

Vedic Literature and Its Universal Concepts: Rishi, Devata and Chanda

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Abstract

Rishi, Devata, Chanda, are the three foundational pillars of the four Vedas: Rik, Yaju, Sama and Atharva .Each of these four is collection of mantra and mantra collection is called Samhita .Each Samhita consists of Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanisad texts and these are interpretive texts of Samhita . Both Samhita and interpretive texts form the vast body of Vedic literature. Samhitas are original texts whereas Brahmana and Aranyaka are their interpretations, and the Upanisads are philosophic texts of the Vedas. Rishi, Devata and Chanda are formative elements of the Vedas. Rishis are the wise scholars who have realized Vedic mantras and handed the same to their disciples which in the long run develop different Sakha or branches of each Veda and such sakha altogether were 1131 and now only 26 sakha with their texts are available. Concept of Devata is suggestive of the theme and the subject matter of Vedic literature. In the Vedas Devas are representatives of divine entity having certain physical form. The sun, the wind/ Indra and Agni (fire) are three Devata of the space, interspace and the earth. Vedas discusses One Almighty Brahma/ Purusha taking different forms as Devata based on various performances. Each Vedic Samhita and all interpretive literature follow structural pattern and especially Rigveda follows rigid metrical pattern. Each mantra of Vedic literature demands proper understanding of its Rishi, Devata and Chanda in order to capture its true spirit.

Key Words: Veda, Rishi, Devata, Chanda, Yajna

The Vedas

The Vedas are the roots of entire Sanskrit, Pali and Prākṛit literature. These are foundational texts of Sanatana vedic/ Hindu way of life. These belong to quite ancient time so the Sanskrit language of Vedic literature is a bit different from Puranic and later literary texts. It is quite significant for every educated person to have basic ideas about the Vedas. This article begins with the meaning of the term ‘ Veda’ , and what these proper names ‘ Rik’ ‘Yaju’ Sama’ and ‘ Atharva’ signify and also discusses about different schools/ branches of each of four Vedas . Moreover it highlights certain seminal vedic concepts like ‘ risi’ , ‘ devata’ and ‘chanda’.

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What is known as a stanza in a later Sanskrit text like that of Purana, Mahabharata, Ramayana and Kalidasa and other poets' texts that in Vedic text is called a Mantra. Mantra in Rig-veda is also called Richa whereas in Yaju, Sama and Atharva veda it is mantra. No mantra of the Veda can be grasped without understanding its basic structural pattern as each mantra of Veda invariably consists of three elements: Rishi, Devata and Chanda.

Let us how Rishi, Devata and Chanda are found used in the first mantra of each of the four Veda Samhitas. In the first mantra of Rigveda Madhuchchanda is Rishi, Agni Devata and Gayatri chanda (Rig 1.1.1); likewise in the first mantra of Sukla Yajurveda Paramesthi Prajapati is Rishi, Vayu Devata and Brihati chanda (Yaju 1.1); similarly in the first mantra of Sama Veda Bharadvaja is Rishi, Agni Devata and Gayatri chanda (Sama 1.1.1) and finally in the first mantra of Atharvaveda Atharva is the Rishi, Vachaspati Devata and Anustup is the used Chanda (Atharva 1.1.1). Thus each mantra of four Veda Samhita mandatorily consists of Rishi, Devata and Chanda. The meaning of the mantra can only be grasped in relation to these three cardinal elements. Though each of the four Vedic Samhita is attributed to one principal Rishi for example Rigveda to Agni, Yajurveda to Vayu, Samaveda to Surya and Atharvaveda to Angirasa/ Atharva. However within this macro form each mantra is specifically assigned to a particular Rishi. The subject matter of the first mantra of Rigveda and Samaveda is the description of the qualities of the Agni (the fire), in the first mantra of Yajurveda the discussion is about action for seeking for food, energy and motion under the aegis of Vayu (the wind) and in the first mantra of Atharvaveda request is to Vachaspati to give power of triple seven that roam around wearing different shapes and forms in the universe.

Commenting on the antiquity of the Vedas S.Radhakrishnan says "The Vedas are the earliest documents of the human mind that we possess" (IP vol I 39). There are four Vedas: Rig-veda, Yajur-veda, Sāma veda and Atharva veda. Rig veda is Veda of knowledge; Yajurveda the veda of Karma/rituals, Sama veda the Veda of Bhakti and Atharva veda is Brahma veda. Rig veda begins with an invocation and prayer to Agni, lord of light and energy, life and light; (I.1.1) Yajurveda begins with the message of ' be vibrant as the winds' be ready for the best of actions ' yajna' and thankful to Lord for food, energy, health and and life (I. 1).

About the origin of the Veda Yajnavalkya addressing Maitreyi in *Brihadaranyakopanisad* says that four Vedas came out of God naturally like breath. As the breath comes out of the body and it is back when the person dies and in the same way the vedas are revealed by God in the initial phase of each new Age and new creation and are taken back at the time of dissolution and the same idea is repeated in Satapath Brahmana by Yajnavalkya (14.5.4.10) and (Dayananda in Rigveda Bhasyabhumika 20). God revealed Vedic

knowledge to Agni, Vayu, surya and Angirasa, as these are the main Rishis of Rig-veda, Yaju-veda, Sama-veda and Atharva-veda respectively(Shatpath Brahmana 11.5.2.3).

The word Veda is from the sanskrit root “Vid” jnane means knowledge. It is a common noun but not proper noun. There are different words used for Vedas such as ‘sruti’ ‘trayi’ ‘ āgama’ nigama’ adhyaya/svadhyaya’ and ‘ Chandasa’(Regmi 38-45).

In certain mantras of Rig *veda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharva-veda* names of four vedas are clearly mentioned and the Atharva veda is named as ‘ Chandamsi’ (Rv X.90.9/ Yv XXXI.9) and (Av X.7.20). Yajnyvalkya in *SatapathBrahmana* refers Atharvaveda as Atharva Angiras (XIV.5.5.10). Atharvaveda is also named in different ways like Atharvana, Atharvangirasa, Chandamsi, Brahmaveda, Bhesaja-veda, Amrita-veda (Sarasvati, Atharva-veda vol.1 ,10-13).

Division of the Veda

It is said that in the initial phase of creation there was only one Veda, intact body of knowledge. Krishna Dvaipayana (Vedavyasa) realized it is too much for an individual to go through such a big body of knowledge so he decided to divide it into four books so his name became Veda Vyasa (divider of the Veda). He divided it into Rik, Yaju, Sama and Atharva and handed to his four disciples Rig-veda to Paila, Yaju to Vaisampayana, Sama to Jaimini and Atharva to sumantu respectively and each of them handed the concerned vedic tradition to their disciples. For example Paile handed Rig-veda to two of his disciples Indrapramiti and Baskali, Vaisampayana Yajurveda to Charak and Yajnyvalkya, Jaimini handed Samaveda to Sumantu and Atharvaveda was handed by Sumantu to Kabandha and so different schools of each Veda got developed.

Each school of the Veda (Sakhā/ Pratisakhā) under certain patron teacher developed its own system of utterance, ritual use and tradition of interpretation. In this process different branches in each Veda got developed while maintaining teacher disciple tradition in the form of Gurukula. Rig veda had 21 branches, Yajurveda 101, (Krishna yajurveda 84 and Shukla Yajurveda 16 =101), Sama veda 1000 and Atharva veda 9 branches and altogether 1131 branches of four Vedas (Patanjali Vyakaranamahabhasya 1.1.1). Out of 1131 schools or branches at present only 4 branches of Rig-veda, 17 of Yajurveda (krishna Yaju 14, sukla 3), 3 of Samaveda and 2 of Atharva veda altogether 26 schools or branches exist.(Regmi 94).

Rationale of Four Division of the Veda

The four fold division of the Veda is for practical purpose i.e. for better performance of various Vedic yajna like Agnistoma, Somayāga which require four fold priests as such rituals demand distinct role of the expert of each Veda during the performane of a yajna

(ritual) (Bhāgavat 1.4.19-20). The expert of each of four Vedas has to play distinct role and are known by different names. The expert of Rigveda reciting mantra from Rigveda is known as Hota and he and his assistants recite Rik mantras during the ritual performance; expert of Yajurveda in the ritual is called Adhvaryu and he and his assistants recite Yaju mantra as offer oblation to the fire god; Sama singers are called Udgātā and he/they go on singing Samaveda mantras and expert of Atharvaved in the yajna is called Brahmā , he recites Shanti and Paustic mantra from Atharvaveda and he supervises each and every aspect of the ritual. Thus a vedic ritual is accomplished by proper role of Hota, Adhvaryu, Udgātā and Brahmā(Regmi 72-74). It justifies four fold division of the Veda.

Main Body of Vedic Literature

Four Samhitas , Brāhmana texts, Aranyaka texts and Upanisads of each samhita; Six limbs (sat anga) , four Upa Vedas, six secondary limbs(sat upānga) form the main body of Vedic literature. Let us enumerate Anga,Upanga, Upaveda in the following lines:

Six limbs (Sat anga) Veda : Siksha (system for proper recitation of each word/ orthoepy, Phonology), Kalpa (principles of rituals),Vyakaran (rules of grammar), Nirukta (etymology), Chanda (prosody) and Jyotish (astronomy/ astrology)

Four Upa Vedas: Arthaveda (Kautilya Arthashastra, Sukraniti, Kāmandakiyanitisar, Chanakyaniti, Pachatantra) or Sthapatyaveda (Kāsyapasilpa, Mayamata, Manusyalayachandrika, Mānsār, architecture related texts) are Upaveda of Rigveda. Dhanurvedhya (the science of war, war strategy and weapons, military science is the Upaveda of Yajurved. Gandharvaveda (the science of music, drama and performance (such texts fall to this category -Nāradasamhitā, Bharatnātyasastra, sangitratnakar etc) is the Upaveda of Sāmaveda. And Ayurved, the science of life and medicine (texts *the Charakra*, the Sushruta, the Nighantu fall to this category) is the Upaveda of Atharvaveda (Regmi 109).

Six Secondary Limbs (sat Upānga):

Sankhya (Kapil muni: Sankya sastra), yoga (Patanjali: Yogasastra/sutra, commentary of Vedavyasa); Nyaya (Gotama : Nyāyasāstra,commentary of Vatsyayan); Vaisesika (Kanāda: Vaisesika sāstra with commentary of Gotāma); Purva Mimamsa (Jaimini: Purva mimamsasatra ,commentary of Yāskamuni) and Vedanta (Vyasa muni : 10 Upanisads ,commentary (with the gloss of) Baudhāyana).Thus the six secondary limbs are six system of philosophy (Sat Darsana).

Four Samhitā are regarded as “authoritative texts” whereas ‘Brāhmana’ text, ‘Aranyaka’ texts and ‘Upanisads’ of each Samhita regarded as “the commentaries on the Vedas”. Out of 1131 branches of the Vedas four being Samhita texts other 1127 are regarded

“only the glosses of the Vedas” the same applies to six limbs of the (sat anga) Vedas and six upānga and four Upavedas (Dayananda 267-269).

As each mantra of the Veda is attributed to a Rishi, Devata and chanda (metre) so proper understanding of them is seminal point to interpret the mantra of each Samhita.

Rishi in the Vedas

The word Rishi in Taittiriya Aranyaka is derived from abhi+a+ rishi means to go upward or to appear; Sayana derives it from the root ris gatau (to go); Dayananda Sarasvati takes the word rishi from Nirukta III.3 seers have the visions of the mantras; rishidarshanat (NiruktaII.20; Rishis have penetrating insight, are able to interpret the correct sense of the Vedic texts “rishayo mantra dristayo bhavanti” (Daya on Rig 1.1.1); mantarthavid (Yaju 31.9).

Sarvanukramani enumerates a list of 407 Rishis for the entire Rigveda. The Rishis given in Mandala two to seven are also related to system of Gotra and Pravara (Satya Prakash The Rik-Yaju prefaces 208-15).

The Rishi held firm belief that the universe runs in its course on the basis natural and universal principle ‘ ritam’ ‘satyam’ .The sun, the moon, the constellation, the nature and its various components, all function due to universal principle of ‘ritam’ and ‘satyam’ (10.37.2).

Rigveda talks about types of Rishi ancient and modern ones (1.1.2).

There are references of seven types of Rishi: Brahmarshi, Devarshi, Maharshi, Paramarshi, Shrutarshi,Rajarshi and Kāndarshi (*Ratnkosh/ Trikandakosh*)

Rishi is defined by Yaska in *Nirukta*, the one who could realize Vedic mantras (2.11).

Concept of Rishi is related to the concept of ‘Devata’

Acharya Katyayana in his work *Sarvanukramasutra* uses two terms for Rishi ‘ drasta’ (one who realizes) and ‘ smarta’ (one who recalls).

Assigned Rishis in different Mandala of Rigveda

Though each mantra is associated with some Rishi but the mantras of Mandala two to seven, each Mandala is related to one Rishi.The second Mandala to Gritsamada, third Mandala to Visvamitra; fourth Mandala to Vamadeva; fifth Mandala to Atri; sixth Mandala to Bharadvaja and seventh Mandala to Vasistha. First sukta in each Mandala is devoted to Agni and it is followed by the Suktas related to Indra and other deities. Eighth Mandala is related to Kanva rishi but some suktas in this Mandala are also related to other Rishis. In the ninth Mandala most of Rishis are the same used in two to seven Mandalas. First Mandala and the tenth Mandala are related to many Rishis and have subject matter of different themes.

In Samaveda Rishi uses seven music tones to sing the Vedic mantra. The seven sama are: Sadja, Rishava, Gandhar, Madhyam, Panchama, Dhaivata and Nisad. (Manduki siksha 1.7.8 quoted in Regmi).

Besides rishi another important vedic concept is ‘ devata’ (deity).

Devata (Deities) in the Vedas

The *Nirukta* of Yaska discusses in detail in its chapters VII to XII known as Devata Kanda about Vedic Devatas. In Vedas the word Devata means the subject matter or the theme of mantra (Sarasvati Rik-Yaju Prefaces 83). The subject of the earth is primarily concerned with Agni as devata, the atmosphere with Vayu and Indra as Devata and celestial sphere with Surya as Devata and thus three worlds ‘ Lokas’ each having primarily one Devata , Prithvi has Agni, Antariksha- Vayu/ Indra; space has Surya. These three principal deities include all other deities. The text *Brihad Devata* credited to Saunaka discusses in great length about Vedic Devatas.

Devata are the sons of Diti and therefore they are Āditya. Aditi is not only the mother of Devata but an embodiment of infinite everlasting strength and power (1.89.10).

Abrahamic discourses blame the Hindus as celebrating uncountable gods and goddesses but the Vedas basically talk about single transcendental God but the same appears with different names based on different roles and performances (Rig 1.164.46). The Vedas categorically mentions about thirty three gods.

Indram mitram varunamagnim huratho divya sa suparno garutm n;

Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadantyagnim yamam m tarishvanm hu.

(Reality is one, truth is one, not more than one. The learned and wise speak of it in many ways. They say: it is Indra (glorious), Mitra (universal friend), Varuna (highest adorable) Agni (light of life) Divya (heavenly) Suparna (supreme beauteous) Garutmān (supreme dynamic). They say it is Agni (life and leader of existence), Yama (supreme controller, the judge) and Matarishva (supreme energy of the universe).

God alone is one, though known as Agni, king Varuna, Mitra ,Aryaman or Amsa (RV 2.1.4); God is Agni Rudra, Mahah, Asura and Pusan (RV 2.1.6). Thus the same God is referred by different names and forms based on different performances.

The Vedas very clearly refers to thirty three ‘ devas’ deities who take their shares in humans observed Yajna ‘ rituals’ and return to the humans in two fold (Rigveda 3.6.9 and Atharva 10.7.13) In *Satpath Brahmana* Yajnavalkya enumerates 33 deities to Shakalya in this way : 12 Aditya, 11 Rudra, 8 Vasu, Indra and Prajapati (4.5.7.2).

Astavasus: The fire, the earth, the air, the intermediate region between the sun and the

earth, the sun, the firmament, the moon and the constellations are regarded as Astavasu because they hold all things in existence in the universe.

Ekadasa Rudra: 10 Pranas (vital airs) and Atma (individual self/spirit) form 11 Rudra. These can be categorized in this way:

Five primary vitals: Prana,(Breath in) Apana,(breath out) Samana (help digestion), Udana (help swallowing food) and Vyana(cause the bodily organs move);

Five subordinate vitals : Nāga (the wind that causes belching/eructation), Kurma (the wind that causes opening and closing of eyelids), Krikala (the wind which causes yawning), Devadutta(the wind which causes hunger and thirst) and Dhananjaya (the wind which remains in the body even after death and it causes the body swell).

These vital airs are called Rudra because they cause weeping of the relatives of dead person when these vital airs leave the body the person dies.

Dvadasa Aditya: The twelve months and twelve constellation (Rasi) are 12 Aditya (the time) .Yajurveda says there are 33 devata and God is their overlord and master who keeps all created things under control (14.31) . Atharvaveda says the 33 devas fulfill their allotted functions in God's creation. Learned ones know the 33 devas (10.7.13, 23,27).

Atharvaveda suggests deities are of three kinds on the basis of their locations: the earth, the interspace and the space (10.9.92). Nirukta (7.5) also supports the idea of location based deities in the Vedas and limits their number only three, Agni is the deity of the earth, Vayu or Indra the deity of the interspace and the sun the deity of the space. Thus he views that there are only three deities. Supporting this idea Rig-veda views the sun from the space, the wind from the interspace and the fire from the earth protect life in every aspect (10.158.1).

The word 'deva' is from the root 'Divu' means 'to give and shine', the sun god gives us light, the fire god gives us heat and vayu gives us oxygen, the earth the food and shelter, Varun gives us water, Indra gives us energy and courage and Prajapati idea to support and protect the family.

Chanda in the Vedas

Chanda is one of six limbs of the Vedas. Rishi Pingala's Chanda sastra gives proper guidelines in this regard. It is comprehensive vedic prosody not confining to mere description of metrical formula. Katyayana in Sarvanukrama Sutra categorically states that it is absolutely essential to be familiar with the Risis, Devatas and Chandas (meters) of the mantras before one can really understand the sense of the Vedic text and hence the knowledge of Risi, Devata and Chanda of each mantra is mendatory to interpret the Vedic verse in proper way. If not so the interpretation might go to wrong track. Let me quote Katyayana

“Tacchadhyayanam pratimantramrishi chandodevata jnanapurvakam videham anyatha dosha shravanat.” (In the study of each mantra its rishi, chanda and devata must be known otherwise the study will be erroneous).

Though many Veda commentators have not paid due attention to the Chandas but Mahidhara and Ubata have given the names of the metres almost exactly in tune with the spirit of Katyayani’s Sarvanukrama Sutra. Svami Dayananda assigns metres in all the Yajuh verses.

Rishi gave expression to profound vedic knowledge in seven metres (Rig-veda 10.71.3) . The seven metres are: Gayatri, Usnik, Anustup, Brihati, Pankti, Tristup and Jagati. The same list is counted in Yajurveda (XXIII.33/ XIV.9 &10).

For Vedic metres the authors of Pratisakhyas have given importance to counting syllables in Rigvedic hymns. Each syllable has to end in a vowel and thus the number of vowels decides the number of syllables. Gayatri 8 syllables; Vairaja 10 syllables; Traistubha 11 syllables and jagati 12 syllables. The Pratisakhyas have all metres within the parametres of four formula:

- a) Gayatri pada of eight syllables ending in hrsva/laghu (short)
- b) The Vairaja pada of ten syllables ending in dirgha/ guru (- -) (long)
- c) Traistubha pada of eleven syllables ending in dirgh (- -)
- d) The Jagata pada of twelve syllables ending in hrsva (Pratisakhya sutras 988, 919)

All the hymns of Rigveda can be reduced to these simple elements as for their metrical composition:

1. Three Gayatra padas = the Gayatri (24 syllables)
2. Four Gayatra padas= the Anustubh (32 syllables)
3. Four Vairaja padas = the Viraj (40 syllables)
4. Four Traistubha padas = the Traistubha (44 syllables)
5. Four Jagat padas = the Jagati (48 syllables)
6. Mixture of Gayatri and Jagat padas = the Usnik (28 syllables), a metre btwn Gayatri and Anustubh.
7. Mixture of Anustubh and Vairaja padas = the Brihati (36 syllables), a metre btwn Anustubh and Pankti.

Let us see the syllable counting in the first mantra of Rigveda:

Ag-ni-mi-le-pu-ro-hi-tam= 8

Ya-jna-sya- de-va-mr-tvi- jam= 8

Ho-ta-ram-ra-tna-dha-ta-man= 8

Thus the 1st mantra of Rigveda has 24 syllables, divided in three steps (pada) so it is in Gayatri chanda.

Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, Upanisad

Vedic literature consists of four layers of texts: Mantra/ Samhita, Brahmana texts, Aranyaka texts and Upanisads. Collection of mantras is called samhita that is main vedic text. There are four Samhitas : Rik samhita, Yaju samhita, sama samhita and Atharva samhita. Rik Samhita consists of 9 sections called Mandala, 10552 mantra, 1028 sukta and. Sukla Yajurveda samhita consist of 40 Adhyaya (early 20 adhyayas and late 20 adhyayas as Purvavimsati and uttaravimsati) and 1975 mantras; Sama Veda samhita is divided into two sections as earlier part and later part known as Purvarchika (650 M) and Uttararchika (1225M) and altogether 1875 mantras; and Atharva samhita consists of 20 chapters known as ‘Kanda’ 736 Suktas and 5987 mantras.

Mantra and Brahmāna

Entire Vedic literature can be broadly categorized as Mantra text Brahmana texts. The Brahmana text includes Aranyakas and Upanisads. Some regards both Mantra and Brahmana texts as Vedas whereas some like svami Dayananda Sarasvati regards Mantra text or Samhita text real Veda Brahman texts are later creation and are interpretive texts of Samhita so they cannot be placed to the level of Mantra or samhita. According to them only four samhitas are primary texts other Sakha texts (1127) are secondary and interpretive texts. Shākala sākḥā of Rigveda samhitā, Madhyandini sākḥā of Suklayajurveda, Kauthum sākḥā of Sāmaveda and Shaunakiya sākḥā of Atharvaveda are reliable primary texts of the Veda (Regmi 94).

Each Samhita has Brahmana text, Aranyaka and Upanisads. Brahmana and Aranyakas are interpretive texts, these interpret mantras and if necessary give examples, upanisads are philosophical portion of each veda. There are upanisads associated to each of four vedas. For example Aitereya Upanisad is associated with Rig veda, Isha and Brihadaranyaka upanisads are associated with the Sukla yajurveda; Katha and Svetasvetara are associated with Krishna yajurveda, Kena and Chandogya are associated with Sama Veda, Mundaka, Māndukya, Prasna upanisad are associated with Atharva veda.

Conclusion

Rishi, Devata and Chanda are the trio foundation rocks of entire vedic texts. Rishi realized the spirit of the mantra and the mantra appear in certain chanda and core spirit of the mantra ‘devata’ is embodied in the metric form and thus each of the mantra of Veda Samhita handed from ancient seer through their disciples in the form of Sakha of each Veda Samhita to succeeding generation and therefore the sruti tradition continues until the oral expressions were not written down or printed in pages in the form of books and

volumes as available in present form. The four Veda samhitas Rik, Yaju, Sama and Atharva form core texts whereas Brahmana texts, Aranyaka and Upanisad texts are interpretive texts based on Samhita texts. Even among interpretive texts there is a demarcation as the first two are interpretation of Samhita texts from ritualistic perspective but Upanisads interpret Samhita from philosophic perspective and therefore Upanisads are labelled as the philosophy of the Vedas. For both layers of vedic texts, core and interpretive, the key concepts Rishi, Devata and Chanda help unfold the underlying structural pattern as well as spirit embodied as subject matter in the given vedic structural patterns.

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