

MADHAV M. DESHPANDE

**CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF THE VEDA:
FROM SPEECH-ACTS TO MAGICAL SOUNDS**

1. The Vedic literature begins with the *R̥gveda* which is a collection of hymns addressed to different Vedic divinities by the priests of various Aryan clans in Ancient India. The oldest portions of the collection probably go back to 1200 B.C., though the exact dating of its individual parts is still a subject of scholastic disagreements. Beginning with the *R̥gveda*, Vedic literature continued to be produced for several centuries, its numerous branches and sub-branches specializing in different aspects of Vedic ritual and religious life in general. In the course of the progress of the successive phases of Vedic and post-Vedic literature in India, one can discern many significant perspectives developing to deal with Vedic literature and to attempt to understand its nature and function. This paper is aimed at surveying this variety of perspectives and their evolution in general terms.¹

2. While dealing with ancient Indian literature, one can follow a number of different alternative approaches. One can study Vedic literature by

¹ For general bibliographical references concerning Vedic research, see Louis Renou (1931), and R. N. Dandekar (1946), (1961), (1973) and (1985). The research in this paper is based on an independent reading of the primary literature, and I have purposely stayed away from getting into nuts-and-bolts controversies.

applying the Western historical approach. One can also study Vedic literature from the traditional Indian perspective. Indian theories about Vedic literature themselves can be studied from various different perspectives. If one studies an Indian theory about Vedic literature from the view point of an adherent of that tradition, that particular theory generally becomes non-negotiable. It does not remain an academic matter, but a whole way of life and the very foundation of the adherent's epistemic system. However, it is possible to study the various Indic theories from a historical perspective. Why did different theories develop at different times? What did a particular theory do to those who believed in it? Different Indian theories present to us a vista of differing perceptions of Vedic literature, and the shifts in the development of these perspectives are significant indicators of how ancient texts became increasingly unintelligible as normal instances of linguistic communication, and how a continuously changing religious tradition accommodated the received ancient texts to its needs for legitimization and validation. We shall explore the following general questions:

- i What did the Vedic poets think about their activity?
- ii What did the post-Vedic Indians think about the inherited Vedic literature?
- iii How did the medieval Hindu schools deal with the Veda-s?
- iv Position of the Veda-s in Modern Hinduism.

3. In early Vedic literature, one can observe a number of dimensions of language ranging from simple

speech-acts to language being fully deified in many ways. These varied dimensions of language do appear already in the *Rgveda*. One may, in a general way, say that while adoration for language is pervasive in the Veda-s, the full deification manifests itself only in the late parts of the *Rgveda*, and continues to build in the later Vedic texts. These dimensions of language can certainly be placed in a sort of rough logical or psychological order, where a given dimension logically precedes or follows certain other dimensions. Though this does not give us chronological history, this acquaints us with the entire range of the early Vedic pre-occupation with language. At some point it may be possible to study how much of this range is traceable to the Indo-Iranian or Indo-European inheritance, and how much clearly developed in India itself. This particular question is reserved for future research.

4. The Sanskrit term *Veda* does not occur in the sense of Vedic texts or literature in the *Rgveda*, but the root *vid* in the sense of 'to know' as well as 'to find, to attain' is commonly used in the *Rgveda*. References abound in the *Rgveda* where particular Vedic poets claim to know something about particular Vedic divinities (e.g., *viduṣ te tasya kāravaḥ*, *RV*, 1.11.6; *viduṣ te tasya medhirāḥ*, *RV*, 1.11.7; and *aganmajyotir avidāma devān*, *RV*, 8.48.3), or Vedic divinities know something or other (*pra nu vocāma vidur asya devāḥ*, *RV*, 3.55.18; *veda māso dhṛtavrataḥ*, *RV*, 1.25.8; *so aṅga veda yadi vā na veda*, *RV*, 10.129.7). The root *vid* also occurs in the sense of 'to find' in the *Rgveda*, e.g., 'by means of sacrifice, they followed the path of speech and they found her who had entered into the (hearts of the?) seers,' (*yajñena vācaḥ padavīyam āyan tām anvavindan*

ṛṣiṣu pravīṣṭām, *RV*, 10.71.3). Knowledge precedes the appearance of speech and the speech reflects this underlying knowledge. This relationship between knowledge and speech mirroring each other is implicit in the *Ṛgveda* (*ko addhā veda ka iha pravocat*, *RV*, 10.129.7). Traditionally, Vedic texts have been viewed as being verbal expressions of sacred knowledge.

5. One may look at the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* as being recordings of certain special speech-acts. These speech-acts normally represent acts of describing, praising and invoking various Vedic divinities. Occasionally, we have descriptions of battles (e.g., *RV*, 7.83) philosophical speculations (e.g., *RV*, 10.129), reported conversations with Vedic divinities (e.g., *RV*, 7.86), etc., but there is hardly any question that the primary function of language in the *Ṛgveda* is that of praising and invoking Vedic divinities. It is from this point of view that Vedic poets think that their language is particularly suited to praise Vedic divinities, and hence their language is godly or divine (cf. *devī vāk*, *RV*, 8.100.11), while the language of their non-Aryan enemies is often described as a 'confused language' (cf. *mṛdhra vāc*, *RV*, 7.6.3), and the non-Aryan people are often considered to be ungodly people (*adevīḥ viśaḥ*, *RV*, 8.96.15).

6. In the *Ṛgveda*, there is a great deal of explicit awareness of the speech-act and its various forms and functions. One can make an analytical distinction between a speech-act as an event and the explicit awareness of this event on the part of the participants and observers. This is parallel to the distinction in Indian philosophical systems between a person knowing

something and a person who knows that he knows something. The explicit awareness of various speech-acts is seen in the use of various different verbs such as *vad* 'to speak,' *gr* 'to praise,' *hu* 'to invoke,' *vac* 'to speak,' *stu* 'to praise,' and *gai* 'to sing.' It is one thing just to praise a divinity, but it is another thing to say 'O Indra, I praise you.' Such a statement implies the following: 'I am praising you, and I know that I am praising you'. The use of these verbs is logically the first stage in the process of externalizing or reifying the speech-act. Thus, the speech-act is not just an event, but in its reified form it becomes an object of cognition and can be further talked about. This is the beginning of metalanguage, and it is built into the fabric of the Vedic texts. While this is indeed not the distinctive feature of Vedic language or texts, this step is necessary for further levels of reification of language.

7. From the use of such verbs as mentioned above, which talk about the speech-act as an action in process, one can then move on to the next category, i.e., the use of nouns derived from these verbs. Even as early as c. 500 B.C., Yāska, an etymologist, notes: 'They point to these characteristics of a noun and a (finite) verb. A finite verb denotes becoming as its principal meaning, (while) nouns principally denote things. Where both the (finite) verb and a (verbal) noun principally denote becoming, a (finite) verb denotes becoming as a process going from one state to the next, e.g., 'he goes,' 'he cooks.' The embodiment of the whole process from the beginning to the end, which has become reified (lit. concretized) and assumed

(conceptually) the form of an entity, is denoted by a (verbal) noun such as 'going,' 'cooking,' etc.¹ Thus, an action denoted by a verbal noun involves a further process of reification and concretization. Thus, in Vedic texts, we find the extensive use of verbal nouns to refer to speech-acts and to the faculty of speech, such as *vāk*, *vacas*, *gir*, 'speech;'; *stoma*, 'praise;'; *hava*, *hūti*, 'invocation;'; *nāma*, 'name;'; *ukti*, 'saying;'; and *dhī*, *dhiṣaṇā*, *mati*, 'thought.' More formal expressions such as *brahman*, 'potent incantation' and *mantra*, 'stanza, ritual formula' are also abundant in Vedic literature. The use of these action nouns facilitates a richer description of the speech-acts. For instance:

'We spoke saluting words to Agni.'
avocāma...vaco vandāru, *RV*, 5.1.12.

'Today, I praise your name, O Śipiviṣṭa'.
pra tat te adya śipiviṣṭa nāma...śamsāmi,
TS, 2.2.12.18.

'May we recite a *mantra* for Agni.'
mantraṃ vocemāgnaye, *TS*, 1.5.5.1.

'Speech full of honey'.
madhumatīm vācam, *AV(Ś)*, 16.2.1.

'With my speech, I speak words full of honey.'
vācā vadāmi madhumad, *AV(Ś)*, 1.34.3.

'With your heart, produce a beautiful thought for Agni.'

hṛdā matim janaya cārum agnaye, *VS*, 20.78.

¹ *tatraitan nāmākhyātayor lakṣaṇam pradīśanti bhāva-pradhānam akhyātam sattva-pradhānāni nāmāni tad yatrobhe bhāva-pradhāne bhavataḥ pūrvāparibhūtam bhāvam akhyātenācaṣṭe vrajati pacatīty upakrama-prabhṛty apavarga-paryantam mūrtaṃ sattvabhūtam sattva-nāmahir vrajyā paktir iti* | *NR*, 1.1.

'Speak great words for Indra.'
bṛhatīm indrāya vācam vada, *VS*, 5.22.

'May our blessings come true.'
satyā naḥ santv āśiṣaḥ, *VS*, 2.10.

'My words approach Indra on all sides.'
giro ma indram upayanti viśvataḥ, *RV*, 3.52.1.

8. With such a reified perception of speech-acts, one finds a description of the participants in these speech-acts. These participant-relationships also get reified, and eventually formalized. Reification of the different modes of participation in the Vedic speech-acts and ritual acts eventually allows the development of a formalized system of describing and prescribing Vedic ritual. The *Atharva veda* says, 'Agni, you, O God, who were saluted, became the killer of the barbarian,' (*tvaṃ hi deva vandito hantā dasyor babhūvitha*, *AV(Ś)*, 1.7.1), and the *Vājasaneyī Saṃhitā* says, 'I, the saluter, O Agni, salute your body,' (*vandāruḥ te tanvam agne vande*, *VS*, 12.42). Thus, the terms 'saluted' (*vandita*) and 'saluter' (*vandāru*, *vandamāna*) show an awareness of the modes of participation in the speech-act of saluting and praising. In the *Rgveda*, one hears of sages 'making potent incantations,' (e.g., *brahma kṛṇvanto gotamāso arkaiḥ*, *RV*, 1.88.4; *brahma kṛṇvanto vasiṣṭhāḥ*, *RV*, 7.37.4; *brahma kṛṇvantaḥ parivatsarīnam*, *RV*, 7.103.8) and calling themselves *kāru* 'craftsmen (of language), (e.g., *imā giraḥ... purutamasya kāroḥ*, *RV*, 3.39.7; *uktheṣu kāro prati no juṣasva*, *RV*, 3.33.8; *o ṣu svasāraḥ kārave śṛṇota*, *RV*, 3.33.9). The Vedic poets are specifically assigned the authorship of particular hymns in many places in Vedic literature (e.g., *imā giraḥ... kāroḥ*, *RV*, 3.39.7; *brahmakṛto*

amṛtā viśvavedasaḥ, RV, 10.66.5; *eṣa vaḥ stomo maruta iyaṃ gīr māndāryasya mānyasya kāroḥ*, VS, 34.48). This activity of consciously and carefully crafting potent hymns is beautifully expressed in the *Rgveda*:

‘Where, like men cleansing corn flour in a sieve, the wise in spirit have created language, there, friends see and recognize the marks of friendship. Their speech retains the imprinted beauty of blessings.’¹

9. The next dimension of the reified speech-act we observe in the Vedic literature is that of the speech-act being looked at implicitly and explicitly as a means to an end. The following instances illustrate the implicit expression of this notion:

‘With my words, I praise the wise Agni who is the essential means of our sacrifice.’

iḷe agniṃ vipaścitam girā yajñasya sādhanam, RV, 3.27.2.

‘O God Agni, you, having been saluted, became the killer of the barbarian.’

tvam hi deva vandito hantā dasyor babhūvitha, AV(Ś), 1.7.1.

‘O Indra, you, who are growing with our potent prayers, please offer us wellbeing in heaven.’

adabdhena brahmaṇā vāvṛdhānaḥ sa tvam na indra divi ṣaṃ charma yaccha, AV(Ś), 17.1.12.

‘We invoke Indra with our prayers so that he may have a drink of our Soma (juice).’

¹ *saktum iva titāinā punanto yatra dhīrā manasā vācam akrata/ atrā sakhāyaḥ sakhyāni jānate bhadrāiṣāṃ lakṣmīr nihitādhi vāci* || RV, 10.71.2.

indraṃ somasya pītaye stomair iha havāmahe, RV, 3.42.4.

‘May you, O Mitra and Varuṇa, grow with our words.’

gīrbhir mitrāvaruṇā vāvṛdhadhyai, RV, 6.67.1.

‘I make you sinless with my potent incantation.’

anāgasam brahmaṇā tvāṃ kṛṇomi, AV(Ś), 2.10.1.

‘In the battle of ten kings, Indra protected Sudās due to your potent prayers, O Vasiṣṭha-s.’

dāśarājñe sudāsam prāvad indro brahmaṇā vo vasiṣṭhāḥ, RV, 7.33.3.

‘Atri found the sun, hidden in darkness, by means of his potent prayer.’

gūlham sūryam tamasā...brahmaṇā vīndad atriḥ, RV, 5.40.6.

‘O priests, transcend the (evil) speech of the enemy with your speech.’

vācā vipras tarāta vacam ayaḥ, RV, 10.42.1.

‘I destroy my enemies with my potent words and I uplift my kin.’

kṣiṇāmi brahmaṇāmitrān unuayāmi svān aham, AV(Ś), 3.19.3.

‘I crush the germs with the potent incantations of Agastya.’

agastyasya brahmaṇā sampinaṣmy aham krimīn AV(Ś), 2.32.3.

‘Agni is enkindled by the potent incantation.’
brahmaṇāgniḥ samidhyate, AV, 13.1.48.

In such instances, the cause-effect relationship or the act-goal relationship is implicit. In many of the passages, the notion that the speech-act is the means is expressed through the use of the instrumental case, e.g., *girā*, and *brahmaṇā*. Sometimes, the reified speech-act is raised syntactically to the place of an agent or subject. Such a promotion highlights the causal powers of the speech-act. Observe:

‘My words, sent from here, went forth to Indra.’
indram itthā giro mamācchāgur iṣitā itaḥ RV, 3.42.3.

Such a speech-act syntactically promoted to subject or agent position, is said to be doing what normally the priests do with the instrumentality of the speech-act. Compare the following:

‘O Indra, the sages, enhancing you with their potent incantations, attended a sacrificial session.’
tvām indra brahmaṇā vārdhayantaḥ satraṃ niṣedur rṣayaḥ, AV, 17.1.14.

In this passage, the agency rests with the sages, while the potent incantations are the instrument. Contrast the following passage:

‘My beautiful praising words ought to enhance you, O Viṣṇu!’

vārdhantu tvā suṣṭutayo giro me, TS, 2.2.12.17.

Here, the agency no longer lies with the priest, but the words of the priest are promoted to agent. This syntactic and semantic promotion of a speech-act to agent reflects an awareness of the rising power of a speech-act.

10. Vedic literature abounds with more explicit

references to the effective power of the speech-acts. Vedic poets strongly believe in the power of their prayers: Viśvāmitra claims that his potent prayers protect the tribe of the Bharata-s (*viśvāmitrasya rakṣati brahmedaṃ bhārataṃ janam, RV, 3.53.12*). The *Atharvaveda* particularly speaks eloquently about the power of incantations:

‘Whoso, O Maruts, thinks himself to be above us, or whoso shall revile our incantation that is being performed for him, let his wrong-doing be burning; the sky shall concentrate its heat upon the hater of potent incantations’.¹

‘Sharpened up is this incantation of mine; sharpened up is my heroism and strength; sharpened up and victorious be the warrior of whom I am the priest.’²

‘That incantation by virtue of which the gods do not go apart, nor hate each other, we perform in your house; concord be for your men.’³

In a number of places, the *Atharvaveda* says that a potent incantation is like an armour.

‘I am covered by the incantation-armour.’
parīvrto brahmaṇā varmaṇāham AV(Ś), 17.1.27.

‘My incantation is my inner armour.’
brahma varma mamāntaram, AV, 1.19.4.

¹ *atīva yo maruto manyāte no brahma vā yo nindīṣat kriya-mānam | tapūṃṣi tasmāi vṛjīnāni santu brahmadviṣaṃ dyaur abhis-antapāti ||, AV(Ś), 2.12.6.*

² *saṃśītam me brahma saṃśītaṃ vīryam balam | saṃśītaṃ kṣatraṃ jīṣṇu yasyāham asmi purohitaḥ || AV, 3.19.1; VS, 11.18.*

³ *yena devā na viyanti nō ca vidviṣate mithaḥ | tat kṛṇmo brahma vo grhe saṃjñānam puruṣebhyaḥ || AV, 3.30.4.*

11. In Vedic literature, one comes across praise for those who are the bearers of this potent word, and expressions of hatred against those who hate it. The *Atharvaveda* says that a priestly youth bears the shining incantation, and that this potent incantation thus installed in the priestly youth protects everything (*brahmacārī brahma bhrājad bibharti, AV(Ś), 11.5.24; tān sarvān brahma rakṣati brahmacāriṇy ābhṛtam AV(Ś), 11.5.22*). The *Atharvaveda* invokes Indra and Soma to direct their hatred for those who hate the potent incantations (*indrāsomā... brahmadviṣe dveṣo dhattam, AV, 8.4.2*). In this respect, the Vedic hymns are not just any free-flowing acts of prayer, but they are carefully crafted potent words which possess a tremendous power and are full of mysterious aspects.

‘When men, O Bṛhaspati, giving names to objects, sent out the first and the earliest utterances of speech, all that was excellent and spotless, treasured within them, was disclosed through their affection.’¹

‘By means of sacrifice they followed the path of speech and they found her entered into (the hearts of) the sages.’²

‘Speech has been measured out in four divisions; the Brāhmaṇa-s with insight know them. Three, kept in a deep secret cave, cause no (external)

¹ *bṛhaspate prathamāṇi vāco agrāṇi yat prairata nāmadheyaṇi dadhānāḥ | yad eṣāṃ śreṣṭhāṇi yad aripuram āsīt preṇā tad eṣāṃ nihitaṃ guhāvih ||, RV, 10.71.1.*

² *yajñena vācaḥ padavīyam āyan tām anvavindam rṣiṣu pra- viṣṭām |, RV, 10.71.3.*

movement; of speech, men speak only the fourth part.’¹ ‘Gods created the divine language. Creatures of many kinds speak it. May that pleasing speech, the cow that yields food and drink, being properly praised, come to us.’²

The *Rgveda* refers to those who move about with false speech which is like a milkless cow and bears neither flowers nor fruit.³ The speech of the Vedic poets is obviously different in their own eyes; it bears excellent results, flowers and fruit.

12. The recognition of the power of language which is attested everywhere in Vedic literature logically paves a way towards the deification of speech. The case of language is somewhat parallel to that of Soma, a plant whose juice was used for sacrificial oblations, or to that of Agni, fire, which is the basic element of the Vedic sacrifice. Soma and Agni are not merely treated as materials needed for the sacrifice, or as means to an end, but are endowed with sacred power and are promoted to the status of divinities in their own right. The promotion of language seems to follow the same path. Favours which were granted by Vedic divinities after being invoked and praised were often ascribed to the power of those prayers. Therefore, before one could gain any favours from Vedic divinities, one had to have full access to the mysterious

¹ *catvāri vāk parimītā padāni tāni vidur brāhmaṇā ye manīṣiṇaḥ | guhā trīni nihitā neḡgayanti turīyaṇi vāco manuṣyā vadanti ||, RV, 1.164.45.*

² *devīm vācam ajanayanta devās tāṃ viśvarūpāḥ paśavo vadanti | sā no mandreṣam ūrjaṃ duhānā dhenur vāg asmān upa suṣṭutaitu ||, RV, 8.100.11.*

³ *adhenvā carati māyayaiṣa vācam śuśruvām aphalām apuṣpām |, RV, 10.71.5.*

power of language. Obviously, not everyone had equal access to that mysterious power of language.

'One has never seen the language, though he sees; another has never heard her, even though he can hear. But to some other person, she manifests herself like a fond well dressed wife to her husband.'¹

'One man they call a laggard, dull in friendship. They never urge him on to deeds of valour. He wanders on in profitless illusion. The speech he hears yields neither fruit nor blossom.'²

13. Thus the mysteriously powerful speech had to be propitiated. The *R̥gveda* says: 'Gods created the godly speech,' (*devīm vācam ajanayanta devāḥ*, *RV*, 8.100.11). Here, the words *devīm vācam* may be understood in such a way that the word *devī* is an adjective of *vāk*, and hence it refers to godly speech, i.e., speech created by gods and worthy to be used to invoke gods. The *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa* (1.2.1.15) uses the expression *daivīm vācam*, where the word *daivīm*, with its significant vowel *ai* in the first syllable, is definitely an adjective derived from *devā*.³ This is parallel to the expression *asuryā vāk* 'demonic speech' in the *Brāhmaṇa* texts, derived from the word *asura* 'demon.'⁴ This godliness of speech made the

¹ *uta tvah paśyan na dadarśa vācam uta tvah śrūvan na śrūoty enām | uto tv asmaī tanvaṃ visāsre jāyeva pātya usatī suvāsāḥ ||*, *RV*, 10.71.4.

² *uta tvam sakhye sthirapītam āhur nainam hinvanty api vājineṣu | adhenvā caratī māyayaiṣa vācam śusrūvām aphaḷām apuspām ||*, *RV*, 10.71.5.

³ The commentator Sāyaṇa glosses *daivīm* as *deva-sambandhinīm*, 'related to gods.'

⁴ *AB*, 2.6; *ŚB*, 3.2.1.25; *ŚB*, 3.5.3.17; *ŚB*, 6.8.1.10.

Vedic sages raise it to the status of a divinity and explicitly offer 'salutations to speech,' (*namo vāce*, *MS*, 4.9.2; *TA*, 2.12.1).

The speech which is thus described as being godly and worthy of being saluted, is, it is no wonder, promoted to the status of a divinity. The *devī vāk* 'godly speech' is transformed into *vāk devī* 'speech, the goddess'. Here an original adjective *devī* becomes a substantive in the process of highlighting the importance of speech. There is a goddess *sūnṛtā* in the *R̥gveda* (1.40.3), which is identified by the commentator Sāyaṇa with the goddess of speech. But there are more explicit references to the goddess of speech in the *Atharvaveda* and other later texts. The *Atharvaveda* mentions the goddess of dawn (*uṣā devī*) together with the goddess of speech (*vāg devī*).¹ The *Vājasaneyī Saṃhitā* refers to the goddess of speech as receiving the oblation of Soma, indicating her elevation to the same status as other Vedic divinities deserving the oblation of Soma.² The same text says: 'May the goddess of speech give us profoundly.'³ Similar statements are found in other texts.⁴

14. The completion of the process of deification is marked in various ways in the Vedic literature. Most feminine deities such as the goddess of dawn and the goddess of speech have their male counterparts in Vedic literature, e.g., *uṣaspati* 'lord of the dawn' and

¹ *uṣā devī vācā saṃvidānā vāg devy uṣasā saṃvidānā | AV(Ś)*, 16.6.5.

² *vāg devī juṣānā somasya tṛpyatu | VS*, 8.37.

³ *pra vāg devī dadātu nah |*, *VS*, 9.29. Also: *TS*, 1.7.10.5.

⁴ *vācam devīm upajīvanti sarve*, *TB*, 2.8.8.4; *vāg devī juṣatām idam haviḥ*, *TB*, 2.5.1.3.

vācaspati 'lord of the speech.' The *Rgveda* invokes god *Vācaspati*, who is said to be the creator of the universe, for protection.¹ Later Vedic texts speak of *Vācaspati* and request him to sweeten the priestly speech.² The *Taittirīya-Āraṇyaka* offers salutations to both speech and the lord of speech.³ Other 'lord of speech' divinities appearing in the Vedic literature are *Brahmaṇaspati*, *Bṛhaspati*, *Vākpati* and *Vākpā*.⁴ The first two of these are prominent in the Veda-s and starting from being 'lord of potent words', they acquire many characteristics by transference from other divinities. Similar is the case of *Brahmā* (*brahman*), the creator god, the masculine counterpart of *brahman* 'potent incantation.' In the general image of these 'lord of speech' divinities, the notion of creatorship is very much at the core. The speech itself seems to be regarded as the creative power or force residing in these 'lord of speech.' In a certain sense, these 'lord of speech' divinities are the divine counter-parts of human priests, and the Vedic passages extolling the power and majesty of the 'lord of speech' divinities are indirect glorifications of the human priests and their ritual power. Observe the following glorification:

'Now *Brahmaṇaspati* speaks forth aloud the solemn hymn of praise, wherein the gods Indra,

¹ *vācaspatiṃ viśvakarmāṇam ūtaye*, *RV*, 10.81.7.

² *vācaspatir vācam adya svadāti nah*, *TS*, 1.7.7.1; *vācaspatir vācam nah svadatu*, *TS*, 30.1.

³ *namo vāce namo vācaspataye*, *TA*, 2.12.1.

⁴ For the identity of *vāk* and *brahman*, see: *eṣa u eva brahmaṇaspatiḥ, vāg vai brahma tasyā eṣa patiḥ* *BU*, 1.3.21. For the rare divinity *Vākpā*, see: *vākpā vācam me pāhi*, *TS*, 3.2.10.8.

Varuṇa, *Mitra*, and *Aryaman* made their dwelling places.'¹

Brahmaṇaspati/*Bṛhaspati* is praised as the 'creator of all potent incantations.'² However, his creativity is not limited to potent incantations. Through these potent incantations, he is the creator of everything:

'*Brahmaṇaspati* produced these (beings) with blast and smelting like a smith. In the ancient times of the gods, the existence was born from non-existence.'³

The creative aspect of the potent prayer (*brahman*) is closely connected with the historical evolution of the creator gods such as *Brahmā*, *Bṛhaspati*, *Brahmaṇaspati*, etc., and also with the later notion of *brahman* in the *Upaniṣads* as referring to the highest reality which lies behind all creation. While the verse referred to above says that *Brahmaṇaspati* created the existent out of the non-existent by means of potent prayers (*brahman*), later philosophical thinkers in the *Upaniṣads* argued that the existent cannot come out of the non-existent, and that everything came out of *brahman*, the ultimate reality, which was there before anything else existed.⁴

15. The personification and deification of speech reaches its logical climax in a hymn found in the *Rgveda*

¹ *pāva nūnam brahmaṇaspatir mantram vadaty ukthyam | yasminni indro varuṇo mitro aryamā devā okāṃsi cakrire ||* *RV*, 10.72.2; *VS*, 34.57.

² *viśveṣāṃ ij janitā brahmaṇām asi*, *RV*, 2.23.2.

³ *brahmaṇaspatir eṭāḥ saṃ karmāra ivādhamat | devānām pūrve yuge sataḥ sad ajāyāta ||*, *RV*, 10.72.2.

⁴ *sad eva somyedam agra āsīd ekam evādvitīyam | tad dhaika āhur asad evedam agra āsīd ekam evādvitīyam | tasmād asataḥ saj jāyeta | kutas tu khalu somyevaṃ syād iti hovāca | katham asataḥ saj jāyete | sāt to eva somyedam agra āsīd ekam evādvitīyam |* *CU*, 6.2.1-2; *brahina vā idam agra āsīd ekam eva*, *BU*, 1.4.11.

and the *Atharvaveda*. The authorship of this hymn is traditionally ascribed to the goddess of speech. Here the goddess of speech sings her own glory in *Rgveda* (10.125):¹

'I roam with the Rudra-s and the Vasu-s, with the

¹ *aham rudrebhir vasubhiś carāmy*
aham ādityair uta viśvadevaīh |
aham mitrāvaruṇobhā bibharmy
aham indrāgnī aham aśvinobhā | 1 |
aham somam āhanasam bibharmy
aham tvaṣṭāram uta pūṣaṇam bhagam |
aham dadhāmi draviṇaṃ haviṣmate
suprāvye yajamānāya sunvate | 2 |
aham rāṣṭrī saṅgamanī vasūnām
cikītuṣī prathamā yajñiyānām |
tām mā devā vyadadhuh purutrā
bhūristhātrām bhūry āveśayantīm | 3 |
mayā so annam atti yo vipaśyati
yaḥ prāniti ya īm śṛnoty uktam |
amantavo māṃ ta upa kṣiyanti
śrudhi śruta śraddhivaṃ te vadāmi | 4 |
aham eva svayam idaṃ vadāmi
juṣṭam devebhir uta mānuṣebhiḥ |
yaṃ kāmāye taṃ tam ugraṃ kṛṇomi
taṃ brahmāṇaṃ taṃ ṛṣiṃ taṃ sumedhām | 5 |
aham rudrāya dhanur ā tanomi
brahmadviṣe śarvave hantavā u |
aham janāya samadaṃ kṛṇomy
aham dyāvopṛthivī ā viveśa | 6 |
aham suve pītaram asya mūrdhan
mama yonir apsv antaḥ samudre |
tato vi tiṣṭhe bhuvanānu viśvotāmūṃ
dyām varṣmaṇopa sprśāmi | 7 |
aham eva vāta iva pra vāmy ārabhyamāyā bhuvanāni viśvā |
paro divā para enā pṛthivyaitāvati mahinā sam babhūva | 8 |

RV, 10.125. This hymn is identical, with minor variations, with *AV*(Ś), 4.30.

Āditya-s too, and all the host of gods. I bear up both Mitra and Varuṇa. I sustain Indra and Agni, and the two Aśvins.

I uphold the steaming Soma, and I sustain Tvaṣṭṛ, Pūṣan and Bhaga. I endow with wealth him who brings an oblation, and is a pious sacrificer pressing (Soma).

I am the Queen, who gathers together the riches. I am the wise one, first among those deserving a sacrifice. Therefore, the gods variously installed me in many places, residing in and entering many abodes.

Whoever sees, breathes, or hears what is said eats food only through me. Without knowing, they reside with me. Listen, one and all. I am telling you the truth.

I myself say these (words which) shall be welcome by gods and men. I empower the person I love. I make him a Brāhmaṇa, a seer and a wise man.

I bend the bow for Rudra so that his arrow may destroy the hater of potent words. I create battle for the people, and I pervade heaven and earth.

I give birth to my father (heaven, *dyauh*) and set him up at the top. My origin is in the waters in the ocean. From there I pervade all the worlds. I touch the heaven with my head.

I alone flow like a blowing wind, holding together all the worlds. Beyond the heaven and beyond the earth, I have become so immense through my power.²

Looking at the progress of language from simple speech-acts to becoming a powerful creative deity, one can indeed appreciate the boast of the goddess of speech in the above hymn.

16. As one moves gradually to later Vedic texts, certain dimensions of language appear more prominent than others. But, one gets unfailingly a feeling that the earlier Vedic speech-acts are increasingly becoming only efficacious texts or incantations, rather than remaining living acts of communication. Individuality of particular ancient authors and the particular original situations have increasingly become unimportant, and the decontextualized texts of the orally preserved Veda-s have become recontextualized in the latter-day ritual. The Veda-s as collections are increasingly appealed to. The *Rgveda* 10.90.9, which according to modern scholars belongs to the youngest part of the collection, says that the verses of the *Rgveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, and the formulae of the *Yajurveda* were born from the first sacrifice performed by the gods at the beginning of time.¹ The origin of these three Veda-s is conceived of in this verse in an impersonal way. Similarly, the *Atharvaveda* speaks of the origin of the various Veda-s in an impersonal way.² The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* says that Prajāpati, the Creator, first created the three Veda-s, and that the Veda-s are the out-pouring of the breath of the Great Being.³ These three Veda-s are referred to as *trayī vidyā* 'threefold knowledge' in the *Śatapatha-Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, where they are

¹ *tasmād yajñāt sarvahuta rcah sāmāni jajñire | chandāṃsi jajñire tasmād yajus tasmād ajāyata |*, RV, 10.90.9.

² *yasmād rco apātakṣan yajur yasmād apākṣan | sāmāni yasya lomāny atharvāṅgiraso mukhāṃ skambhāṃ tam brūhi katamaḥ svid eva sah |*, AV(Ś), 10.7.20.

³ *sa (prajāpatiḥ) tayā vācā tenātmanedaṃ sarvaṃ asṛjata yad idaṃ kiñ carco yajūṃsi sāmāni*, BU, 1.2.5; *are 'sya mahato bhūtasya niḥśvasitam etad yad rgvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo 'tharvāṅgīrasa itihāsaḥ purāṇam*, BU, 2.4.10.

equated with truth.¹ The known Veda-s not only appear impersonalized and decontextualized, they are also looked at as being just a handful portion of the *real* Infinite Veda-s:

'(God Indra) showed him (=the sage Bharadvāja) three mountainlike undifferentiated masses. From each of those he took a handful. He (=Indra), having called Bharadvāja, said: 'These are the Veda-s. Infinite indeed are the Veda-s'.²

This impersonal and collective attitude toward the Veda-s is expressed in many ways. The *Śatapatha-Bṛhadāraṇyaka* says that Prajāpati, the creator, saw all the beings in the threefold Veda-s.³ Another passage from the same text says that gods dug up the threefold Veda-s from the ocean of mind by means of speech.⁴ Beginning with the *Atharvaveda*, the three Veda-s are also collectively called the Veda-s in plural (cf., *vedāḥ*, AV(Ś), 4.35.6), or the Veda in singular (cf., *vedāḥ*, AV(Ś), 7.57.1, 10.8.17, 19.68.1, and 19.72.1). These collective references continue in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* texts. The *Taittirīya-Bṛhadāraṇyaka* says that the speech is the mother of the Veda-s.⁵ Transcending all notions of human seers being authors of the Vedic hymns, the

¹ *tad yat tat satyaṃ trayī sā vidyā*, ŚB, 9.5.1.18.

² *taṃ ha trīn girirūpān avijñātān iva darśayāñcakāra | teṣāṃ haikāikasmān muṣṭim ādāde | sa hovāca | bharadvājetyāmantrya | vedā vā ete | anantā vai vedāḥ |*, TB, 3.10.11.4.

³ *sa (prajāpatiḥ) trayyāṃ eva vidyāyāṃ sarvāṃ bhūtāny apaśyat*, ŚB, 10.4.2.21.

⁴ *mano vai samudro manaso vai samudrād vācābhryā devās trayīṃ vidyāṃ nirakhanan*, ŚB 7.5.2.52.

⁵ *vāg akṣaraṃ prāthamajā ṛtasya vedānāṃ mātā 'mṛtasya nābhīḥ*, TB, 2.8.8.5.

Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa says that the *Rgveda* was born from Agni, *Yajurveda* from Vāyu, and the *Sāmaveda* from the Sun.¹

17. Later Vedic texts also deal with expressly justifying the ritual application of the orally preserved ancient Vedic texts. The logic of ritual application is explained in several ways. The *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā* says:²

‘He (=the Sun who was afraid of death) reflected, ‘Let me praise Agni here; he, praised, will help me go to the world of heaven.’ He praised Agni. He (=Agni), praised, helped him go to the world of heaven. He who knowing this pays reverence to Agni, goes to the world of heaven.’

It is this kind of ritual logic that leads to the utilization of the ancient hymns in the performance of latter-day rituals. The ideal expectation in the use of a Vedic verse in the performance of a ritual is expressed in the concept of *rūpa-saṃṛddhi* ‘perfection of form’ as seen in the *Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa*.³

‘That in the sacrifice is perfect which is perfect in form, namely that the rite as it is performed is concomitantly described by the Vedic verse [which is being recited].’

¹ *agner rgvedo vāyor yajurvedaḥ sūryāt sāmavedaḥ, ŚB, 1.1.58. The conception is seen CU, 4.17.2, and Manusmṛti, 1.23.*

² *so manyatemam evāgnim stavāni sa mām stutaḥ suvargaṃ lokam gamayisyatīti | so ḡnim astaut sa enaṃ stutaḥ suvargaṃ lokam agamayad, yaḥ evaṃ vidvān agnim upatiṣṭhate suvargaṃ eva lokam eti |, TS, 1.5.9.3-4.*

³ *etad vai yajñasya saṃṛddhaṃ yad rūpasamṛddhaṃ yat karma kriyamānam ṛg anuvadati, AB, 1.13.*

This brings up a number of important issues. Ancient verses from Vedic hymns were recited in performances of ritual in later days. In this process the verses were often stripped from their original context and were generalized in terms of their ritual application (*vinīyoga*). Ideally it was expected that the ritual action being performed should fully match the contents of the Vedic verse being recited. But it is clear that only the recitation of such verses was being performed, and not an act of real linguistic communication. The real prayers from the early Vedic texts turned into incantations. The ideal expectation that the ritual action should match the contents of the recited verse presumes that the performer or the reciter can and does understand the exact meaning of the recited verses. However, though the old texts were preserved by memorization, their language increasingly became more and more archaic. As the time-gap between the original compositions and the ritual utilization increased, the meaning of Vedic texts became increasingly inaccessible. Thus, gradually, from a practical point of view, the ritualists had to forget about the meaning of the verses and concentrate mainly on their recitation, or to make determined efforts to understand the meaning of the older texts.

18. In the *Brāhmaṇa* literature one notices a tremendous urge to understand the meaning of the preserved ancient hymns. These ancient hymns are constantly explained, interpreted, paraphrased by using more contemporary expressions and are often incorporated into larger mythological and ritual contexts which are supposed to clarify the purpose

behind these hymns. There is also a constant tendency to offer explanations in terms of what we would now call folk-etymologies. For example:

‘He (i.e., Vṛtra) covered up these worlds. Since he covered up (*avṛnot*) these worlds, therefore he came to be called Vṛtra.’¹

‘Agni, verily, is Rudra. Since he cried (*arodīt*), therefore he is Rudra.’²

Such etymologies were to be taken very seriously and a great value was attached to knowing them. Frequently, these etymologies are followed by a reference to ‘he who knows thus’ (*ya evaṃ veda*), and the knower is promised some desirable result. Such attempts were directed at placing a contemporary pragmatic value on the understanding of the preserved older texts.

19. The very activity of preservation of older sacred texts is given a very high priority, in conjunction with a vast increase in mystical and ritual speculation concerning the nature and function of language. The speech is often identified metaphorically as the real sacrificer and the sacrifice itself.³ It is considered to be like a boat with which the sacrificer crosses over to the heavenly world.⁴ The speech is constantly connected with the process of creation in a casual way:

‘To him the Creator said, ‘You are Rudra,’ and

¹ *sa imān lokān avṛnod yad imān lokān a vṛnot tad vṛtrasya vṛtratvam, TS, 2.4.12.*

² *agnir vai rudro yad arodīt tasmād rudrah, ŚB, 6.1.3.10.*

³ *vāg vai havīṣkrd... vāg u vai yajñāh, ŚB, 1.1.4.11.*

⁴ *vāg vai sutarmā naur vācam eva tad āruhya tāyā svargaṃ lokam abhi santarati, AB, 1.13.*

because he gave him that name, Agni assumed that form.’¹

This process is often generalized to creation at large: ‘Prajāpati, the creator, created all creatures... Whatever he spoke with his speech, that happened. Whatever one says with his speech, that happens. ...He creates it.’²

Thus, the general theories about the connection of the Creator’s use of speech and the creation are brought to bear on the ritual use of language aimed at producing the desired result.

‘Speech indeed yields all desired objects, since one indeed expresses all his desires by means of speech. Speech yields all wishes of him who knows this.’³

‘I shall speak forth this speech, which will declare much, fare far, produce much, gain much, effect more than much, which goes to heaven, which will declare heaven, which will fare to heaven, produce heaven, gain heaven, carry this sacrifice to heaven, and carry the sacrificer—me—to heaven.’⁴

Thus it is no wonder that a great value was placed on the study of Vedic texts. We are told:

¹ *tam abravīd rudro ’sīti tad yad asya tan nāmākarod agnis tadrūpam abhavat, ŚB, 6.1.3.10.*

² *prajāpatiḥ prajā asṛjata | ... sa yad vācāvadat tad abhavat | yad vai vācā vadati | tad bhavati | yad yad eva vācā vadati tat tad bhavati tat tat sṛjate, KS, 7.10.*

³ *vāg vai sarvān kāmān duhe vācā hi sarvān kāmān vadati sarvān hāsmāi kāmān vāg dugdhe ya evaṃ veda, AA, 1.3.2.*

⁴ *premāṇ vācam vadiṣyāmi bahu vadiṣyantīm bahu patīsyantīm bahu kariṣyantīm bahu sanīsyantīm bahor bhūyah kariṣyantīm svar gacchantīm svar vadiṣyantīm svar imāṇ yajñāṇ vakṣyantīm svar māṇ yajamāṇāṇ vakṣyantīm iti, AA, 5.1.5.*

‘Whatever (heavenly) world a person wins by giving away this whole earth filled with wealth, one wins three times that much and more and an imperishable (heavenly) world, if one studies Vedic texts every day. Therefore, one should study Vedic texts.’¹

With all this glorification, Vedic studies finally came to be restricted to Brāhmaṇa males, and the rest of the Indian society remained permanently out of touch with the Veda-s.

20. While the *Brāhmaṇa* texts and some of the *Upaniṣads* such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* and *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* place a high value on the study of the Veda-s and Vedic ritual, the *Upaniṣads* of the *Atharvaveda* such as the *Mundaka-Upaniṣad* show markedly anti-ritual tendencies and a decisive preference for the ascetic and meditative way of life. This may perhaps show a certain influx of non-Vedic traditions. The *Mundaka-Upaniṣad* says:²

‘Considering sacrifice and good works as the best, these fools know no higher good, and having enjoyed their reward on the height of heaven, gained by good works, they enter again this world or a lower one. But those who practice penance and faith in the forest, tranquil and wise, and living

¹ yāvantaṃ ha vai imāṃ pṛthivīm vittena pūrṇāṃ dadan lokāṃ jayati tribhis tāvantaṃ jayati bhūyāṃsaṃ cakṣayyaṃ ya evaṃ vidvān ahar ahaḥ svādhyāyam adhīte tasmāt svādhyāyo ’dhyetavyaḥ, ŚB, 11.5.6.1.

² iṣṭāpūrte manyamānā varīṣṭhaṃ nānyac chreyo vedayante pramūḍhāḥ | nākasya pṛṣṭhe te sukṛte ’nubhūtvemaṃ lokāṃ hīnataṃ vā viśanti || tapah-śraddhe ye hy upavasanty araṇe śāntiā vidvāṃso bhaikṣyacaryāṃ carantaḥ | sūryadvāreṇa te virajāḥ prayānti yatrāmṛtaḥ sa puruṣo hy avyayātmā ||, MU, 1.2.10-11.

on alms, depart free from passion through the sun to where that immortal Person dwells whose nature is imperishable.’

In the light of this avowed anti-ritual attitude, it is to be expected that the attitude of the *Upaniṣads* toward the Veda-s would also be markedly different. The *Mundaka-Upaniṣad* says:¹

‘Two kinds of knowledge must be known, this is what all who know Brahman tell us, i.e., the higher and the lower knowledge. The lower knowledge is the *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Atharvaveda* etc., but the higher knowledge is that by which the Indestructible Brāhmaṇ is comprehended.’

A student, having studied all Veda-s and other texts of ritual etc., approaches his teacher and says:²

‘Respected Sir, thus I am only a knower of the ritual formulae, but not a knower of the Self. I have heard from people like your honour that a knower of the Self crosses beyond grief. Sir, I am in grief. Please help me cross over beyond grief.’

This particular attitude towards ritualistic Vedic texts was later continued in texts such as the *Bhagavad-*

¹ dve vidye veditavye iti ha sma brahmavidō vadanti parā caivā-parā ca | tatrāparā rgvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo ’tharvavedaḥ... | atha parā yayā tad akṣaram adhigamyate |, MU, 1.1.4-5.

² so ’ham bhagavo mantravid evāsmi nātmaiv chṛutaṃ hy eva me bhagavadrṣebhyaḥ tarati śokam ātmavid iti so ’ham bhagavaḥ śocāmi tam mā bhagavañ chokasya pārāṃ tārayatv iti |, CU, 7.1.3.

*gītā*¹ and in the later traditions of Non-Dualist Vedānta philosophy and devotional Hinduism. In the *Upaniṣads*, it is clear that the meaning of the term *brahman* gradually moves away from language or ritual incantation to a metaphysical concept, i.e., the Ultimate Reality which is the ultimate foundation for the existence of all known existence, cognition and bliss.² However, as we shall see, along with the ritualistic *Brāhmaṇa* texts, the *Upaniṣads* themselves were later included in the expanding scope of the term 'Veda,' and hence all of the later orthodox Hindu traditions recognized the authority of the Veda, by emphasizing different texts and by interpreting them in accordance with their tradition.

21. As one leaves the realm of the *Upaniṣads* and enters the phase of the earliest post-Vedic scholasticism, the remoteness of the original nature of the Vedic texts and the results of the sheer time-gap

¹ *yām imām puṣpitaṃ vācaṃ pravadanty avipaścitaḥ | veda-vādaratāḥ pārtha nānyad astīti vādinaḥ || kāmātāmānaḥ svarga-parāḥ janmakarmaphalapradām | kriyāviśeṣabahuḥlām bhogaiśvarya-gatim prati || bhogaiśvarya-prasaktānāṃ tayāpahrtacetāśām | vya-vasāyātmikā buddhiḥ samādhau na vidhīyate ||*, BG, 2.42-44. 'The undiscerning who rejoice in the letter of the Veda, who contend that there is nothing else whose nature is desire and who are intent on heaven, proclaim these flowery words that result in rebirth as the fruit of actions and (lay down) various specialized rites for the attainment of enjoyment and power. The intelligence which discriminates between right and wrong, of those who are devoted to enjoyment and power and whose minds are carried away by those words (of the Veda-s) is not well established in the Self.'

² The *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* (7.1.6ff.) successively offers different interpretations of *brahman*, which supersede one another: *brahman* = *nāma* 'name,' *vāk* 'speech,' *manas* 'mind,' *saṅkalpa* 'conception,' *citta* 'mentation,' *dhyāna* 'concentration,' *vijñāna* 'cognition,' etc.

become absolutely evident. Yāska composed his *Nirukta* in c. 500 B.C. This is principally an etymologically oriented commentary on the *Nighaṇṭu* which is a list of Vedic words. The *Nirukta* contains a long debate in which a teacher named Kautsa contends that Veda-s are meaningless as linguistic expressions:¹

'If the object of the science of etymology is to ascertain the meaning of Vedic stanzas, it is useless,' says Kautsa, 'for Vedic stanzas have no meaning.'

Some of Kautsa's arguments show that Veda-s were no longer viewed as instances of free-flowing linguistic usage, but as partially unintelligible fixed chunks of sounds. Kautsa argues:²

the order of words in the preserved stanzas is absolutely fixed, unlike the natural language;
for some sentences such as 'save him, O plant,' there can be no sensible meaning;
several statements in the Veda are mutually contradictory; and
the meaning of many Vedic expressions is obscure beyond recovery.

Yāska's answers to these objections are also important indicators of other views regarding the Veda-s. He argues (*NR*, 1.16) that the Veda-s are meaningful because their words are identical with those of the current spoken language. He says that many of

¹ *yadi mantrārthapratyavāyānatrithakam bhavati kauso 'narthakā hi mantrāḥ*, *NR*, 1.15.

² *niyatavācoyuktayo niyatānupūrvyā bhavanti... anupapannārthā bhavanti... vipratīṣṭhārthā bhavanti... avipaścārthā bhavanti*, *NR*, 1.15.

Kautsa's arguments are applicable even to the current language, and hence they would not make Vedic stanzas meaningless. As to the objection that the meaning of Vedic words is obscure, Yāska replies that it is not the fault of a pillar that a blind man does not see it, but that it is the fault of the blind man himself.

22. The reality is obviously somewhere in the middle. The Vedic stanzas are certainly not meaningless, but have become partially unintelligible due to their language having become archaic. While the oral Vedic tradition preserved the texts themselves, preservation of meaning has been a far more difficult task, and the success on this front has not been very high. The statements shown as being contradictory belong to different texts. For instance, the statement 'there was but one Rudra and no second' belongs to the *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā* (*eka eva rudro 'vatasthe na dviṭīyaḥ*, TS, 1.8.6.1), while the statement 'There are innumerable thousands of Rudra-s on earth' belongs to the *Vājasaneyī-Saṃhitā* (*asaṃkhyātā sahasrāṇi ye rudrā adhi bhūmyām*, VS, 16.54). However, Kautsa's objection that these are mutually contradictory implies that he expected that no two statements in 'the Veda' should be contradictory. This indicates that already a conception of a single unified Veda without different authors has developed, with the expectation that the statements in this one unified Veda must not contradict each other. This is clearly the view seen in later traditions of Vedic exegesis. Thus the historical differences of authorship are gradually replaced by a more theological conception of a single authorless Veda.

Yāska's confidence that an insightful person can certainly find the meaning for obscure Vedic words is based not so much upon anyone's natural familiarity with those meanings, but upon his belief that the analytical efforts of the etymologists and grammarians could unravel all riddles. In fact, Yāska does not minimize the gap between the original Vedic compositions and his etymological attempts. He says:¹

'There were in remote times sages who had direct intuitive insight into religious duty. By oral instruction, they handed down the hymns to later generations who were destitute of the direct intuitive insight. Generations that came still later, declining in oral transmission, compiled this work, the Veda and the ancillary treatises, in order to comprehend their meaning.'

23. The overall concern shown by Yāska is also to be seen in other branches of the ancillary literature (*vedāṅga*) such as the traditions of grammar, phonetics, metrics etc. While these traditions made analytical scholastic attempts to understand the form and the contents of the Vedic texts, other traditions made heroic efforts to preserve the texts themselves as they had been received until that point. Since writing was considered to be sacrilegious by the early Vedic traditions, all efforts to preserve the texts were directed toward developing new oral recitational techniques. First, scholars such as Śākalya, Gārgya and others prepared the first compilations of various Vedic texts. This

¹ *sākṣātkṛtadharmāṇa ṛṣayo babhūvur te 'varebhyo 'sākṣātkṛtadharmābhyā upadeśeṇa mantrān samprādūr upadeśāya glāyanto 'vare bilmagrahaṇāyemaṃ granthaṃ samāmnāsīṣur vedaṃ ca vedāṅgāni ca*, NR, 1.20.

activity may be dated to c. 600 B.C. This involved organizing the collected materials according to deities, authors etc. Then began novel attempts in oral techniques called *vikṛti*-s 'modifications.' First scholars analyzed these received texts into their constituent words and prepared word-by-word versions (*pada-pāṭha*). Then they prepared various versions with permutations and combinations of words in the word-texts, so that the original text could always be mathematically deduced from these permutations and combinations. Thus the original text was firmly tied down and could not change, since even one change in the original would imply hundreds of changes in the more complicated permutations and combinations. Thus, if the complicated versions were memorized, the original could not change. Some samples of the permutations and combinations are illustrated below:

Recitational Permutations and Combinations

Samhitā Version: (abcdefg...)

agnim-īle-purohitam-yajñasya-devam-rtvijam |
Rgveda (1.1.1ab)

Pada Version: (a/b/c/d/e/f/g/...)

agnim| īle| purohitam| yajñasya| devam| rtvijam|...

Krama Version: (ab/bc/cd/de/ef/fg/...)

agnim-īle| īle purohitam| purohitam-yajñasya|...

Jaṭā Version: (abbaab/bccbcb/cddccd/deedde/effeef/
fggffg/...)

*agnim-īla-īlegnim-agnim-īle| īle-purohitam-puro-
hitam-īla-īle-purohitam|...*

Śikhā Version: (abbaabc/bccbcbcd/cddccde/deeddef/
effeeg/...)

*agnim-īla-īle-gnim-agnim-īle-purohitam|īle-puro-
hitam-purohitam-īla-īle-purohitam-yajñasya|...*

Ghana Version: (abba, abccbaabc, bccb, beddcbbcd,
cddc, cdeedccde...)

*agnim-īla-īle-gnim-agnim-īle-purohitam, purohitam-
īle'-gnim-agnim-īle-purohitam, īle-purohitam-puro-
hitam-īla-īle-purohitam-yajñasya, yajñasya-puro-
hitam-īla-īle-purohitam|yajñasya, purohitam-yajñas-
ya-yajñasya-purohitam-purhoitam-yajñasya-devam,
devam yajñasya-purohitam-purohitam-yajñasya-
devam,...*

These attempts did indeed succeed and this oral tradition preserved the Vedic texts right until our own times. 'Even today some priests have the ability to recite the voluminous texts according to several memorization formulae (*vikṛti*-s), schemes which require both grammatical and accentual alterations of the original or continuous text. Even the smallest error is abhorred and believed sufficient to produce catastrophe' (Wayne Howard, *Sāmavedic Chant*, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 4).

24. The tradition of Sanskrit grammarians also contributed significantly to the preservation and interpretation of Vedic texts. The mythological beginnings of grammatical analysis can be traced to a story recounted in the *Taittirīya-Samhitā*.¹ Somehow language was increasingly becoming unintelligible to gods. It was in large unbroken chunks (*avyākṛtā*).

¹ *vāg vai parācy avyākṛtāvadat, te devā indram abruvann imāṃ
no vācaṃ vyākurv iti...tām indro madhyato 'vakramya 'vyākarot,
tasmād iyaṃ vyākṛtā vāg udyate, TS, 6.4.7.3.*

Gods requested Indra to break it down for them. Indra broke it down for them, and since then we know the constituents of the language. This story also hints at the fact that the Vedic language was increasingly becoming archaic and only scholastic analytical efforts could provide a certain degree of access to its form and content. Pāṇini's grammar of Sanskrit (c. 500 B.C.) covers both the Vedic language and the language current in his days. The accents of the Vedic language were still alive in Pāṇini's language, though they died out in the later classical language. Pāṇini's own language comes fairly close to the language of the late Vedic prose texts, i.e., *Brāhmaṇa*-s.

The next two great grammarians, Kātyāyana (c. 200 B.C.) and Patañjali (c. 100 B.C.), provide us with more explicit information concerning the relationship of Sanskrit grammar to Vedic traditions. In the first chapter of his great commentary (*Mahābhāṣya*),¹ Patañjali extensively discusses purposes of Sanskrit grammar, of which many are closely connected with preservation, interpretation and ritual application of Vedic texts. The first and the foremost purpose is preservation of Vedic texts (*veda-rakṣā*). Secondly, one needs to modify Vedic texts in particular ritual applications to suit the context, and these modifications need the help of grammar. It is also the stated duty of a Brāhmaṇa to study and understand (*adhyetavyaḥ jñeyāḥ ca*) the Veda with its ancillary texts without any regard for worldly gain. Grammar is also considered to be essential in the process of clearing away confusion in the interpretation of Vedic texts. Patañjali

¹ MB, vol. I, p. 1ff.

places equal emphasis on the proper pronunciation and interpretation of Vedic texts:¹

'A word faulty in its sounds or accents does not convey the same meaning. That (mispronounced) word, becoming a thunderbolt, destroys the sacrificer, as did the expression *indraśatru*, due to an error in accentuation.'

The sacrificer Tvaṣṭṛ wanted to have a son who would become *indraśatru* 'killer of Indra.' However, he mispronounced the word as *indraśatru* which came to mean 'one whose killer was Indra.' Then, as a result of this mispronunciation, Tvaṣṭṛ had a son, Vṛtra, who was killed by Indra. This story cited by Patañjali, goes back to the *Brāhmaṇa* texts,² and seems to imply that the loss of accents in the vernaculars was probably beginning to affect the pronunciation of the orally preserved texts as early as the *Brāhmaṇa* period, and special efforts had to be made to ensure proper pronunciation of accents. The Sanskrit grammarians joined the efforts to preserve the form and the content of the Vedic texts.

25. One must also take note of the school of Mīmāṃsā 'Ritual Philosophy.' The *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*-s or aphorisms ascribed to Jaimini (c. 300 B.C.) consolidated the philosophy of Vedic ritual and also offered a

¹ *duṣṭaḥ śabdaḥ svarato varnato vā mithyāprayukto na tam artham āha / sa vāg-vajro yajamānaḥ hinasti yathendraśatruḥ svarato parādhāt / MB, vol. I, p. 2.*

² *ātha yad ābravid indraśatruḥ vardhasvéti tasmād hainam indra eva jaghānātha yād dhi śāśvad āvakṣyad indrasya śatruḥ vardhasvéti śāśvad u ha sāv evendram ahanīṣyat, ŚB, 1.6.3.8-10. Also: TS, 2.5.2.1-2.*

comprehensive science of textual interpretation. The term 'Veda' by this time came to include the early Vedic hymns as well as all the *Brāhmaṇa-s* and *Upaniṣads*. This totality of Vedic literature has emerged as the ultimate authority for the tradition of Mīmāṃsā. Jaimini also repeats the debate concerning meaningfulness of Vedic texts and arrives at the conclusion that they are indeed meaningful (*PMS*, 1.2.31-53). Jaimini defines *dharma* 'religious duty' as those actions which are known by means of Vedic texts and are conducive to the highest good.¹ This system goes to an extreme in impersonalizing Vedic texts by claiming that they have no human or divine authors and that the texts themselves are eternally self-existent (*PMS*, 1.1.6-23). Jaimini also states (*PMS*, 1.3.3) that when there is a conflict between a Vedic text and a later *Smṛti* 'remembered text, law-book,' the latter should be discarded, but that (*PMS*, 1.3.2) a *Smṛti* text, not contradicted by a Vedic text, is considered to be authoritative. One also assumes that a *Smṛti* text not explicitly supported or contradicted by a known Vedic text is based on a Vedic text which is now lost. This novel assumption of 'lost Veda-s' has far-reaching consequences in Mīmāṃsā and in the tradition of Hindu law. The authoritativeness of élite customs is also to be decided in relation to Vedic texts. Those customs which explicitly contradict Vedic texts should be abandoned, but those customs which are not contradicted by Vedic texts should be accepted. If two Vedic statements contradict each other and if the contradiction cannot be resolved in any other way, then the two statements

¹ *codanālakṣaṇo 'rtho dharmah, PMS, 1.1.2.*

should be accepted as reflecting two valid optional alternatives.

26. The interpretative canons established by the school of Mīmāṃsā did not remain restricted to the traditions of ritual, but became an integral part of the Hindu legal system, which claimed that it is ultimately based on the Veda-s. In discussing the sources of *dharma* 'duties, rights, justice, virtue, religion, good works etc.,' all the *Smṛti-s* 'law-books' and other treatises claim that their authority is finally based on the Veda-s. Thus, for instance, the *Vāsiṣṭha-dharma-śāstra* says that *dharma* is prescribed primarily in the Veda and the *Smṛti-s*, and that in the absence of these authorities, customs of the élites are considered to be authoritative.¹ It adds that Manu prescribed duties of particular regions (*deśadharmā*), castes (*jātidharma*) and families or clans (*kuladharmā*), because these had not been prescribed in the Veda-s.² But of course these later prescriptions should not be ideally contradicted by the Veda-s. In this manner, the traditions of law tried to integrate the received Vedic texts with the requirements of latter-day conditions and to make the Veda-s relevant for all times to come. They attempted to remove all seeming contradictions and conflicts by interpreting Vedic texts in such a way that there would not remain any problem.

27. The Veda-s have thus come a long way from being living speech-acts of certain Aryan priests of

¹ *śruti-smṛtivyūhito dharmah, tad-alābhe śiṣṭācārah pramāṇam, VDS 1.4-5.*

² *deśadharmā-jātidharma-kuladharmān śrutyabhāvād abravīm manuh, VDS, 1.17.*

ancient India, and the Indian tradition now reveres them mostly as preserved sacred texts which are chanted in ritual performances and which remain only in a theoretical sense the basic texts of modern Hinduism. Hinduism is certainly not a linear development of Vedic religion. It incorporated much that was not Vedic or Aryan in a historical sense and it developed in directions which are unheard of in the Veda-s. Yet every Hindu god or goddess claimed to have been the sole object of Vedic knowledge. For instance, Kṛṣṇa says in the *Bhagavadgītā* (15.15) that he alone is the final object of Vedic knowledge. Of course, such a claim would be very difficult to defend from a purely historical point of view, and yet it is of historical importance that the Hindu deities and their devotees felt that it was important for them to be connected with the Veda-s to gain a higher degree of legitimacy and respectability.

Hinduism preserved the Veda-s with due respect and almost every tradition that developed within Hinduism at least paid lip service to the authority of the Veda-s. Many zealous traditions in their conviction and enthusiasm ascribed their latter-day doctrines to the ancient Vedic texts and used ingenuous scholastic devices to extract particular interpretations. Until recent times, there have always been groups and individuals in India who felt the necessity of deriving support for their own views from the ancient Vedic texts. In modern India, conservatives and reformers alike have used the Veda-s to defend their social and religious doctrines. Despite the entry of Westernization and modernization in India, the process of reinterpreting the Veda-s to fit the changed

circumstances is an on-going process in India. Modern Hindus often derive principles of democracy and nuclear physics from the Veda-s, and there is a pervasive popular belief in India that the West, especially the Germans, derived their knowledge of modern science and technology from the Veda-s, which they took away from India. We, the Indians, have to know how to properly interpret the Veda-s, and all the modern theories of science will be found there. This is a very widely held belief in India. Thus, the faith in the ultimate validity of the Veda did not stop the process of change of ideas in India, because 'in actual history, that doctrine had only a formal and nominal significance. ... Though the Veda was regarded as the final authority, complete freedom was allowed in its interpretation' (R. N. Dandekar, *Some Aspects of the History of Hinduism*, Pune, 1967, p. 136). However, the persistence of the faith in the Veda-s helped keep the mosaic of Hinduism bound together, and also helped to preserve the Veda-s themselves to the present day.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

- Aitareya-Āraṇyaka (AA)*. Edited and Translated by A. B. Keith. 1909. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aitareya-Bṛāhmaṇa (AB)*. *Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series*, No. 31. Pts. I-II. 1896. Pune: Ānandāśrama.
- Aṣṭādaśa-Upaniṣadaḥ*. Edited by V. P. Limaye and R. D. Wadekar. 1958. Pune: Vaidika Saṁśodhana Maṇḍala.
- Atharvaveda (AV(Ś))*. The *Śaunakīya* recension of the *Atharvaveda*, with Sāyaṇa's commentary. Edited by S. P. Pandit. 1895-98. Bombay.

- Bṛhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad (BU)*. See: *Aṣṭādaśa-Upaniṣadaḥ*.
- Chāndogya-Upaniṣad (CU)*. See: *Aṣṭādaśa-Upaniṣadaḥ*.
- Dandekar, R. N. (1985). *Vedic Bibliography*. Pt. IV. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- . (1973). *Vedic Bibliography*. Pt. III. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- . (1967). *Some Aspects of the History of Hinduism*. Pune: University of Poona.
- . (1961). *Vedic Bibliography*. Pt. II. Pune: University of Poona.
- . (1946) *Vedic Bibliography*. Pt. I. 2nd Edition. 1986. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- Howard, Wayne. (1977). *Sāmavedic Chant*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kāṭhaka-Saṃhitā (KS)*. Edited by L. von Schroeder. 1900-10. Leipzig.
- Mahābhāṣya (MB)*. By Patañjali. Edited by Franz Kielhorn. Revised edition by K. V. Abhyankar. Vols. I-III. 1962, 1965, and 1972.
- Māitrāyaṇī-Saṃhitā (MS)*. Edited by L. von Schroeder. 1881-86. Leipzig.
- Mīmāṃsā-Darśana (PMS)*. By Jaimini, with commentaries by Śabara and Kumārila. *Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series*, No. 97. Six volumes. 1929. Pune: Ānandāśrama.
- Muṇḍaka-Upaniṣad (MU)*. See: *Aṣṭādaśa-Upaniṣadaḥ*.
- Nirukta (NR)*. By Yāska. With a commentary by Durga. *Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series*, No. 88, Pts. I-II. 1921. Pune: Ānandāśrama.
- Renou, Louis. (1931). *Bibliographie Védique*. Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Adrien-Maisonneuve.
- Rgveda (RV)*. With Sāyaṇa's commentary. Edited by Max Müller. 1890-92. London.

- Śatapatha-Bṛāhmaṇa (SB)*. Edited by Albrecht Weber. 1849. Berlin.
- Taittirīya-Āranyaka (TA)*. *Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series*, No. 36, Pts. I-II. 1967-69. Pune: Ānandāśrama.
- Taittirīya-Bṛāhmaṇa (TB)*. *Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series*, No. 37, Pts. I-III. 1988. Pune: Ānandāśrama.
- Taittirīya-Saṃhitā (TS)*. *Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series*, No. 42, Pts. I-VI. 1900-08. Pune: Ānandāśrama.
- Taittirīya-Upaniṣad (TU)* See: *Aṣṭādaśa-Upaniṣadaḥ*
- Vājasaneyī-Saṃhitā (VS)*. Edited by Albrecht Weber. 1852. Berlin.
- Vāsiṣṭha-Dharma-Śāstra (VDS)*. Edited by A. A. Führer. *Bombay. Sanskrit and Prakrit Series*, No. 23. 1916. Bombay.