

# The Vedic Corpus: A Referential Synthesis of Philosophy, Religion and Grand-Narratives

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## Abstract

This paper aims to address an age-old imperialistic problem of whether the whole of the Vedic corpus deals with mythical and religious issues only; or whether they have some other aspects as well that may satisfy the human intellectual and emotional need via their philosophical and grand narratives essential to beat the multiple forms of nihilism (Epistemic, *ontic* and *existential*). Presupposing that religion simply asks for positive faith, optimism, submission and sacrifice, while philosophy and grand narratives (metaphysics) creates a sense of wonder in us, we aim to depict that the Vedic corpus as a holistic system without any imposition of positive or negative emotions. Moreover, this paper aims to conclude that the hardcore Vedic corpus with certain lacunas (due to *philosophical ambiguities and toughness in the interpretation*) provides a holistic way of life, which is also an innovative application that modern materialistic and imperialistic world order often miscues in one way or other.

## Full paper

There are many famous things about India, and the Vedas, Upaniṣads, and Gītā are among them. These texts are not considered sacred and full of religious aura; but also, philosophical in-depth and grand narratives that imbibe the characteristics of the innovative application and sense of wonder. In other words, on the one hand, we have a notion that those who negate the authority of Vedas are atheists (*Nāstikas*). On the other hand, we have multiple numbers of interpretations of the same texts with an equal amount of criticism from any side (*Pūrvapakṣa or Partipakṣa*). In addition, the beauty of these texts is that we find every possible knowledge that the human world order may imagine or require. However, some partial understandings of these texts limit them to mere religious practices and fundamentalist authoritarianism, consequently distorting the very image of Vedic philosophy. Essentially, Modern Vedic studies, like Indian culture, seem peculiarly prone to arouse either violent antipathy or fervent enthusiasm. Both approaches represent the extreme of their side, which is, off-course, not a good research approach. Actually, philosophy (research) is considered a critical discipline that does not support the authoritative pursuit as such an approach often leads to theology instead of thinking, which is an intrinsic part of human beings. So, our first question is, can we really have an unbiased standpoint regarding Vedic philosophy? In the upcoming section, we will try to formulate such a position that it may provide an argumentative framework of the Vedic corpus in synthesizing Philosophy, Religion and Narratives. We have discussed the Vedic Philosophy, Religion and Narratives in such a way that one singularity cannot be understood without the other since everything is unified in a Vedic ecosystem.

## (I)

### Skeptical *Pūrvapakṣas* and Central Allegations about the Vedic Corpus

One problem that seems to arise from a philosophical point of view is that we look at the Vedic corpus from biased perspectives, which may be grounded in a particular culture, religion, and nation's ideology. For instance, in the past, a typical westerner would look at the whole of the Vedic body merely as a depiction of myths and ostentatious artificial that hardly relates to ground reality and humanistic purpose. This allegation seems sound when we look at the Vedic corpus from the modern materialistic point of view. Nonetheless, the question arises, is it really a genuine problem to look at a particular

system (like the Vedic system) from another system? Prof. Daya Krishna highlights some imperialistic problems beautifully, "...The self-evident claims about Indian philosophy are legion. Primarily is the claim to spirituality. Who does not know that Indian philosophy is spiritual? Who has not been told that this is what specifically distinguishes it from western philosophy and makes it unique and apart from all the other philosophical traditions of the world? The claim, of course, is never put to the test. In fact, it seems as self-evident as to require no argument or evidence on its behalf. Indian philosophy, however, is not uniquely and distinctively characterized in terms of 'spirituality' alone. There are other characterizations which are almost as universally current and which, on examination, are found to be as mythical as the one regarding spirituality. The other such characterization is in terms of 'authority'. The myths of spirituality and of authority are not the only myths about Indian philosophy..."<sup>1</sup>

Stalwarts such as Bimal K. Matilal has maintained that Indians, except for cursory forays into the subject, have "seldom discussed ethics." Many scholars think that Indian philosophy neglects ethics altogether. B.K. Matilal writes: "Professional philosophers of India over the last two thousand years have been consistently concerned with the problems of logic and epistemology, metaphysics and soteriology, and sometimes they have made significant contributions to the global heritage of philosophy. Nevertheless, except for some cursory comments and some insightful observations, the professional philosophers of India have very seldom discussed what we call "moral philosophy" today. Indeed, the Dharmaśāstra texts were there to supplement the Hindu discussion of ethics, the classification of virtues and vices, and the enumeration of duties related to the individual's social status. However, morality was never discussed as such in these texts."<sup>2</sup> N.K. Devaraja also makes virtually the same remark: "[My] remarks about Indian philosophy are not intended to belittle its achievements in the spheres of logic, epistemology and aesthetics. While these compare well enough with cognate achievements in the European philosophical tradition, it must be admitted that the contributions of Indian thinkers in the fields of ethics and socio-political philosophy seem to be very poor indeed when viewed against those of the European philosophers, e.g., Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, P.T. Raju comments: "There is a general lack of interest in ethical problems as such in Indian philosophy"<sup>4</sup> (Raju 1949 p.27). Finally, Eliot Deutsch adds his voice to this chorus; "The criticism is often raised against Indian philosophy in general ... that it turns its back on all theoretical and practical considerations of morality and, if not unethical, is at least a-ethical in character. If by "ethics" one means a rigorous, independent inquiry into problems of, and questions concerning, the meaning of value, the justification of Judgements, and the analysis of moral concepts and concrete existential modes of behaviour, then this criticism is justified."<sup>5</sup> Then there is Albert Schweitzer's argument. According to Schweitzer, "...ethics is concerned with "world and life-affirmation" while Indian thought is essentially bound up with "world and life negation" (Schweitzer 1936 pp.1-2). Hence, on this account, Indian philosophers cannot have views on ethics without abandoning the peculiar flavour that makes their philosophy Indian in nature. If an Indian philosopher has a view on ethics, the view is uncharacteristic of Indian thought: [T]his greatest difficulty for the worldview of world and life negation comes from ethics. Ethics demands of man that he should interest himself in the world and in what goes on in it; and, what is more, simply compel him to action. So, if the world and life negation really become concerned with ethics at all, it is driven to make such great concessions to the world and life affirmation that it ceases to exist... As the worldview of world and life negation becomes ethical, it necessarily, therefore, renounces itself."<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Babington Macaulay advocates that traditional Indian knowledge consists of "false History, false Astronomy, false Medicine ... in company with a false religion", surprisingly so many Indian academicians and so-called 'intellectuals' have accepted that knowledge from the West is the only real thing. Similarly, Guthrie's conception rejects the Indian thoughts and philosophy to include in the History of Philosophy; he writes: "The motives and methods of the Indian schools, and the theological

and mystical background of their thought, is so utterly different from those of the Greeks that there is a little profit in pursuing them."<sup>7</sup> In addition, who is not aware of Albert Schweitzer's allegations, for instance, "...we know very little about any thought except our own, especially about Indian thought. The reason why it is so difficult to become familiar with this is that Indian thought, in its very nature, is so entirely different from our own because of the great part that the idea of what is called world and life negation plays in it. Whereas our modern European worldviews (*Weltanschauung*), like that of Zarathustra and the Chinese thinkers, is on principle world and life-affirming."<sup>8</sup>

## (II)

### **Vedic *Prātīpakṣa*: Synthesis of Philosophy, Religion and Narrative**

Above are some classical problems, which we will use as a *Pūrvapakṣa* and try to provide some argumentative and factual responses from an Indian philosophical point of view. While philosophizing these matters, we have considered that all Indian thoughts, ethics and way of life are quite integrated, and distinctions among them make them incomplete. We have aimed to explore the ethics of life affirmation, Self-Reliance and pride in Indian thought. Religion is a worldwide phenomenon that has played a part in all human cultures. Therefore, it is a much broader and more complex category than the set of beliefs or practices found in any single religious tradition. An adequate understanding of religion must take into account its distinctive qualities and patterns as a form of human experience and the similarities and differences in religions across human cultures. In all cultures, human beings make a practice of interacting with what are taken to be spiritual powers. These powers may be in the form of gods, spirits and sisters or any kind of sacred reality with which humans believe themselves to be connected. Sometimes a spiritual power is understood broadly as an all-embracing reality, and sometimes, it is approached through its manifestation in special simples. It may be regarded as external to the self, or both people interact with such a presence in a sacred manner. Religion is a term most commonly used to designate this complex and diverse realm of human experience.

In modern usage, religion covers a wide spectrum of meanings that reflect the enormous variety of ways the term can be interpreted. At one extreme, many committed believers recognize only their own traditions as a religion. Understanding expressions such as worship and prayer to refer exclusively to the practices of their tradition at the other extreme religion may be equated with ignorance, fanaticism or dreaming. By defining religion as a sacred engagement with what is taken to be a spiritual reality. It is possible to consider the importance of religion in human life without making claims about what it really is or ought to be. Religion is not an object with a single fixed meaning or even a zone with clear boundaries it is an aspect of human experience that may intersect, incorporate or transcend other aspects of life and society. In many traditional cultures, including Vedic culture, the idea of a sacred cosmic order is the most prominent religious belief. In Vedic terminology, it is better explained with the notion known as *Rta*.<sup>9</sup> Religion, in this understanding, includes a complex of activities that cannot be reduced to any single aspect of human experience. It is a part of individual life but also of group dynamics. Religion includes patterns of behavior but also patterns of language and thought. It fulfills all the psycho-spiritual needs of humans. As Carl Jung Put it about Vedic Religion:

It is the role of religious symbols to give a meaning to the life of man. The wise Indians believe that they are the sons of Father Sun and mother earth, and this belief endows their life with a perspective (and a goal) that goes far beyond their limited existence. It gives them ample space for the unfolding of personality and permits them a full life as complete persons. Their plight is infinitely more satisfactory than that of a man in our own civilization who knows that he is (and will remain) nothing more than an underdog with no inner meaning to his life." (Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*)

Religion is sometimes a highly organized institution that sets itself apart from culture and is an integral part of a culture. Religious experience may be expressed in visual symbols, dance, and the performance of elaborate philosophical systems, legendary and imaginative stories, formal ceremonies, meditative techniques and detailed rules of ethical conduct. In addition, the law of each of these elements assumes innumerable cultural forms in some ways, as there are as many forms of religious expression as there is human culture. Religion has existed in all human societies from early times. However, belief systems and traditions of worship differ from culture to culture, but they also have many common elements in all cultures. Human beings make a practice of interacting with what are taken to be spiritual powers. These powers may be in the form of God's spirits, ancestors or any kind of sacred reality with which humans believe themselves to be connected. The religion satisfies a deep inward craving in a man who is not always content with leading mere and animal existence and one spiritual consolation and peace.

India is home and abroad of religions. It occupies a proud first place in religious devotion and godliness philosophy. Furthermore, religion has been closely associated with each other in India. The reason is that the final aim of both is the same, that is, to make man realize his supreme goal, which is freedom from the cycle of birth and death called "*samsāra*". The purpose of religion is to refine man and make him attain higher spiritual goals. Philosophical wisdom also aims at self-realization. Vedic literature is religious books, which the Hindus have considered as sacred scripture. The term Veda means knowledge. Vedic religion revealed a close similarity between the human being and the nature surrounding him. The early people looked with fear and curiosity to the natural events around him- like the firestone, thunder or even the scorching sunrays. They had no idea how to control them and could never understand why they happen naturally. They imposed some divine characters on these natural events and began to call them gods. The R̥gvedic period were essentially the natural phenomena but the aliens tried to personify them and thus the anthropomorphism began. Secondly, the R̥gvedic gods were all equal in status because that was an age of equality.

This Vedic corpus is also concerned with fact that there must be some explanation for the observed facts and this explanation leads to a causal connection that there must be a cause for an effect. This must be the logic behind the definition of natural powers. The most important factor of this belief consists in the conviction that no event can take place without a significant cause. The causal factor has philosophical importance. Animistic beliefs consists in the worship of deities living in natural forces and preceding duties over these activities. The man began to distinguish between spiritual bodies. He superimposed the same in the case of natural forces thus; man began to address his prayers to the self on spirit behind the natural forces in animatism. The worship is done towards the natural forces as animated being.

God or transcendental absolute principal manifests imminently in nature. It is a type of monotheism that supports the belief in a single God. In most cases transcendent qualities do not always worship all the gods equally; but can be the notice specializing in the worship of one particular deity. It is believed that gods are distinct separate real divine beings not psychological archetypes or personifications of natural forces. In the Vedic religion, we can see one or other God gaining prominence all of the others for a temporary period. Following the same, the concept of Brahman arises. Brahman the Supreme Being is ever growing ever expanding the infinite dynamic being that has no limits. This Vedic monism is based on the theme of Brahman and Ātman. It consists the believe that the ultimate being is essentially one principle. It is a high concept of unity of phenomena. Monism trace a whole universe in single Soul. The completely possible life being and not being, death and life, etc. emerge from this soul and ends in this principle. It is a belief that ultimate reality is one positive and unitary principle. The ultimate reality here is unlimited absolute, which cannot be described in human terms. All things are traced to this one principle. Every plurality and the binary is like being and non-being, life and death, are shown to be the unfolding of this one. How the one appears as a man is a mystery conclusion. In addition, how can we

miss the skeptical heritage of Vedas where the 'creation hymn', in itself, ends with the following radical doubts:

"...Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen? Whence this creation has arisen - perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not - the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows - or perhaps he does not know."<sup>10</sup> (Rgveda, IO. I29)

Lets' come to the aesthetical and moral part, most of the Indian philosophical schools that follows the Vedic Corpus accept the veracity of *Satyam* (truth), *Shivam* (goodness), and *Sundaram* (beauty) in one way or another. However, it is a different thing that some accepts the harmony among them and some not. For instance, the Indian Non-Dual School of thought focuses more on one absolute reality which comprises truth, beauty and goodness altogether with emphatic exclamations — *Aham Brahmāsmi* (I am Brahman) and *Tattvamasī* (That Thou Art). In short, *Satyam* (truth), *Shivam* (goodness), *Sundaram* (beauty) form the basis of it. In this state, Life is experienced as “*Sat-Chit-Ānanda*,” or “Truth-Consciousness-Bliss.” The situation is more like *Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram*, meaning ‘Truth-Goodness-Beauty.’ The truth of existence arises, and, more than good is an experience of Goodness. Experience is felt as ‘total goodness.’ It comprises the perfection of moral character which ethics, particularly virtue ethics purposes since the *Chitta* (consciousness) is thoroughly pure. One sees that existence is enlightened, and has been all along. The first word, *Satyam* means the truth, not what you think about it, but what it is; not your idea about it, but its reality. To know this truth you have to be utterly absent. Your very presence will distort the vision because your presence means the presence of your mind, your prejudices, your conditioning. You are nothing else but a bundle of all that has been forced upon you by the religions, by the society, by the so-called leaders of humanity. It is worth noting fact that no aforementioned virtue is exclusive since it contains the capacity to absorb one and another. Therefore, we neither can priorities one for another nor exclude.

[I]f the too obvious, so straight branches of Truth and Good are crushed or amputated and cannot reach the light—yet perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will make their way through and soar up to that very place and in this way perform the work of all three. And in that case, it was not a slip of the tongue for Dostoevsky to say that “Beauty will save the world,” but a prophecy.<sup>11</sup>

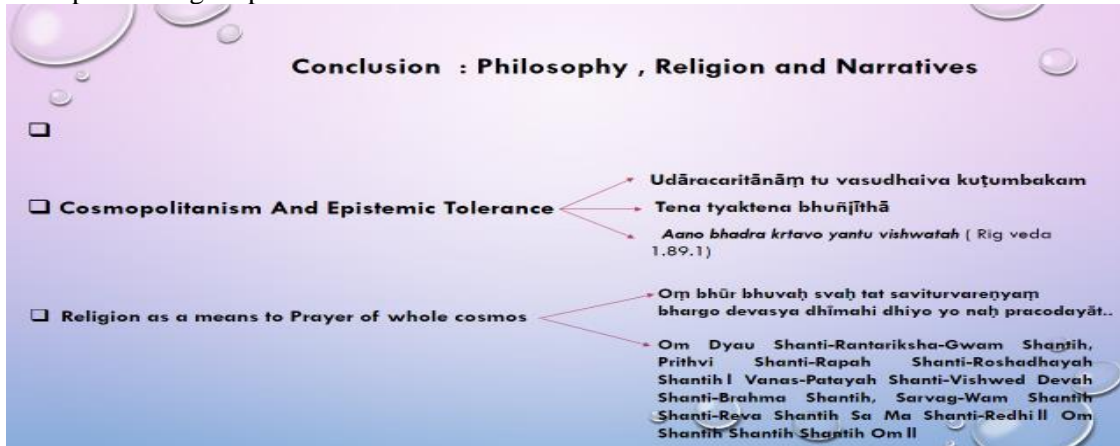
However, being a little critical, it has long been recognized that every narrative is a “mode of cultural self-expression.” This basic fact stems from the very nature of human tendency and reality. Many evolutionists and skeptics proclaim that we live our lives “in stories,” and it is impossible to escape the narrative character of both fundamental and transient events which constitute our existence. People have been telling and practicing the stories seriously since antiquity to modern time. Modes and standards may differ, but it is a fact which evolutionist proposes that we live by a narrative to prevent anarchy. Knowledge ability and sharing tendency has helped us to preserve the useful legacy for future generations by becoming part of society and the literary catalogue. Hindus narratives, a mode of the self-expression of early tradition, have also found their way to the literary canon, and since then they have deeply influenced the culture and way of life of various peoples, reaching far beyond the Asia of their origin. Indeed, one should marvel at the extent to which Hindu narratives have become intercontinental, transhistorical, and transcultural. The philosophy of truth, beauty and goodness is also one of the important parts of Hindu viewpoints that require critical examination for a better presentation.

Nyaya philosophy of logic, Mimānsā's Principles of Interpretation, and three most important Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India which comprises the thought of Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrī Harṣa can contribute a lot to strengthen any thesis including the Indian ethical assignment which we have aimed for. Conversely, the roots of skepticism get back to the legacy of Vedas and Upaniṣads where strong

questions have been put into a very skeptical manner. As R̥gveda points out: “who knows for certain? Who shall here declare it? Whence was it born, and whence came this creation? The gods were born after this world’s creation: Then who can know from whence it has arisen?”<sup>12</sup> So where the very notion of creation and creator has been put at critical interrogations than how can we mistrust the legacy of ethical discourses? Getting back to the philosophy of Shivam or goodness — we can interpret it as an embodiment of virtue – all that is good, all that is valuable, and all that is the most precious in you, the ultimate good. And it is the thing which the very notion of truth needs to embrace and must have put in front of the views of ancient sages and seers hermetically as well as hermeneutically.

## Conclusion

After the possible responses for the allegations Vedic Corpus, we can contemplate so many solutions in Indian thought and ethics as the credo of life affirmations, holisticism. It was more a way of life and not an imposed discipline, which is intrigued, in a day-to-day life. What else do we need to have a glimpse of self-reliance and pride in Indian thought and ethics? Humayun Kabir writes, “there has been a tremendous upsurge of interest in Indian life and thought in recent years. Gone are the days when a few erudite scholars or critical analysis of Indian religion confined Indian philosophy to esoteric studies by disapproving theologians. Today the art and culture, the economies and politics, the social structure and traditional customs of India find eager and sympathetic students throughout the world. Professional students of philosophy still at times tend to deal with ancient traditions. At others, they identify themselves with a particular sectarian persuasion or confine themselves to philosophy in a strictly conventional sense.”<sup>13</sup> Truth is obviously the ultimate pursuit of Indian wisdom but it also encompasses the value of beauty and goodness. We find this tendency in every possible system and texts, which Indian philosophical tradition comprises. Philosophy and ethics of Puruṣārtha, for an instance, provide a detailed account of what is worth pursuing and what is not while giving priority to every aspect of human life without violating the law of dharma. In short, it comprises the value of *Abhyudaya* and *Niḥśreyasa*. In addition, it was the main motive of the present paper to establish how goodness can be accomplished through the philosophical pursuit of truth and beauty. Following the slide from our conference personation, which includes the synthesis of philosophy, religion and grand narrative better explain our thesis that the legacy of Vedic corpus is that great we may be vowed of receiving of wisdom but it will never stops us being surprised.



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