

## Why the Study of the Vedas?

SWAMI SUPARNANANDA

The need for the study of the Vedas was felt by the great Vyāsadeva. He divided and classified the Vedas into four parts: *Rik Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. The *Rik*, *Sāma* and *Yajur* Vedas have all, again, been grouped into four divisions such as Samhitā, Brāhmana (Mantra), Āranyaka and Upanishad. Only the *Atharva Veda* does not have the Upanishadic part. They contain hymns of gods and the performance of *yajna* (sacrifice) mainly for the ultimate goal of the illumination of mind.

Today we have been developing an urge to study the Vedas for knowledge with curiosity to know what is there in that ‘body of speech’ by the ancient seers of our country. Any thoughtful reader of the Vedas will easily discover that the very zeal with which Vedavyāsa started the study of the Vedas was very much lacking in the religious leaders who came later. The claim of the Vedas was great but its systematic studies were discouraged. The reason would be clear from the fact that new generations changed their focus from ‘Intuition to Reason’ and the Vedas were no longer studied with zeal and diligence.

We see that the study of the Upanishads, which appear at the end of the Vedas, has gained both popularity and momentum over the centuries. But at the same time the ‘Mantra’ part of the Vedas has been relegated to the backyard in the successive centuries. The study of the Vedas has never been encouraged all through the ages. For

example, Buddha was very much impatient with the study of the Vedas and hence he flung them aside. Even Sri Krishna, ‘the giver of the *Gitā*’, wanted to look beyond the Vedas and had taught only the Upanishads. Shankarāchārya also held the Vedas useless for spiritual gain and therefore put them on the ‘shelf of neglect’.

In modern times, Swami Vivekananda’s main teachings centred round the Upanishads with major emphasis on the divinity of all life and strength, fearlessness, self-confidence and so on. He was no respecter of the *Karma Kānda* of the Vedas. But before his passing away in 1902, he made a prophetic statement to Swami Premananda that a Veda Vidyālaya was a must and Belur Math would have a Veda Vidyālaya. His great grand disciples, of course, respected his desire and, consequently, his dream came true in the form of the Veda Vidyālaya on the Belur Math premises. There Sanskrit learning and the study of the Vedas are cultivated among the students.

The general trend among the monks, however, has always been the study of the Upanishads, the *Gitā*, the *Brahma Sutra* and the like. The Samhitā, Mantra (Brāhmana), Āranyaka parts are difficult to grasp because of the frequent use of the almost unknown vocabularies. Access to the Vedic grammar even for most of the Sanskrit scholars being demanding, it is not easy for the beginners of Sanskrit learning to develop interest in the Vedas.

Moreover, translation of the entire 'Vedic Text' in all its four parts has not been done assiduously and they are not available either. Therefore, we have been trying to offer our Bengali readers the translation of the entire Vedas in 60 volumes or so in five years, thanks to the liberal financial grant of the Government of West Bengal. People may ask, as the study of the Vedas except the Upanishads has been discarded by the spiritual leaders of our country, how is it that further propagation of the Vedas in their entirety has become a necessity? True, but we cannot deny the root, the seed. From the seed develops the tree into various branches. It is unfair to totally neglect the branches. In fact, Swami Vivekananda, though principally a preacher of the Upanishads, had the encyclopaedic knowledge of all the Vedas. It is he who had constantly conveyed to us the necessity of the study of the Vedas.

Love for the study of the Vedas by Sri Aurobindo was also very strong. We all know that Sri Aurobindo's concern for superconscious state of our existence was great. His *Life Divine* deals with the subject at the greatest length. And still his 'Secret of the Veda'<sup>1</sup> and the 'Hymn to the Mystic Fire' (Vol. 10) give us an idea of his tremendous love for the Vedas. *Yajna* and its various practices have not so long been properly explained to us. Sri Aurobindo made an attempt. Sri Krishna also teaches us a different kind of *yajna* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* where he explains that *yajna* is the highest kind of sacrifice and not merely lighting a sacrificial fire just as a ritual but constantly opening ourselves to the needs of others. All our actions (*karmas*) have to be done as *yajna*, have to be directed towards sacrificing the fruits of action for the good of people.

Swamiji praised the 'South' for the preservation of Vedic learning. He did not

ignore the merits of the Samhitā and the Brāhmana parts of the Vedas. But he said that these portions were studied for ascertaining different natures of altars (*vedis*), sacrifices, libations which were 'all in the way of Bhoga'<sup>2</sup>. He cited the Vedic texts like 'Om Agnimeelay purohitam yajnyasya devamritvijam. Hotāram Ratnadhātam amu' Or, 'Om Ishetvorjetvā vāyavah...' (*Yajur Veda* 1.1.1). Or, 'Om shanno deveerabhoshtaye...' (*Atharva Veda* 1.1.1)

In the Samhitās, we have prayers for keeping us well in different spheres of heaven. For example, in the *Rig-Veda Samhitā* we have the prayer like 'Make me immortal in that realm where they move even as they list' or 'In the third sphere of inmost heaven, where worlds are full of light, make me immortal in that realm of bliss.'<sup>2</sup> But how greatly Swamiji has acknowledged the publication of the *Rig-Veda Samhitā* with translation in English by Prof. Max Muller! 'We cannot easily comprehend how difficult it is for a foreigner, however learned he may be, to find out the accuracy or inaccuracy of these Sanskrit Characters, and more especially to make out clearly the meaning of an extremely condensed and complicated commentary.'<sup>3</sup>

And still we see in what zeal Swamiji has been praising the Vedas: 'You will remember that in India these Vedas are regarded in a much higher light than even the Christians regard their Bible. Your idea of revelation is that a man was inspired by God; but in India the idea is that things exist because they are in the Vedas. In and through the Vedas the whole creation has come. All that is called knowledge is in the Vedas. Every word is sacred and eternal, eternal as the soul, without beginning and without end.'<sup>4</sup>

Of the two major parts of the Vedas, the ceremonial part became so intricate that it was almost hopeless to disentangle them and that is why the knowledge part in the Upanishads came up to do away with the ceremonials but ‘gently, by explaining them.’ Swamiji has given a detailed description of some doctrines in the Vedas which, he claimed, he even could not understand. For example, he said,

When a man dies, who has by meditation purified himself and got knowledge, he first goes to light, then from light to day, from day to the light half of the moon, from that to the six months when the sun goes to the north, from that to the year, from the year to the sun, from the sun to the moon, from the moon to the lightning, and when he comes to the sphere of lightning he meets a person who is not human, and that person leads him to the (conditioned) Brahman. This is the way of the gods. When sages and wise persons die, they go that way and they do not return. What is meant by this month and year, and all these things, no one understands clearly. Each one gives his own meaning. . . .<sup>5</sup>

We do not know how to study the Vedas and how to explain the words having various meanings.

Swamiji has mentioned specifically that the creation of the universe was from the Vedas. This creation is without beginning. ‘By God’s power, systems after systems are being evolved out of chaos, made to run for a time and again destroyed. . . . The sun and the moon, the Lord created like the suns and moons of previous cycles. And this agrees with modern science’—Swamiji said this in his paper on Hinduism delivered on 19th September, 1893 at Chicago Parliament of Religions. We also request the readers to go through the lectures on ‘Vedic Religious Ideals’—especially his explanation of the ‘Nāsadiya Suktam’. He said, ‘Gloom existed

first. . . . I remember three poets’ attempts to picture this. Milton says, “No light, but rather darkness visible.” Kālidāsa says, “Darkness which can be penetrated with a needle”, but none comes near this Vedic description, “Gloom hidden in gloom”. . . .<sup>6</sup>

‘That which existed at first became changed into “will”, and this “will” began to manifest itself as desire. . . . this idea of desire is said to be the cause of all we have. . . . This idea of will has been the corner-stone of both the Buddhist and the Vedantic system, and later on, has penetrated into German philosophy and forms the basis of Schopenhauer’s system of philosophy. It is here that we first hear of it:

Now first arose desire, the primal seed of mind.  
Sages, searching in their hearts by wisdom,  
found the bond,  
Between existence and non-existence.<sup>7</sup>

It is, therefore, true that though Swamiji principally preached the Upanishadic idea of divinity, fearlessness and so on, his love for the study the Vedas in general was always uppermost in his mind.

We need to study the Vedas in original to have full knowledge of our culture, religion, science and the great heritage that we had. Sri Aurobindo writes:

The Vedas are the fount of our philosophies, the bedrock of our religions, the kernel of our thought, the explanation of our ethics and society, the summary of our civilization, the rivet of our nationality. . . . From this one seed developing into many forms the multitudinous and magnificent birth called Hinduism draws its inexhaustible existence. **Buddhism, too, with its offshoot Christianity flows from the same original source. It has left its stamp on Persia and through Persia on Judaism, through Judaism Christianity and Sufism on Islam, and through Buddha on Confucianism and through Christ and**

**mediaeval mysticism Greek and German philosophy and Sanskrit learning on the thought and civilization of Europe.** There is no part of the world's spirituality, of the world's religions, of the world's thought which could be what it is today, if the Vedas had not existed. Of no other body of speech . . . in the world can this be said.<sup>8</sup>

So, the Veda is a book of Divine knowledge. But Sāyana and others (Yāska) interpreted in such a way that it became predominantly a book on rituals and worldly gains explained in terms of food, priest, giver, wealth, praise, prayer, rite and sacrifice. When the new generation in another civilization set themselves to study the Vedas, fresh errors crept in. 'In modern times, European erudition engaged itself in explaining the suggestions given by Sankarāchārya but surely unable to unlock the inner chamber of the Vedas (because Sāyana, according to Sri Aurobindo, might have used a key with double lock) [and] could not replace its utility.' It is necessary to give an *ādhyātmic* (spiritual) interpretation of the Vedas. A critical research on them is necessary with much knowledge on comparative philology of the Vedic texts. How could we know then, the real meaning of 'Cow is light'? A thorough research on the origins of Aryan 'speech' is also necessary. We have to lead up to a recovery of the old symbols and myths. It would then be possible to reveal the secret of the Vedas. And their need can hardly be denied. Swamiji did not get sufficient time to dwell on the Vedas; but Sri Aurobindo has provided us with a powerful searchlight on the subject. His ideas are scattered in his writings which are available in 36 volumes. We need a group of sincere students who would love to work on it. Let us consider the sort of qualifications that these students need for taking up the uphill task.

First, the scholars should have love and faith that the Veda is a sacred storehouse of wisdom, a great mass of inspired poetry and realization of the Rishis, seers and sages. These have to be believed. We now accept the Upanishads as true but it is equally true that the seers of the Upanishads themselves had the great idea of the Veda being a 'Revealed Scripture'. It is they who distinguished and accepted the sections of work as *Karmakānda* and the section of knowledge an *Jnānakānda*. It is, therefore, pertinent to feel that rites, rituals are not legends and moonshines or groundless and nonsensical. 'Unfortunately, the modern European scholars did not follow even Sāyana and went on to make their own etymological explanation of the words in the Vedas, or build up their own conjectural meaning of the Vedic verses and give a new presentation [which is] arbitrary and imaginative. . . . It has persuaded the mind of modern India.<sup>9</sup> Sri Aurobindo has rightly detected the fault. Whatever the European scholars have written about the Vedas, the minds of modern India are swallowing them without question.

Why do we have several interpretations of the Vedic hymns? Because it was necessary. For example, there is (a) sacrificial or ritualistic interpretation, (b) historical or mythological explanation, (c) explanation by the grammarians, by the logicians and (d) a spiritual explanation. Yāska himself admits of three kinds of knowledge of the Vedic hymns and hence three meanings: (a) sacrificial knowledge (b) knowledge of gods and (c) spiritual knowledge. Sri Aurobindo says, 'The Rishis saw the truth, the true law of things, directly by an inner vision. . . . The true sense of the Veda can be recovered directly by meditation and tapasyā.'

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