

## **CHAPTER 2: THE METHOD AND THE PROBLEM OF THE VEDA**

Is there anything of a secret with the Vedas? The secret of Vedas is that there are no ‘Secrets’ at all. At the same time, it is only a matter of fact that Vedas can’t be comprehended the way one normally understand a text by studying it. One need the whole hearted assistance of an acharya to unpack the interpretations of Vedic suktas to the intense mental requirement of each aspirant who approaches the Vedas.

Do the Vedas have a method or are the Vedas creator of many methods? Vedas are to be looked at as a store house of methods also. One has to try and get the required method unpacked from that store house of methods.

Here, if one feels that there are some problems with the Vedas, then one may say so: but in reality such problems are also not problems at all, on a different land.

The whole problem of the Vedas starts, when if there are problems at all. The problem is of the secret when there really is a secret in the Vedas, if at all. Sri Aurobindo in the book ‘The Secret of the Veda’ addresses this problem first by stating how this text has been misunderstood as barbarous and primitive by Europeans and others. It is true it depends on person to person about what he understands from this text. Even the person who has called it barbarous and primitive is saying this from his point of view. Thus, we cannot generalize for the entire west. The difference between the west and the east has been well explained by Sri Aurobindo in his book ‘The Human Cycle’. In this book we experience that how the east didn’t have to struggle to reach the subjective stage in the cycle of society and how the west had to undergo two world wars to reach that stage. Thus the subjective stage is the stage of transcendence which comes naturally to the east. Thus, if a person from the west tries to understand the Vedas, then it is likely for him to misunderstand it as barbarous and primitive.

What Aurobindo is trying to do with his interpretations is not to use a deleterious method to interpret the Vedas but to provide an affirmative view for the ancient problem. This we understand from his writings. And he is very right here to be with the spirit of Vedas.

“It is my object in these chapters to suggest a new view of the ancient problem. I do not propose to use a negative and destructive method directed against the received solutions, but simply to present, positively and constructively, a larger and, in some sort, a complementary hypothesis built upon broader foundations,—a hypothesis which, in addition, may shed light on one or two important problems in the history of ancient thought and cult left very insufficiently solved by the ordinary theories.” (1)

The Veda which Sri Aurobindo focuses on is the Rig Veda and selected hymns from the Rig Veda. It is so massive that even he was not able to complete all the hymns but just a selected few ones.

“We propose for the present to discontinue the Secret of the Veda so as to make room in the third year of the Arya for other matter, but we shall subsequently resume and complete the series.”(2)

We all must have heard about the game of Chinese Whispers. That we have to whisper a word in another person’s ears by the time it reaches the last person. The entire word is changed. Same is the case of the Vedas. And the words used in the Vedas. So with time we can imagine an ancient text like Veda whose date of existence is also really not known, would had to go through so many changes, in its understanding of the words used in them.

Perhaps this is how the Europeans looked at the Vedas and the Smriti-Shruti tradition of orally transmitting and memorizing. At once, it becomes evident that this is a very shallow, narrow way of looking at the Vedas. Obviously they had no way of knowing or understanding the Shruti Smriti tradition of preserving knowledge through the dynamism of Sanskrit language.

The Shruti Smriti tradition is so designed to memorize and orally transmit all kinds of knowledge through making knowledge into lyrics of Mantras. Mantras are compressed units of knowledge that shall get de-compressed at the hands of right acharyas.

Even when we read the Vedic poetry that is mantra poetry. It is not necessary that we get into the actual poetry. Because this poetry is different from the poetry that is understood now. Here the Rishis were the seers and the hearers of the truth. Therefore our understanding of mantra poetry will be a lot different from theirs. Now how to become seers; it is only through austerities, yoga, contemplation on truth and peace.

Further, one also must read the synthetic creation of a language itself to serve the smriti-shruti tradition. It simply is a matter of common sense logic that a knowledge tradition that had gone into creating a very advanced language itself for preservation of an oral tradition shall naturally be doing an excellent job. Nonetheless, there could have been willful addition and subtractions by scholars subsequently: and this is only a possible assumption.

“In the course of several thousands of years there have been at least three considerable attempts, entirely differing from each other in their methods and results, to fix the sense of these ancient litanies”.(3)

Even while referring to Sayanacharyas interpretation we find that he interpreted Vedas only as a text for rituals to obtain material gains. Even the western scholars while providing their interpretation took help from Sayana’s interpretation. Thus, they were able to reach only its ritualistic aspect.

When Sayanacharya discusses rituals in details, let none take the implication that Sayana is only ritualistic. Even Shankaracharya who is a Vedanti had not objected to Vedic rituals- or did not try to stop ritualism. This is all because they understood very well the rituals, why rituals are needed, to what end, to what benefit and so on.

In short, none treats rituals as an end in themselves. Rituals are only means to some other ends. This makes rituals merely instrumental and never intrinsic. So, rituals have only instrumental value and not intrinsic value. Nonetheless, what is intrinsic is the end, but till one reaches the end that is intrinsic, rituals shall appear to be all meaningful, all purposeful.

It just depends on what stage one is, borrowing the 'Kosh theory' from the Upanishads, except in Anandamaya Kosha stage, rituals may appear to have various meanings given stages and contexts. Further, there are also different grades in rituals. Yagnik rituals are supposed to be superior to some others and one can even contemplate of a hierarchy as well.

In short, to look at Sayanacharya only as ritualistic is utterly reductionistic and reductionism is a common phenomenon with many Europeans and those who adopt the European tools of interpretations.

If we talk about the interpretations provided by the European Scholars, particularly that of Max Muller, we find that the Vedas have been translated in such a way that the readers of the Vedas finds nothing in it. Thus they can be converted into Christianity. This is what we find in the letter that he wrote to his wife.

Max Muller had been projected as something that he really was not. This image of Max Muller only got destroyed as his personal letters got published from the British archives much later in time. The genesis of Max Muller becomes very interesting. He was brought to England from Germany to function in the nefarious plot of Mc Canley by the then German Ambassador to England. Till such time, Max Muller was not taken seriously and was treated simply as a romantic in Germany.

Mc Canley had a plan of subjugating Bharat intellectually. He realized that the Bharatiya pride is the main obstacle for him to really dominate Bharat. He also realized that the Bharatiya pride is rooted in the Vedopanishadic knowledge tradition. If Mc Canley started dreaming that if he could destroy the origins of Bharatiya knowledge tradition as some group of people who are not the ancestors of present Bharatiyas, this could well be done. He wanted to float the Aryan invasion theory.

Oxford University had already a chair for Sanskrit language to train British officers who are to be sent to Bharat and Prof. Williams was on Boden Chair. Mcganley approached Prof. Williams to this very purpose which Williams did not accept giving some reasons of age,

health etc. But he suggested the name of Max Muller the German who was only 30 years then, young and romantic. That is how Max Muller was thought to meet Mc Canley in England.

Max Muller knew to read and understand Sanskrit but he never knew how to speak or understand spoken Sanskrit. Max Muller never spoke Sanskrit, never visited Bharat never took any help from any other Sanskrit scholar, Bharat or not. The program or plot was to translate ancient Bharatiya wisdom texts from Sanskrit to English in such a manner that any one reading them should find them as utter non-sense. Max Muller was offered 10,000 pounds and Mc Canley told that the East India Company will pay all the money. That was a huge amount of money in those days. East India Company did pay Max Muller at the instance of Mc Canley, but they never paid the money fully.

Max Muller went to England and lived the rest of his life there. He began his translations under the name, “The sacred books of East”. To destroy the Bharatiya pride in the Vedopanishadic knowledge tradition, he brought, the theory that Vedas are created by the “Aryans”, who came to Bharat from outside. So people of Bharat have no legitimate right to the Vedopanishadic knowledge tradition. Later, the racially pure Aryans got blended with local Bharatiyas and lost their racial purity. His description of Aryans stirred the Europeans, so the British could claim Aryan ancestry to claim credit for the Vedopanishadic knowledge tradition and legitimacy in dominating Bharat.

Max Muller got the idea of Aryan theory from a proto type Aryan theory created by Christian intellectuals of Europe from their voyages of 17<sup>th</sup> Century to Bharat and other places. The Christian intellectuals wanted to prove that they are Aryans and have nothing to do with their Judaic heritage.

But Max Muller romanticized Aryan Invasion theory so much that he depicted Aryans in, his own image that well suited the Germans. From this, Hegel and other German philosophers became greatly overwhelmed and later, Hitler became drunk in Aryan race theory which he improvised to “Nordic Aryan” as the racially most pure. Subsequently, this became the

foundation of German strength that England started feeling as a great threat. At this point we see Max Muller afraid served of his British masters as Max Muller is found making a complete 'U' turn from his Aryan race theory by going to German Universities (University of Stuttgart) and giving lectures against his own Aryan race theory. He then said that Aryan is only a linguistic identity and maintained this.

Thus, according to Aurobindo the interpretation's provided by Sayana and the European scholars has been only to their convenience. But unfortunately these interpretations have had become popular with a good fortune in the literary history.

From the earlier times till now we see a gap or a sense of change in the God's of the Vedas, in their meaning and significance. The hypothesis that Sri Aurobindo proposes for the same is

“The European scholars took up the ritualistic tradition, but for the rest they dropped Sayana overboard and went on to make their own etymological explanation of the words, or build up their own conjectural meanings of the Vedic verses and give a new presentation often arbitrary and imaginative. What they sought for in the Veda was the early history of India, its society, institutions, customs, a civilisation-picture of the times. They invented the theory based on the difference of languages of an Aryan invasion from the north, an invasion of a Dravidian India of which the Indians themselves had no memory or tradition and of which there is no record in their epic or classical literature. The Vedic religion was in this account only a worship of Nature Gods full of solar myths and consecrated by sacrifices and a sacrificial liturgy primitive enough in its ideas and contents, and it is these barbaric prayers that are the much vaunted, haloed and apotheosized Veda.”(4)

Aryan Invasion theory is not factual it is a theory created to be forcibly implemented as a false analogy.

“I suggest that the gulf is of our own creation and does not really exist in the ancient sacred writings. The hypothesis I propose is that the Rig Veda is itself the one considerable document that remains to us from the early period of human thought of which the historic

Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries were the failing remnants, when the spiritual and psychological knowledge of the race was concealed, for reasons now difficult to determine, in a veil of concrete and material figures and symbols which protected the sense from the profane and revealed it to the initiated.”(5)

Even what Yaska, a great scholar, through Niruktas has mentioned is that the Vedas is pregnant with triple meaning. Thus it has a sacrificial interpretation which was also given by Sayana. Secondly it has the knowledge of the god. And thirdly it has the knowledge of transcendentality which could also be known through meditation or tapasya. Thus, a scholar can reach only its outer layer but only a seer knows its true meaning. Nirukta is a Vedanga and Yaska is an authority. Yaskas triple meaning theory itself is more than sufficient to provide an instruction regarding multi-layer implications of Vedas.

The Vedas have been purposely written in an enigmatic manner so that the essence of it remains safe in the worthy’s hands. And for the unworthy the outer rituals are always there. So we can say the symbolic construction of the Vedas is intentional.

“One of the leading principles of the mystics was the sacredness and secrecy of self-knowledge and the true knowledge of the Gods. This wisdom was, they thought, unfit, perhaps even dangerous to the ordinary human mind or in any case liable to perversion and misuse and loss of virtue if revealed to vulgar and unpurified spirits. Hence they favored the existence of an outer worship, effective but imperfect, for the profane, an inner discipline for the initiate, and clothed their language in words and images which had, equally, a spiritual sense for the elect, a concrete sense for the mass of ordinary worshippers. The Vedic hymns were conceived and constructed on this principle. Their formulas and ceremonies are, overtly, the details of an outward ritual devised for the Pantheistic Nature-Worship which was then the common religion, covertly the sacred words, the effective symbols of a spiritual experience and knowledge and a psychological discipline of self-culture which were then the highest achievement of the human race.”(6)

Sri Aurobindo too agrees with the double language of the Vedas. That is the Gods of whose praises the poetry is sung understands the secret meaning of the poetry. As nothing is concealed from these Gods therefore they understand its true meaning.

The beauty of the Vedas is such that its hymns are not a smriti but shruti. That is something that is being heard. This, Rishis were able to do with their impersonal experiences. Also we see that hymns were not produced just by one Rishi but it was a compilation of groups of Rishis. This too not just Rishis belonging to school clan but also the Rishis which were being refuted in logic would join during the compilations of the hymns. Another beauty of the hymns we see that it has been written in a perfect metrical order, which proves it was not a work of barbarous people. Thus the hymn was a way of expression for the spiritual growth of self and others to the transcendental and not a means to anything else.

If we interpret other smriti texts in the light of the Vedas it will make more sense. One should abstain from the interpretations provided by western scholars because they have interpreted these texts using their western methodologies which don't help in knowing the Vedas rather they are works often misleading. We find Wendy Doniger calling Sarama as the bitch of Indra. Max Muller as we know he was hired purposely for this purpose. Though in the later years of his life we see a change of mind and he did realize the knowledge it held, that was inevitable. Contemplating on the Vedas are certain to have an effect for good because there is power in the mantras.

“It helped him to express the god in him, to destroy the devourer, the expresser of evil; it became a weapon in the hands of the Aryan striver after perfection, it flashed forth like Indra's lightning against the Coverer on the slopes, the Wolf on the path, the Robber by the streams.” (7)

To understand the Vedas though we may have a certain guides like the Upanishads and the Brahmanas. In regards to Brahmanas, Sri Aurobindo says they cannot be used to interpret the meaning of the Vedas, because they are more in a ritualistic manner.



“Brahmanas, though full of interesting hints, help us very little in our research; nor are they a safe guide to the meaning of separate texts when they attempt an exact and verbal interpretation.” (8)

For the Upanishads too Sri Aurobindo says that they can be of little help to understand the Vedas. Because firstly their purpose was different and the method of interpretation was also different.

“In a certain sense their handling of the texts was not disinterested; it was not governed by the scholar’s scrupulous desire to arrive at the exact intention of the words and the precise thought of the sentences in their actual framing. They were seekers of a higher than verbal truth and used words merely as suggestions for the illumination towards which they were striving. They knew not or they neglected the etymological sense and employed often a method of symbolic interpretation of component sounds in which it is very difficult to follow them. For this reason, while the Upanishads are invaluable for the light they shed on the principal ideas and on the psychological system of the ancient Rishis, they help us as little as the Brahmanas in determining the accurate sense of the texts which they quote. Their real work was to found Vedanta rather than to interpret

Veda.” (9)

When we try to interpret the Vedas through comparative mythology, philology, psychology, religion or through various theories, the problem we shall face is it will again be through our reason. Unlike Sri Aurobindo we will not be able to understand it through our experience. The essence of it shall never be met. This is the beauty of the Veda, it is open for the seers, but a secret for the unworthy.

One can simply not attempt to know the Vedas intellectually; one only has to experience it.

It is also through the shift of Vedas to Upanishads which is more ritualistic in outlook, we also notice a shift from experiential to rational. For this we can take a simple example that it is easy to watch a movie than read a book. Here the Vedas are the book and Upanishad is the movie. It is also because of this shift that arise a problem in the interpretation of the Vedas

because the kind of knowledge we hear in the Vedas is in the level of experience. And the kind of knowledge we experience in the Upanishads is from the level of reasons. We cannot grasp the experiential knowledge with that of reason. The gap shall always be there. There remains the difference in reading a text and having a spiritual experience for the same. For example one can very well read Vedanta, so when we are reading Vedanta it will be through reason that we are able to read it. But what comes as an intuition or experience or expression are the Vedas. Thus, the reason can never understand the intuition. We see a gap in the interpretations of the Vedas, if we try to understand it through reason.

Also the Vedas had suffered a great ignorance due to upcoming religions like Buddhism, which gave rise to the Puranas. Here we see how the Vedas were forwarded from the Sages to the scholars.

“For the mass of the nation the Puranas pushed aside the Veda and the forms of new religious systems took the place of the ancient ceremonies. As the Veda had passed from the sage to the priest, so now it began to pass from the hands of the priest into the hands of the scholar. And in that keeping it suffered the last mutilation of its sense and the last diminution of its true dignity and sanctity.” (10)

Sri Aurobindo comments about Sayana’s commentary to be failing to give its essence as it is also aiming towards ritualistic interpretations same as done by the Upanishads.

“Sayana, the great commentator, gives us a ritualistic and where necessary a tentatively mythical or historical sense to the Riks, very rarely does he put forward any higher meaning though sometimes he lets a higher sense come through or puts it as an alternative as if in despair of finding out some ritualistic or mythical interpretation. But still he does not reject the spiritual authority of the Veda or deny that there is a higher truth contained in the Riks. This last development was left to our own times and popularised by occidental scholars.”(11)

“It is the final and authoritative binding of the Veda to this lowest of all its possible senses that has been the most unfortunate result of Sayana’s commentary. The dominance of the

ritualistic interpretation had already deprived India of the living use of its greatest Scripture and of the true clue to the entire sense of the Upanishads. Sayana's commentary put a seal of finality on the old misunderstanding which could not be broken for many centuries. And its suggestions, when another civilisation discovered and set itself to study the Veda, became in the European mind the parent of fresh errors." (12)

No matter what the allegations or misundersandings about the Vedas be it doesn't change the actual position of the Vedas.

Considering the progress of Modern theories such as that of the Comparative Mythologies, Sri Aurobindo further states it sees no difference between Plato and the Upanishads. The base of their interpretations is poetic imagination rather than scientific research. Again they view the Veda to be barbaric consisting of only admiration of the natural process like sunrise and sunset.

"Comparative Mythology has deformed the sense of man's early traditions by ignoring this important stage in human progress. It has founded its interpretation on a theory which saw nothing between the early savage and Plato or the Upanishads. It has supposed the early religions to have been founded on the wonder of barbarians waking up suddenly to the astonishing fact that such strange things as Dawn and Night and the Sun existed and attempting in a crude, barbaric, imaginative way to explain their existence. And from this childlike wonder we stride at one step to the profound theories of the Greek philosophers and the Vedantic sages." (13)

"If that had happened, then the country and the entire world would have been strong enough to counter barbaric attacks of West/Central Asian tribals that have resulted in the greatest problem of last 1000 years- terrorism. But that was the destiny we had to face. Because there was none to propagate the philosophical foundation of Vedas instead of mechanical & often illogical ritualism in name of Vedas." (14)

The modern theories we see how there have been different shifts and angles to look at the Vedas from different fields. Of which Sri Aurobindo acknowledges the work of Swami Dayananda's monistic approach to the Vedas.

“Dayananda has given the clue to the linguistic secret of the Rishis and reemphasized one central idea of the Vedic religion, the idea of the One Being with the Devas expressing in numerous names and forms the many-sidedness of His unity.” (15)

So far we see that the Comparative Philology, Comparative Mythology, Comparative Religion was not of much aid to get the essence of the Vedas. Sri Aurobindo's journey for the works of the Vedas came from their own experiences which they could later refer in the Vedas. The words of the hymns had a psychological function to play. This we can say because their own experiences were similar as mentioned in the Vedas.

“I perceived also that throughout Veda the elements of our personality are themselves continually personified. I had only to apply this rule inversely and to suppose that the person of the priest in the external figure represented in the internal activities figured a non-human power or energy or an element of our personality. It remained to fix the psychological sense of the different priestly offices. Here I found that the Veda itself presented a clue by its philological indications and insistences, such as the use of the word *purohita* in its separated form with the sense of the representative “put in front” and a frequent reference to the god Agni who symbolises the divine Will or Force in humanity that takes up the action in all consecration of works.” (16)

From the psychological theory of the Veda of Sri Aurobindo, we find out that it has given birth to the integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo. As Veda's are the expressions of the sages of their experiences. Through Yoga even Sri Aurobindo had intuitive experiences which he later found mentioned in the Vedas as well. We can read the journey of mind to the super mind in his work of 'Integral Yoga'.

Through the psychological interpretation we see what appears as symbols in the Vedas are basically referring to the mental realms. There is also mention of this notion in our neighboring scriptures.

“They represent the struggle between the powers of the higher Good and the lower desire, and this conception of the Rig Veda and the same opposition of good and evil otherwise expressed, with less psychological subtlety, with more ethical directness in the scriptures of the Zoroastrians, our ancient neighbours and kindred, proceeded probably from a common original discipline of the Aryan culture.” (17)

The Vedas that we know now are from the time when the Vedas were contemporary in that time. So we don't know before that how ancient they were. So what we have is the fragments left from the end period of Vedic civilization. What has come to us is what got preserved in history. So what we have is the fragments left from the end period of Vedic civilization. What has come to us is what got preserved in history. So that is what we are calling as Vedas, but we don't the depth of this knowledge.

“Many of the lines, many whole hymns even of the Veda bear on their face a mystic meaning; they are evidently an occult form of speech, have an inner meaning. When the seer speaks of Agni as “the luminous guardian of the Truth shining out in his own home”, or of Mitra and Varuna or other gods as “in touch with the Truth and making the Truth grow” or as “born in the Truth”, these are words of a mystic poet, who is thinking of that inner Truth behind things of which the early sages were the seekers. He is not thinking of the Nature-Power presiding over the outer element of fire or of the fire of the ceremonial sacrifice. Or he speaks of Saraswati as one who impels the words of Truth and awakes to right thinkings or as one opulent with the thought: Saraswati awakes to consciousness or makes us conscious of the “Great Ocean and illumines all our thoughts.” It is surely not the River Goddess whom he is thus hymning but the Power, the River if you will, of inspiration, the word of the Truth, bringing its light into our thoughts, building up in us that Truth, an inner knowledge. The Gods constantly stand out in their psychological functions; the sacrifice is the outer symbol of an inner work, an inner interchange between the gods and men,—man giving what he has, the gods giving in return the horses of power the herds of light, the heroes of Strength to be his

retinue, winning for him victory in his battle with the hosts of Darkness, Vritras, Dasyus, Panis.” (18)

Saraswati once was a mighty river but it got divided into various rivers cause of tectonic waves. Various descriptions can be found about this in various samhitas. Only this can explain the drying up of once flourishing Saraswati. Other denotation of the word Saraswati is for Vak. Therefore we see two senses of the word Saraswati, which now has been reduced to the Goddess of knowledge. Vak also represents knowledge. The Vedic period witnessed River Saraswati, the hymns were also composed near the bank of River Saraswati. We see the mention of Saraswati in several hymns.

“But what is peculiar is that *Sarasvati* in the Veda occurs not only as a symbol of *Vak* but also as a river and that also not as any feeble one but as one of the mightiest rivers of the then Indian, no less mighty than the *Sindhu* itself. *Sarasvati*, according to the *Rgvedic* account, emerges from the mountains and merges into the sea. Her emergence from the mountain is by no means peaceful. She is said to break the mountainous ranges by her tremendous stream like anyone digging out the root of the lotus. This she does on her both the sides equally. Indian rivers in plains normally take to only one of their banks at one point for breaking with the flow of their water. It is only in the mountainous region that they are prone to strike at both the banks simultaneously. The Vedic seer’s account of *Sarasvati* as such, shows that he was acquainted with the course of the river deep in the Himalayas as well. This gets confirmed also by *Vasistha*’s account of her as a mighty river flowing clear water from the mountains to the sea. Use of the plural form of *giri*, mountain, by the seer bears out his actual acquaintance with the Himalayan ranges. So may also be said about his familiarity with the sea. Without such familiarity, it was difficult to account for his description of the river as falling in the sea.” (19)

Mugging up the mantras of the Vedas did help in preserving the Vedas. But our aim should be to aim to know the meaning of the Vedas just like Sri Aurobindo did. He first experienced the truth which then he confirmed in the Vedas. We find the same mantras of Rig Veda in other three Vedas but they are used in different meaning and context.

When trying to understand the Vedas the objective knowledge that we are trying to understand that remains the same which is eternal. Just that their subjective approaches are different. It is us who have penned it down divided into four parts. Originally it is the truth which the seers have heard and experience, which is true knowledge.

“The Dasyus, robbers or destroyers, are the powers of darkness, adversaries of the seekers of Light and the Truth. Always there are indications that lead us from the outward and exoteric to an inner and esoteric sense.” (20)

Further we see the outer sacrifice has an inner relevance to portray. This is how we interpret entire Veda to be symbolic.

Let us say that rituals are external manifestations of the essential longing from the inner real self towards the transcendental that is the ultimately real. Rituals signify both our inability to go to the transcendental and conscious intentionality to transcend such limitations to reach the transcendental. Rituals are simply earnest and conscious efforts towards the transcendental; that is what one does in whichever manner given one’s own knowing and available knowledge to one; and that is the only thing that one can attempt from a mundane level of existence and further, for all practical purposes, that is what one ought to be doing!

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