

# Rescuing our Vedic Priesthood

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## I. Our Scriptures

The word *veda* is derived from the Sanskrit root *vid* which means "to know". Since our religion follows the vedic injunctions, it is known as "Vedic Religion". The word religion implies the meaning of *dharma*. The texts that give us the complete knowledge of *dharma* are called *dharma-pramANa*. They are fourteen in number and are: four *Vedas*, six *VedAngas* (the organs of the *Vedas*), and four *UpAngas* (secondary organs of the *Vedas*). These fourteen texts are glorified as *vidyAsthAna*'s - the abode of true knowledge and wisdom. (See Appendix 1 for a comprehensive list of our scriptures and what they deal with). As codified by Sage Veda Vyasa, all four *Vedas* put together had 1,131 *SakhAs* (branches). However, only 10 are available today, and of those, only two are nearly complete!

The Vedic literature can be broadly classified into four groups: 1. *SamhitA*: the mantra portion; 2. *BrAhmaNas*: the portion dealing with rituals; 3. *AraNyakas* - the forest texts, and 4. *Upanishads* - the portion dealing with Vedic philosophy.

The principles of *dharma* as embodied in our religion are all centered on the *Vedas*.

## 2. Glory of the Vedas

*Apasthambha Sutra* describes *Vedas* as the *Pramana*: (authority - *pramanam vedasca*). *Manu Smriti* hails them as *vedokhilo dharma moolam* (the root of *dharma*); *Bhagavan Sri Krishna* says: *vedaisca sarvair-ahameva-vedya*: (I am known through the *Vedas*).

The *Vedas* are Infinite (*anantA vai vedA*); They are the very breath of *Iswara*: (*yasya niSvasitam vedA*;) They are without beginning: (*anAdi*) and of non-human origin (*apourusheya*.) They teach the glories of all creations and the principles of *dharma* and enshrine true knowledge and wisdom. That is why our scriptures proclaim:

*vedo nityam adheeyatAm tad uditam karma svanushtIyatAm*  
(practice the *Vedas* daily; practice well their prescriptions)

It is our great fortune that we have inherited such a rich and cherished *dhArmic* tradition. It should be our foremost duty and goal to preserve such a tradition. Our ancestors led a peaceful and contented life following the path set by the Vedic guidelines. That path withstood the tests of historic times and was smooth to follow without obstacles.

## 3. The guardians of our scriptures – the Vedic Priests

Wayne Howard, in his book “Veda Recitation in Varanasi” writes: “ The four Vedas are not “books” in the usual sense, though within the past hundred years each Veda has appeared in several printed editions. They are comprised rather of tonally accented verses of hypnotic, abstruse melodies whose proper realizations demand oral instead of visual transmission..... The ultimate authority in Vedic matters is never the printed page but rather the few members of the Brahmana caste who are today keeping the centuries-old traditions alive. However, the Vedas are approaching a point in history, which will determine whether they survive or slip into extinction. They have shown remarkable vigor and perseverance in the past – thriving under potentially destructive political, economic, and religious upheaval – but whether they can withstand the accelerated rate of social change in the twentieth century is a formidable question which leaves their future in grave doubt”.

No – that doubt should never be allowed to sustain. Because, if Vedas have to perish, it amounts to the destruction of *dharma* itself, the root of an entire civilization, culture and tradition. However, as Howard had correctly observed, the ultimate authority of Vedas lies with the vedic priest , who, through a tradition of oral transmission, has been propagating them over generations.

#### **4. Vedic Chanting – a perfectly formulated oral tradition**

The Vedas are called ‘*Sruti*’- which means, what is heard. It is never read from a text, since the recitation of any *veda mantra* should conform to the following six parameters, namely, *varNa* (letters); *svara* (intonation); *mAtrA* (duration of articulation); *balam* (force of articulation); *sAma* (uniformity), and *santAna* (continuity). If any of these parameters is not maintained, it would change the meaning of the *mantra* itself, leading to even diametrically opposite effects!

In the absence of a written text, our *rishis* had devised many ways to prevent even a small error to creep in to the recitation of the *veda-mantras*. These fool-proof methods used to chant each *veda-mantra* in various patterns and combinations are known as : *vaakya*, *pada*, *krama*, *jaTA*, *mAlA*, *SikhA*, *rekhA*, *dvaja*, *danDa*, *ratha*, and *Ghana*. Among these, *vAkya*, *pada*, *krama*, *jaTa* and *Ghana* methods of chanting are more popular and let us analyze them only here.

*Vaakya or samhita pATha* is to recite a *mantra* in a sentence straight with appropriate intonations. In sentences, some of the words have to be conjoined in chanting. In *pada pAtha*, a sentence is broken down to ‘words’ or *pada*’s, which gives the student the knowledge of each word. In the *krama* method, the first word of a sentence is added to the second, the second to the third, the third to the fourth and so on, until the whole sentence is completed. This method enables the student to understand not only individual words but also how the words combine in recitation with the attendant modification of the *svaras*. Scholarly priests capable of reciting the entire *veda-SakhA* in the *krama* format is given the title “*kramavit*”. In the *jaThA* method, the first word and the second word are recited together and then the words are recited in the reverse order and then again in the original order. For example, in the *krama* method, if they are recited as 1-2;

2-3; 3-4; 4-5 etc., in the *jaThA* method, they are recited as 1-2-2-1-1-2; 2-3-3-2-2-3; 3-4-4-3-3-4 and so on. Scholarly priests capable of reciting in the *jaThA* method are given the title “*jaThAvallabha*”. The *Ghana* method is more difficult than the above where the combinations of words will be 1-2-2-1-1-2-3-3-2-4-4-2-3; 2-3-3-2-2-3-4-4-3-2-2-4 and so on. A priest who can recite in the *Ghana* method is given the title *ghanapATHi*.

These methods of complicated recitations in a oral tradition were devised in order to preserve the purity of the word, the sound, intonation, pronunciation, accent and sound combinations of the *vedamantras*. By repeating the words in manifold ways, the correct tally of words was also kept which has naturally ensured its purity. To enable the scholars to take up the difficult methods recitation, it was believed that, more difficult methods of chanting earned more *puNya* or merit!

## 5. The Merit, and the Plight of a Vedic Scholar Today

Just to illustrate what it takes for a priest to earn the title of a *ghanapATHi*, let us briefly analyze what is involved in the training. For illustration, let us consider only one portion of the *krishNa yajur veda*, called the *taittiriya samhita*. In this portion there over 2,000 *pancASat*'s (1 *pancASat* = 50 *pada*'s), amounting to 109,308 *pada*'s. We can roughly assume each *pada* to have 3 syllables, thus totaling ~330,000 syllables. In the *Ghana* method of chanting, each syllable gets repeated 13 times, thus amounting to 4,290,000 utterances. And each of these utterances have to conform to all the six parameters discussed earlier. Only when a person becomes capable of reciting this in any order asked, gets the title of a *ghanapATHi*. This is for only one *samhitA* portion in *krishna yajur veda* alone. Then there is *Sukla yajur veda*, *rig veda*, *sAma veda*, and *atharva veda*. There were scholars proficient in more than one *veda* as evident from the names *dvivedi*, *trivedi* and *caturvedi*. In addition, there are other *samhitA* portions, *brAhmaNa* portions, *AraNyaka* portions, and the *Upanishads*, in the vedic scriptures alone. After proficiency in *ghanapATHa*, some learn *lakshaNa-ghanapATHa*, which deals with the characteristics of each letter, its origin, how it has to be emphasized in a *mantra*, its *varNa*, the presiding deity, etc etc. Then there are *purANa*'s, *dharma-Sastras* etc. All these were learnt without any book, tape or any such instruments in the oral tradition, and were stored just in ~200 grams of the human brain! And the most interesting thing is, it was not that one or two individuals who were proficient in this *dharma*, but an entire society was well versed in this! Such a scholarship takes well over 25 years of intense education in a *gurukulam*, in addition to observing all the religious disciplines!

Having analyzed what it takes for a vedic priest to become a *ghanapATHi*, let us look at his plight in modern day society. When there is so much of respect and recognition for all other secular professionals – be a doctor, lawyer, engineer, scientist, businessman, artist etc. – the respect and the compensation extended to these vedic scholars are pathetically far below standards. On the one end we are all proud to inherit such a rich and cherished vedic tradition, but, on the other, not being sensitive enough or even negligent towards preserving and transferring it forward. At this rate, what were originally 1,131 *SakhAs*, and are only 10 today, will further deteriorate leading to a great loss to human-kind. The only guardians of this rich tradition are the vedic priests. Because of the way the society

treats them and the poor compensation, they are not motivated to send their children to vedic schools (*pAThaSAIA*'s). Generally they come from economically backward families, and so they drop out of schools early, striving to make a living and to support their poor families. All others who have already migrated to secular education are not going to revert back to vedic learning in the traditional sense. In addition, the personal discipline to be observed by the vedic priest being so stringent (otherwise, the *rituals* and *mantras* are believed not to give the desired result, and to even bring demerit), it makes one to shy away even more. When compared to the status of priest-hood in other religions, the plight of the vedic priest is really sad.

## 6. What can be done to bring back the lost glory of the vedic priest ?

Even though the situation appears very gloomy, there is lot of hope today. The very fact that a forum like this wants to address this issue itself is very encouraging. Following are some of my thoughts to help foster and propagate this tradition, though by no means exhaustive:

1. The first step is for every member of this *varNa* to be aware of what we have in our vedic scriptures and become sensitive to this education.
2. Even if one may not have time or may have other limitation to learn, observing the disciplines, one could at least support those who learn, and the *pAThaSAIA*'s that teach.
3. Many of the teachers in these *pAThaSAIA*'s are highly under-paid and they continue to teach just to foster this *dharma*. With the affluence of the NRI community, support can be given to increase the compensation for the teachers and stipend to the students.
4. Scholarships for advanced vedic learning can be implemented to motivate students not to discontinue from a full curriculum due to economic reasons.
5. Most of the *mantra*'s employed in rituals are from *Vedas*. Actually rituals (*samskAras*) are aimed at developing the eight inner values (*Atma guNa*'s), which are: compassion (*dayA*), patience (*kshamA*), free from jealousy (*anasooyA*), purity (*soucam*), keeping cool (*anAyAsam*), not being miserly (*akArpaNyam*), absence of attachment (*aspruhA*), and peace (*mangaLam*). The more we shy away from rituals, more are the chances of losing those *mantra*'s, since less will be the motivation for the priest to practice them!
6. There can be awareness courses on *samskAra*'s (there are ~ 41 *samskAra*'s from conception to cremation!), so that every member of the *varNa* will develop an interest and faith in them. Such faith will increase their respect for the vedic priest as an *AchArya*.
7. We believe that giving *dAnam* (gift) to a priest washes our sins. The priest gets this power because of his vedic knowledge. Hence, the compensation for the priests should be given with faith, humility and sincerity so that, it is not just a compensation for a job done, but an offering (*sambhAvanA*) for blessing our families in the name of *Vedas*.

Unless this *varNa* raises to bring back the glory of the vedic priest, it may be difficult to expect others to raise to this call. After all, religious practices are only for the believers, and these discussions are aimed at those who have an implicit faith in this *dharma*.

With a renewed thrust and commitment, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The vedic-priesthood will certainly become well respected in society with this awareness. Institutions like the Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation Inc. USA, organize mega *yajnas* like the *ati-rudra-mahA-yajna* of 1997 bringing ~100 vedic scholars from India, essentially to appreciate and respect the vedic priest-hood, in addition to showing to the present and the future generation, how an authentic vedic ritual could be conducted, even outside of India, and how such knowledgeable priests are available even today.

### Source Material:

1. "The Vedas", Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1988
2. "Rescuing our Vedic Pundits", Dr. S. Yegnasubramanian, Page 9, The Hinduism Today, Dec. '97

### About the Author

Dr. Yegnsaubramanian (Dr. Mani) is the Chairman of the Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation, and the Sanatana Dharma Foundation, USA. He is also the advisor for several temple organizations within USA, Canada and India. Dr. Mani has been teaching vedic/puranic scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita and Vedanta for the past two decades in New Jersey, to groups of adults and children. He is the editor and publisher of the international journal, Paramaatha Tattvam in which he writes regularly on various topics of Vedanta, vaidika samskaras, and bhakti in general. He was the general chairman of the first Ati-rudra Mahayajna conducted in the Poconos in 1997 and the Satachandi yajna in 2001. Under the auspices of the Sringeri Shankar Mutt, he organizes veda sammelans all over India every year involving thousands of vedic scholars. He was a trustee and the Chairman of Religious affairs of the Bridgewater temple from inception until the kumbhabhishekam in 1998. He gives lectures and short courses on sanatana dharma, scriptures, and Vedanta, all over USA and Canada. He represents the Hindu Faith in Interfaith Forums and conducts Youth Forums. He was awarded the title of "Dharma-rakshA-mani" by the Shankaracharya of Kanchi in 2003. Dr. Mani is a scientist by profession who retired from Bell Labs. in 2001. He works presently at Andrew Corporation in Warren, NJ and lives with his family in Skillman, NJ.

### Appendix 1. Our Scriptures (Dr. S. Yegnasubramanian)

#### I. Vidyasthanas (Source of Supreme Knowledge) – 14

- a) Vedas (4) : Classified by Vyasa - 1131 recensions (*SakhAs*): ~25,000 mantras

Name	Rishi	Seer	SAkhAs	Contents
Rig	Agni	Paila	21	Hymns on Devas; Social Life; Soul...
Yajus	Vayu	Vaishampayana	101	Rituals/Yajnas, Sacrifices...
Sama	Aditya	Jaimini	1000	Devotional Hymns, Music, Peace...
Atharva	Aditya	Sumanthu	9	Devas, Creation, Mantras to ward off enemies/evils

**b) Vedangas: (6) & c) Upangas (4) (to understand Vedas completely and in depth)**

<u>Vedangas</u>		<u>Upangas</u>	
1. Chandas	Meter, Poetry	1. MeemAmsA	Enquiry
2. Nirukta	Words & Roots	2. NyAya	Logic
3. SikshA	Phonetics	3. PurAna	Magnifying glass of Vedas; 18 Maha Puranas, 18 Upa; Puranas and Ithihasas
4. Vyakarana	Grammar		
5. Jyotisha	Astrology / Astronomy		
6. Kalpa	Yajnas, Samskaras...	4. DharmaSAstra	Smriti, social frame, duties

**II. Upa Vedas (4)**

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|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Ayurveda      | Science of Life               | 3. Dhanurveda     | Science of Weaponary and Warfare   |
| 2. Artha SAstras | Science of Wealth / Economics | 4. Gandharva veda | Treatise on fine arts, music, etc. |

**III. Aranyakas and Brahmanas - Vedic Scriptures learnt and interpreted by Rishis in the forests are Aranyakas and those interpreted in homes for homely use are Brahmanas:**

<u>Veda</u>	<u>SAkhA</u>	<u>Aranyaka</u>	<u>Brahmana</u>
Rig	Sakala, SAnkhAyana	Aitereya, Kousitaki	Aitereya, Kousitaki
Yajus	Taittiriya, MaitrAyania, kAnva, mAdhyandina	Taittiriya, BrhadAranyaka, MaitrAyania	Taittiriya, Kanva Satapatha, Madhyandin Satpatha
Sama	RANayaNiya, Jaiminiya, Kauthuma		TalvakAra, PancavimSa, VamSa, Arseya, SadvimSa, ChAndoghya, Mantra, Daivata, Jaiminiya, Samavidhana, Samhitopanishad
Atharva	Saunaka, PippalAda		Gopatha

**Upanishads:** are placed towards the end of Aranyakas. They deal with aspects of realizing through the path of knowledge (jnana marga), the nonduality (abhedha) of Brahman. They are considered as the quintessence of Vedas.

<b>Veda</b>	<b>Main Upanishads</b>
Rig Veda	Aitereya, Kousitaki
Yajur Veda	Taittiriya, Kathopanishad, Brhadranayaka, Isavasya, Maitiya, Svetasvara
Sama Veda	Kena, Chandoghya
Atharva Veda	Mundaka, Mandukya, Prasna

**Prasthanatrayi:** (Texts on Tattvajnana - Knowledge of Self - Metaphysics): 1. Upanishads; 2. Bhagavad Gita; 3. Brahmasutras; 2 & 3 are not vedic scriptures, they are given this status due to their content.

**32 Primary Vidyas:** (Primary Knowledge) 4 Vedas, 6 Vedangas, 4 Upangas, 4 Upa Vedas, 2 Ithihasas, Tantra, Smriti, Nastikamata (agnosticism), 3 Sastras (artha, kama and shilpa), Alankriti (asthetics), Kavya (poetry), Desabhasha (linguistics), Avasaokti, Yavanamata, Desadhidharma.