad literally means 'sitting near'. It indicates the concept of Guru-Shishya parampara (teacher-disciple tradition): sitting near the guru to learn. In the Indian tradition the secret doctrines are not for public consumption but rather for those who seek them. Thus the secrets hidden in

Overview of Vedic Literature



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the Vedas are declassified by the teacher to the disciple.

The Upanishads were authored by different sages at different times and historians place them between 800 - 500 BC. There are 108 Upanishads which demystify relations of Creators and created and propound the basic philosophy. However, the utterance of the Upanishads are creations of spiritual minded people who had the

rare glimpse of the highest truth. Thus in philosophy we find the process is more intuitive than logical. The objective remained to satisfy the natural yearnings of the human mind to know the absolute truth.

According to Dr. Winternitz who wrote in *History of Indian Literature*: "... the whole of the later philosophy of the Indian is rooted in the Upanishads. Their doctrines formed the foundation of Vedanta Sutra of Badarayana... The theological philosophical systems of Sankara and Ramanuja whose adherents at present day are still counted by millions."

Explaining the fundamental doctrines of the Upanishads Dr. V.D. Mahajan explained that the universe is the Brahman and Brahman is the *atman* (soul) and, thus spelled, God dwells in all beings. German mystic Schopenhauer often referred

to the term *tat twam asi* which means *that thou art* — the universe and Brahman. The world exists only in so far as thou, thyself art conscious of it.

The Upanishad propounds that the essence of self is the soul and not the body, mind or ego. To conceptualize we take one exemplary explanation of the thought: A guru asks his disciple to bring a fig and tells him to split it then asks "What do you see there?" The disciple replies "Three fine seeds." The guru then tells him to split the seeds and again asks "What do you see?" The reply is, "Nothing". "Verily, my dear one, that finest essence which you do not perceive ... from the finest essence this great tree thus arises... that which is the finest essence the whole world has as in soul. That is reality, that is *atman*. *Tat twam asi* — that thou art."

Likewise the Upanishads removed many an enigma about the concept of *atman* and *paramatma*, the Supreme Soul. These thoughts later on took a definite shape of philosophy in the era of Ramanuja and others. The Upanishads propounds its philosophy through many interactive discussions and if one delves deep into it one might perceive what is otherwise unperceivable.

Vedangas, Darshanas and Sutra Era (7th -2nd century BC)

Vedangas: There are six Vedangas (members of the Vedas) composed long after the Upanishads. They are Siksha or pronunciation; the Chhandas, prosody and verse; Vyakarana that deals with grammar; Nirukta is a type of dictionary of obscure words and phrases; Jyotisha is a very important Vedanga which elaborates the Hindu school of astronomy. Finally there is Kalpa Vedanga which is a description of religious ceremonies.

Darsanas: There are six schools of Indian philosophy which are an important part of Vedic literature. These were composed between the 6th and 3rd century BC. They are Nyaya, Vaisesika, Sankhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa and Uttara Mimamsa Darsana. These Darsanas are in the form of Sutras — aphorisms which are short, definite and free from doubts. Except for Purva Mimamsa all talk about *moksha* (emancipation) through purification of the heart. No gain-oriented activity is also propounded.

Sutras: This is a manual of instructions. It was created between

the 7th and 2nd century. It encompasses the Vedangas, Nirukta of Yaksha, Ashtadhyayi of Panini, Srauta Sutra, Griha Sutra and Dharma Sutra. The Ashtadhyayi of Panini is a book of Sanskrit grammar. Srauta Sutra gives details of ceremonies to be practised by priests. The Griha Sutra deals with domestic sacrifices and rites to be performed by householders. The Dharma Sutra refers to customary law and practices.

The Epic Era and Dharmashastra

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the two epics which are not only revered by Hindus but open a panoramic scenario of ancient times with a touch of mythology. The *Ramayana* is the oldest epic and is said to have been written by sage Valmiki. It contains seven books and 2400 couplets. The *Mahabharata* consists of 18 books and there are about one lakh couplets. Its author is Vyas Muni.

Historian Dr. R.C. Majumdar, describes the *Ramayana* as the expansion of Aryan culture over the Deccan and deep South India. It also pays an indirect tribute to the high state of material and moral culture of the non Aryans. This is the foundation of the Hindu way of life where the opponents are measured and revered. Dr. Majumdar wrote: "The first and last book of the *Ramayana* are later additions. The bulk, consisting of Book II-VI, represents Rama as an ideal. In Book I and VII Rama is made an *avatar* (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu and the epic poem is transformed into a Vaishnava text. The reference to the Greeks, Parthians and Sakas show that these books cannot be earlier than the second century BC. It is interesting to note that the *Ramayana* story was known to *Mahabharata* people. Thus *Ramayana* is the older of the two epics.

Without going into the details of the two epics let us delve into their essence. Apart from the story line we find a new theory not talked about in earlier Vedic literature. In the *Ramayana* for the first time the philosophy of Vishnu incarnation as Rama gained currency. Moreover for the first time the *Ramayana* coins different Hindu pantheons which in course of time gave birth to many a belief system within the macro Hinduism which envelopes all castes and creeds in the pan Indian concept. The *Ramayana* propagates the concept of Vishnu in the fold of incarnations and at the same time praises Shaivite philosophy and even praises Ravana on many occasions on the count of morality and strength. Thus the seed of praising even the enemy was planted and harmony became the key word for the Hindu way of life.

In the *Mahabharata* one can see how it thematically deals with the socio-political life of those times which introduced many rituals and codes for the Hindu way of life. The *Bhagavat Gita* is an integral part of the *Mahabharata* where Lord Krishna (again reincarnation of Vishnu) advised and taught Arjuna about life, mortality and reincarnation. With its theo-philosophical treatment it is held in great veneration by Hindus. In the *Gita* Lord Krishna unfurled the mystery of the world and enlightened Arjuna about the basic concept of *dharma* (morality) and *karma* (duty) and the essence of godhood within. This is the discourse of the *Bhagavat Gita* which, till date, is not surpassed by any literary work.

The epics give us an understanding of Vedic traditions and its later manifestation. At this point we need to gauge the *Dharmashastras* which opened up a new vista to understand functional Hinduism created in the last phase of BC.

These *Shastras* are *Manu Smriti*, *Yajnavalkya*, *Narada*, *Brahspati* and *Vishnu Smritis*. Another important book which ruled the era was Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.

As we are aware, Hinduism is no mere ecclesiastical idea but rather it encompasses a way of life.

The *Manu Smriti* paves a very clear concept of laws under 18 heads. Many deal with civil laws, administrative justice to the observance of religious codes.

The concept of stages and regulations of life is discussed in the *Manu Smriti*. There are four stages: *Brahmacharya* (student life); *Grihasharam* (family life); *Vanashram* (end of family life) and *Sanyas* (ascetic life). The *Manu Smriti* provides an insight into the then social life.

The *Narada Smriti* gave further interpretation and added a few modifications to *Manu's* prescriptions. Those were regarding remarriage of women, regulation of gambling and talked about the law of inheritance.

Yajnavalkya Smriti systemizes the concept of law and all through refers to the Vedas, Vedangas and fourteen *Vidyas*.

Vedic literature has travelled through various eras and the process of understanding the encoded mysticism of the Vedic era still haunts us.