

In This Chapter

The Āryan religious heritage leaves an indelible imprint on the character of Hinduism. Its character is most evident in Vedic religious literature, beliefs, and practices, which are explored here. The various genres of Vedic religious texts, such as their hymn collections, ritual manuals, and works of speculative philosophy are characterized, as are works on health and astrology. The chapter presents close examinations of certain Vedic rituals, some of which are humanity's oldest enduring rites, and discusses the nature of important Vedic deities. The crucially significant conception of the Vedic Absolute, or the One, is also introduced here, as is its relationship to the pervasive notion of sacrifice.

Main Topics Covered

[The Vedic Saṃhitās](#)

[Vedic Deities](#)

[Rta and Cosmic Order](#)

[The Brāhmaṇas](#)

[Vedic Rituals](#)

Case Study: The aśvamedha

Case Study: The agnicayana

[Soma](#)

[The Āraṇyakas](#)

[The Upaniṣads](#)

[Ātman and Brahman](#)

[Śruti and Smṛti](#)

[Other Vedic literature](#)

[Astrology](#)

[Āyurveda](#)

The Vedic Saṃhitās

The most highly regarded literary works of the Āryans are hymns in praise (*ṛg*) of various deities. Many of these hymns were chanted during a New Year festival centered on a ritual to prepare, offer, and imbibe a sacred beverage, Soma. The oldest collection (*saṃhitā*) is the [Rg Veda Saṃhitā](#) which consists of over 1000 hymns arranged in 10 books known as *maṇḍalas*. Scholars who have scrutinized [this collection](#) surmise that the first and last of these *maṇḍalas* were among the last to be added to the collection. So, despite the antiquity of the *Rg Veda Saṃhitā*, there appear to be discernable stages in its compilation. The exact dates of its composition are still debated, with some proponents postulating dates as early as 5000 BCE or even earlier, while more conservative scholarly estimates suggest that the *Rg Veda Saṃhitā* reached its final form by about 300 BCE. A prevailing number of estimates suggest a date of about 1000 BCE. There are Hittite-Mitanni treaty tablets from the region

of modern Iraq, dated at about 1400 BCE, which mention the Vedic gods Indra, Mitra, and Varuṇa, suggesting that portions of the *Rg Veda Saṃhitā* were composed at about the same time. In the ensuing centuries two other Saṃhitās were produced. These were the [Sāma Veda Saṃhitā](#) and the [Yajur Veda Saṃhitā](#), which together with the *Rg Veda* constituted early orthodox Āryan scripture. The *Sāma Veda* mostly contains verses from the *Rg Veda* and presents these in a form to be chanted (*sāman*) by *udgātṛs*, a special class of priests, during the sacrificial offerings of Soma (a sacred plant) in Vedic rituals. The *Yajur Veda* consists of verse prayers (*yajus*), also mostly drawn from the *Rg Veda*, to be learned by *adhvaryus*, priests who performed the main elements of Vedic rituals, such as the construction of the fire-altars, and so on. It also contains prose instructions on how to perform rituals such as the horse-sacrifice. The *Yajur Veda Saṃhitā* exists in two recensions, popularly known as the *Black* and the *White Yajur Vedas*. The *Black Yajur Veda* or *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* is challenging to deci-

pher because of the arrangement of its contents. By contrast, the *White Yajur Veda* or *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā*, which contains essentially the same material, is more accessible in its structure.

An examination of these three Vedic Saṃhitās reveals a progressive development in Vedic ritual art, with greater specialization on the part of priests (e.g., *udgātr*, *adhvaryu*) entrusted with particular duties in the performance of rites. Geographical references suggest a movement from the regions around the Indus to the Gaṅgā river basin, leading to postulations that the Āryans migrated from the northwest of the Indian peninsula to the east and south. These movements resulted in interactions with the local cultures whose religious beliefs and styles were partially assimilated into the compositions of the Saṃhitās and the rituals that accompanied them. The Saṃhitās are composed in verse in an archaic language known as [Vedic Sanskrit](#) to distinguish it from subsequent forms of the Sanskrit language that comply with more accessible grammatical structures.

The fourth Vedic Saṃhitā, the [Atharva Veda](#), was accepted into the orthodox Āryan canon several centuries later. There is no mention of it in certain early authoritative textual sources, such as the *Laws of Manu*, or the Buddhist Jātakas, which refer to the triad of the *R̥g*, *Sama*, and *Yajur Vedas*. The *Atharva Veda* is markedly different from this triad. Although about a sixth of its hymns are common to the *R̥g Veda Saṃhitā*, the *Atharva Veda* contains hundreds of original hymns dealing with different themes, which are often categorized as benevolent or malevolent. Within the beneficial class are spells and chants for the cure of illnesses, for the acquisition and retention of fertility and virility, and even for success in securing a lover. Within the malevolent category are incantations and formulae to bring harm to others. The *Atharva Veda Saṃhitā* reveals ancient techniques of medicinal practice, warfare, and ritual, as well as astrological knowledge and philosophical speculation. Indeed, many of its prayers and accompanying rites may derive from non-Āryan and pre-Āryan

sources, and it appears that the astrological and medicinal concerns of the *Atharva Veda* priestly lineages were initially not regarded favorably by the Āryan priesthood. Thus the *Atharva Veda* may have been initially resisted, and only included as the fourth canonical Saṃhitā later in time. However, many of its hymns suggest an origin as early, if not earlier, than the other three hymn collections. Contemporary scholarly studies are beginning to note compelling continuities between the religious concerns voiced in the *Atharva Veda* and the beliefs and practices of Tantra, whose literature emerges more than a thousand years later.

Vedic Deities

Of the various deities to whom hymns are addressed in the *Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā*, [Agni](#) (Fire) and Indra (God of Storms and Lightning) each receive about 200 hymns, suggesting their high status among the gods of the Āryan pantheon. There are hymns to Sūrya (the Sun), Dyaus-pitr̥ (God of the Heavens), Vāyu (the Wind), and Varuṇa (God



Bronze mask of the deity Indra, recognized by his horizontally positioned third-eye (National Museum, Patan, Nepal).



Contemporary lithograph of the Vedic sun god Sūrya, nowadays melded with the attributes of Viṣṇu.

of the Waters), and even to Soma (a sacred plant and the intoxicating drink prepared from it). The pantheon of [Vedic deities](#) is mostly populated by male gods, but there are a few hymns to such goddesses as Uṣas (the Dawn), Rātrī (the Night), and Pṛthivī (the Earth). Scholars conjecture that the prevalence of male deities, some of whom, like Indra, have warrior natures, reveals a patriarchal social structure among the Āryans. Others suggest that since goddesses come to command a sizeable part of Hindu worship, quite in contrast to their representation in the Saṃhitās and other early Āryan literature, that these feminine deities may have figured significantly in non-Āryan worship traditions, which progressively influenced the dominating Āryan culture.

Through a study of the deities in the Vedic pantheon, early influential Indologists, such as [Max Müller](#), speculated on the origin of religion itself. The close relationship between the Vedic deities and natural elements led Müller to suggest that human beings, in awe at natural phenomena such as the sun and lightning, and even

such purely abstract qualities as “brilliance,” began to attribute anthropomorphic qualities to these, and subsequently to envision a divine actor behind the manifestation of these powers. So the Ṛg Vedic linguistic term “*dyaus*,” rendered by Müller as “shining” or “radiant,” was eventually identified with a particular deity, Dyaus-Pitr̥. In fact, Müller suggested that the cognate words in Indo-European languages, such as *deva*, *deus*, *theos*, general terms for “god,” eventually became particularized into specific gods such as Zeus, Dyaus-Pitr̥, and Jupiter. Thus Müller argued it was a “disease of language” that led human beings to mistake words originally used for abstract principles and reify them into imagined realities. Most scholars acknowledge the close linguistic relationship between the names for Vedic deities such as Dyaus-Pitr̥ and those of the western Indo-European gods, such as Zeus and Jupiter, or between Varuṇa and Uranus, which suggest common socio-cultural origins. However, theorizing on the origin of religion has fallen out of favor in the last century, because there is

little evidence to evaluate the truth behind such speculations.

***Ṛta* and Cosmic Order**

Among the concepts encountered in Vedic literature is *ṛta*, which may be translated as “the right way,” and is often rendered as “the cosmic order.” It reveals that Āryan civilization was aware of an overarching orderliness to the workings of the cosmos, evident in the movement of the heavenly bodies, the seasonal changes, and the course of human life. One discerns a sense of acceptance of an inexorable principle, akin to “Fate” in its controlling power, but different in that it was not necessarily capricious, but orderly. *Ṛta* controlled the way plants grew, rivers flowed, and persons developed. In time, it becomes apparent that alignment with this cosmic order is regarded as beneficial, while to be in discord with it is harmful.

The concept of *ṛta* eventually disappears from usage, and is taken up by the term *dharma*. *Dharma* develops into a notion of individual hu-

man and social actions in relationship with the overarching cosmic order. Dharmic action is in accord with *ṛta*; undharmic action is not. Religious authorities, regarded as having intuited the nature of this orderly “course of things,” which was now seen as encapsulating a divine, moral order, begin to prescribe how individuals should behave through the course of their lives in order to follow the way of religious righteousness.

The Brāhmaṇas

A genre of texts next emerged that primarily deal with the power (*brahman*) within the recitation of sacred verses (*mantra*), and with the ritual practices of the priestly class (*brāhmaṇa*, or Brahmin in this text, to minimize confusion). The Brāhmaṇas, as these texts are called, are composed in Vedic Sanskrit prose, and extol the virtues of sacrificial rites known as *yajñā*. They contain commentaries on hymns from the Vedic Saṃhitās, and describe a variety of rituals in detail. They also offer interpretations, and explanations for the origins, of aspects of ritual practice.

Their interpretations often strive to demonstrate parallels between three realms: the macrocosm, which is the abode of the gods, the mesocosm of society, and the microcosm of individual human life and ritual action. Hence, the fire sticks that are rubbed together to kindle the sacrificial fire are equated with the sexual union between a Vedic god and goddess, and the clarified butter used to stoke the fire is likened to the rain, to semen, and to the divine child produced by their sexual union. The content of these texts, although once dismissed as being of little merit, are attracting renewed attention by some scholars engaged in ritual studies.

Vedic Rituals

The term that was originally used for Vedic sacrifices is *yajñā*, and the patron who commissioned such a rite is the *yajamāna*. Nowadays, it is much more common to hear the term *homa* used for such Vedic styled rituals of offerings into the fire. The Brāhmaṇa literature begins to emphasize *yajñā* even more than the gods to whom the of-



A Brahmin patron makes an offering of ghee in a *homa* ritual as Brahmin priests chant Vedic *mantras*.

offerings are made, insinuating that it is *yajña* that gives the gods their powers, or that it is because they themselves performed *yajña* that the gods gained prestige. Thus the Vedic gods are seen as dependent on the performance of *yajña*, and in turn on the ritual acts of the priests who are capable of conducting the rites. The Vedic deity Bṛhaspati, regarded as the high priest, and



Vedic-styled temporary pavilion for the performance of a *yajña* or *homa* rite.

wise spiritual preceptor to the gods themselves, served as a divine model for the earthly members of the priestly class, who presided at *yajñas*. The performance of *yajñas* was deemed vital for anyone desiring entry into heaven. *Yajñas* were thought to maintain the very order of the cosmos by providing nourishment for the gods. The gods consumed the essence of the offerings that were made into the fire, requiring these offerings as their sustenance. What are left behind are the empowering consecrated remnants of the offered food that the gods have tasted. Although the term “sacrifice” often conjures up the image of the offering of animals, Vedic *yajñas*, and certainly contemporary *homa* rites, rarely involve offerings of flesh and blood. Milk, clarified butter or ghee, yogurt, rice or other grains and pulses, and even parts of sacred plants such as the *datura* fruit, wood-apple leaves (*bilva patra*), or Soma, might be offered.

The most ancient types of *yajña* were rituals performed for the benefit of the social or cosmic good. Collectively known as *śrauta* rites, they in-

involved the use of three sacred fires. The patron (*yajamāna*) of these rites was typically a king, to whom particular benefits of the ritual would accrue. However, *śrauta* rites were supposed to be performed in accord with the rhythms of the natural world, for instance, during seasonal changes, in accord with lunar cycles, or even at junctures of the day. By commissioning priests and staging these *śrauta* rites, some of which were on an exceptionally grandiose scale, the ruler demonstrated his own largesse, secured the harmonious workings of the cosmos, and obtained the beneficial fruits of the sacrifice. These fruits might include prosperity of the kingdom, fertility of his lineage and of the land, and revitalization of his own power.

While the earlier pattern of *yajña*, as suggested in the hymns of the Vedic *Samhitas*, appeared to reiterate events of a cosmic battle between gods and titans, order and chaos, as exemplified by the warrior-god Indra’s defeat of *Vṛtra*, the *Brāhmaṇas* emphasize the science of ritual itself. The timely performance of these *yajñas*, with

exactitude in adhering to the system of rules of ritual action, was eventually perceived as essential for the proper functioning of the cosmos. Thus human beings, through the indispensable mediation of the Brahmin priests, were thought to have substantial control over their world.

Yajñas that were prescribed for individuals, which involved the use of a single sacred fire, were known as *gr̥hya* or household rites. The simplest of these could be performed by the householders of the upper classes themselves. In time, the number of prescribed rituals increased, as did the belief that erroneous performance could result in dangerous consequences for the *yajamāna*. The responsibility for the correct performance of *yajñas* flowed in the direction of the priestly classes, as did those offering materials from the rite that were not consumed in the sacrificial fire. It became commonly understood that without the *dakṣiṇā*, the monetary or material payment for services provided, even the spiritual benefit would go to the priest(s) who performed the rite, rather than to the patron. *Dakṣiṇā* was

regarded as the “spouse” of *yajñā*, and an indispensable payment to bring about the transfer of spiritual merit from the ritualist to the patron.

Case Study: The *aśvamedha*

One of the grandest of all *śrauta yajñas* was the *aśvamedha* or horse-sacrifice. Only the most wealthy and powerful of kings could afford to commission this *yajña* since it was financially costly and politically provocative. The ritual was designed primarily to extend and consolidate a king’s dominion, as well as to obtain offspring. In the *Ramāyaṇa*, a Hindu epic of a later period, King Daśaratha performs an *aśvamedha* that leads to the birth of Rāma, the hero of the tale. The horse sacrifice would begin with the selection from the king’s stable of his finest stallion, which would undergo a three day rite of purification and consecration. Marked with an insignia of the king, the stallion would then be released to roam freely for an entire year. It would be followed by an entourage of the king’s warriors. If the horse wandered into a neighboring monarch’s territory it set the

stage for potential conflict. If that ruler allowed the horse free access to his lands, he essentially submitted to the stallion's owner. However, if he seized the animal for himself, he would initiate a battle for sovereignty over his own land. If the horse's wandering progressed smoothly, the stallion of the victorious emperor would return to the capital at the end of the year.

In accord with its concerns for fertility, the chief queen or *mahiśī* played a central role in the concluding rites, over which several priests presided. The king would cleanse himself by gargling, and shaving his beard and head. Together with the chief queen, he would perform an all-night vigil before a sacred fire on the night of the new moon. The next day, the horse would be adorned and anointed, while a variety of animals were sacrificed. Among these was the dog, a symbolic antagonist of the horse, and thus a symbol of the king's enemies. The chief officiating priest, the horse, and the king would be identified with the Vedic creator deity, Brahmā Prajāpati. Rice, representing the stallion's virile

semen, would also be cooked in the rite. It was equated with the gold given by the king, who was the patron of the rite, to the priests. Finally the horse would be "quieted," although its vital breaths would be "restored." Some scholars suggest that this meant the animal was suffocated. In keeping with the rite's concerns with fertility, the chief queen would lie beside the horse, who symbolized the king, be covered with a cloth, and enact a mock copulation. The horse would subsequently be dismembered, offered into the sacrificial fire, and portions of its flesh would be consumed by the participants. The consumption of the cooked rice was believed to distribute the stallion's virility among Prajāpati, the priests, and the king. In a description of the horse sacrifice in a version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, portions of the rice are consumed by the chief queen and king Daśaratha's next two chief wives, all of whom subsequently bear children.

The performance of one hundred *aśvamedhas* was reputed to grant to a human ruler the throne of Indra, king of the gods. However since the rite

took over a year to perform this was hardly possible. There are mythic tales of gods themselves, such as Brahmā, and kings, such as Yudhiṣṭhira of the *Mahābhārata* epic, having performed the *aśvamedha*. Several historical kings are also known to have performed the rite. Among these was Samudragupta of the Gupta dynasty, who cast coins commemorating the event. In the city of Banāras, a renowned spot (*ghāt*) on the banks of the river Gaṅgā bears the name Daśāśvamedha Ghat, because a local royal dynasty reputedly performed ten (*daśa*) *aśvamedhas* there. A recent performance of the rite was by Sawai Jai Singh II, a king of Jaipur in the 18th century.

A repeating motif in Hindu sacrifice is based on the notion that the creation is the result of the dismemberment of the creator deity Prajāpati. By building the sacrificial altar and making offerings into it, Prajāpati, and the creation itself is temporarily reconstituted and restored.

Case Study: The agnicayana

Another example of Vedic *yajña* is the *agnicayana*, perhaps humanity's oldest surviving religious ritual. The Nambudiri Brahmin community from the state of Kerala has maintained knowledge of ancient Vedic traditions with little change. However, since the *agnicayana* was a costly rite it was rarely performed by them, and even if conducted, had not been witnessed by outsiders. A detailed study of this ritual was conducted by renowned Indologists who commissioned the rite in 1975. It was filmed by a visual anthropologist, photographed, and studied, providing us with a remarkable [record of the procedure](#). Since the 1975 performance, a few others have been commissioned, suggesting a revival and endurance of this ancient rite. An elaborate 12 day ritual, the *agnicayana* is typically commissioned by a patron in order to attain vitality, offspring, or even immortality. It requires the ministrations of 17 priests and many months of preparation. It is performed in the fortnight between the new and

full moon in spring.

The ritual takes place in a temporary enclosure built according to prescribed specifications where measurements are related to various dimensions of the human body. The ritual enclosure is typically a thatched roof supported by wooden posts. A stick, measuring from the toes to the tips of the middle fingers of the patron's upstretched arms, raised as if in prayer, serves as the main length against which all other measurements are made. The ritual site is a reconstruction of the cosmos itself, whose dimensions are mirrored in that of the human microcosm. One sees, in this ancient rite, early applications of the astronomical sciences in the necessary timings of each event, of mathematics, in its computations and structural geometries, and of the physical sciences in the casting of bricks, the making of fire, and the offering of oblations. One sees applications of culinary art in the production of the Soma sacrifice and other oblations into the fire, as well as sonic science in the recitation of Vedic chants with their varied metri-

cal forms. The *agnicayana* weaves together an elaborate tapestry, with threads of technological knowledge transmitted from antiquity, in the service of a vision of the world that integrates human beings (e.g., the patron) with the broader cosmic reality, through the agency of indispensable priestly functionaries who are custodians of that arcane knowledge.

The center piece of the *agnicayana* is an elaborate brick altar (*vedi*) fashioned from over a thousand bricks placed in five layers and laid out in the shape of a bird. It is located in the Great Altar (*mahāvedi*) section of the sacred enclosure while the other section holds the domestic altars and fire pits. This domestic section represents the home of the patron (*yajamāna*) who must preside over the ritual with his wife, who holds a parasol to keep her partially concealed from the view of onlookers. Only a Brahmin who has maintained the tradition of keeping three domestic fires burning in his household is entitled to commission the *agnicayana*, the "piling up of fire" rite.

The ritual process in summary is as follows. On the first day of the rite, the patron and priests enter the enclosure carrying three fires. Clay pots are constructed, an animal sacrifice is traditionally performed for the god Vāyu (the Wind), and fire, generated through churning a wooden shaft in a wood receptacle, is placed in one of the pots. The patron undergoes some purification rites and takes a vow of silence for the duration of the ritual, except for the utterance of various prayers. A sacrificial pole is prepared in the domestic section, while the dimensions and placement of the Great Altar are laid out in their appropriate place. Construction of the bird-shaped Great Altar begins on the fourth day, with the second, third and fourth layers of bricks laid on successive days. The patron voices a prayer that each of the bricks be transformed to cattle to enhance his wealth. The construction of the altar reiterates the reconstitution of the divided creator deity Prajāpati. The fifth and final layer is positioned on the eighth day. Appropriate Vedic hymns are chanted throughout the ritual by the priests specialized for the task.

Oblations of water and ghee are made and one of the old domestic altars is replaced with a new one. An animal sacrifice is performed. Continuous rites follow from the tenth to the twelfth day. These include the pressing of the stalks of the sacred Soma plant to produce a hallucinatory beverage. Hymns are chanted in honor of the divine plant. At various points in the ritual, the Soma is consumed by the priests and patron, or offered into the fire. The gods, including Indra, are invited to participate in the oblations. Eleven more animals are sacrificed. In the 1975 enactment of the ritual, non-animal substitutes were used for what would typically have been goat sacrifices. At the conclusion of the rite, the patron and his wife take a purifying bath and don new clothes. Another animal is sacrificed and the ritual enclosure is set ablaze. The patron departs with fire to install in his domestic altars which have been rejuvenated in the process. Thereafter, he will be expected to perform the domestic *agnihotra* ritual daily, for the remainder of his life. The *agnihotra* is a simple ritual to be performed

at sunrise and sunset in which offerings of rice and ghee are made into a fire fuelled by dried cow dung. Prayers to Sūrya (the Sun), Prajāpati, and Agni (Fire) are uttered during the rite.

Soma

The identity of the sacred [Soma plant](#), and the Soma beverage prepared from it, continues to puzzle scholars. Vedic descriptions of its preparation and properties suggest that it had intoxicating and possibly even [hallucinogenic capacities](#), and differed from mere alcoholic beverages. The golden-hued liquid was obtained by pressing Soma between stones. There are over a hundred Vedic hymns in praise of Soma, and they tell that the gods Indra and Agni drink it in large quantities. The mycologist R. Gordon Wasson made a compelling case that Soma was likely the “fly agaric” mushroom, *Amanita Muscaria*. This fungus has been used by Siberian shamans in various cultures to induce altered states of consciousness. Recent discoveries of ephedra, and other plant substances, in jars at sites of the

ancient Zoroastrian *haoma* ritual, which parallels the Vedic Soma rite, have led other scholars to consider that these plants might have been Soma. However, in both India and Persia, a variety of plants have been substituted for whatever might have been the original [Soma/haoma](#).

The Āraṇyakas

The Āraṇyakas are a loosely defined genre of texts that bridge the concerns of the Brāhmaṇas and those of the Upaniṣads. They are even sometimes classified within those categories. Thus the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, which is attached to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, is regarded as an Upaniṣad. Like the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, or wilderness (*āraṇya*) texts, concern themselves with sacrificial rituals of offerings into sacred fires, and like the Upaniṣads, endorse the value of meditative practices. The *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* even designates itself as an Upaniṣad. As their name suggests, the Āraṇyakas uphold the value of retreating beyond the outskirts of the village to study their teachings. In fact, their content is



An ascetic in a deeply forested isolated meditation retreat (Madhya Pradesh).

held to be dangerous and to be studied in secret while adhering to an ascetic lifestyle. As such, they are eventually associated with the forest-dweller (*vanaprastha*) stage of life prescribed by orthodoxy. However, the concerns of the texts may actually derive from the ritual practices of nomadic warriors who herded cattle and dwelt apart from village communities. The *Āraṇyakas* emphasize symbolic speculation on the nature of rituals rather than exclusive attention to the

performance of the rite itself, and thus, although they are primarily concerned with Brāhmaṇa-like ritual action, are clear forerunners of the speculative spirit encountered in the Upaniṣads.

The Upaniṣads

The oldest Upaniṣads, which may have been composed as early as the eighth century CE, are appended to the *Āraṇyakas* or partially embedded within them. There are as many as eighteen [principal Upaniṣads](#), “principal” because they are appended to the previously mentioned genres of Vedic literature, namely the Vedic Saṃhitās, the Brāhmaṇas, and the *Araṇyakas*. Of these eighteen, the [Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad](#) (attached to the *White Yajur Veda*) and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (attached to the *Sāma Veda*) are the earliest, and composed in Vedic Sanskrit prose. The expression Vedānta is often used when referring to the Upaniṣads and their teachings, since they form “the end or concluding sections (*anta*) of revealed Vedic literature.” Other prin-

cipal Upaniṣads include the *Īśa*, *Śvetāśvatara*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Jābāla*, and *Māṇḍukya Upaniṣads*. They appear to have been composed in subsequent centuries, some in verse, and others in classical Sanskrit prose. There are over a hundred other “[lesser Upaniṣads](#),” some of which were composed only a few hundred years ago. These reflect the concerns of specific philosophical schools, such as those of Sāṅkhya or Yoga, or have sectarian orientations towards particular deities, such as Śiva or Viṣṇu.

Actually, tradition holds that any text with secret teachings is an Upaniṣad, but scholars classify them according to their style and thematic content. The term “*upaniṣad*” is said to derive from the classic image of a student sitting (*ṣad*) down (*ni*) beside (*upa*) a spiritual mentor. The format of many of the Upaniṣads reflects this terminology since they are framed as conversations between a disciple (*śiṣya*) and teacher (*guru*). Although there are considerable variations in the content of the Upaniṣads, they are generally classified as texts of speculative philosophy, and



A father acting as *guru*, teaches his son how to recite a Sanskrit scripture, evoking the Upaniṣadic style of sitting next to one’s teacher.

become a cornerstone of the Indian philosophical tradition that subsequently develops.

The primary concern of the Upaniṣads is with the nature of Absolute Reality (Brahman), the true nature of the individual self (*ātman*), and the relationship between Brahman and *Ātman*. This focus reflects a trend prefigured in the *Āraṇyakas*, to uncover an underlying principle of coherence that unifies the apparent diversity of the created

world. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, which bridges the two genres of Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad, exemplifies this in its cosmological interpretation of the Vedic horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*). What is significant is not the performance of the rite, but an intuitive grasp of the relationships that connect particulars from the realm of human ritual action to the fullness of the universe. So, the Upaniṣadic sage proclaims that Dawn itself, both the goddess in Vedic myth and the natural phenomenon, is the head of the sacrificial horse. So, too, the Sun is the horse's eye; the wind, his breath; the sacrificial fire, his open mouth; the seasons, his limbs; the stars, his bones; plants and trees, his hair, and so on. When the horse shakes himself, there is thunder; when he urinates, it rains; and Speech itself is his voice (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.1.1). Thus the pantheon of Vedic deities, and their corresponding natural phenomena, are united and symbolically interpreted as parts of a unity. In this case that unity is the sacrifice, again understood as a whole, comprising both the sacrificial offering (i.e., the horse and his faculties) and the

sacrificial fire (I.2.7). The implication is that what appears to unskilled eyes as merely the immolation of an animal, to those who have the insight to recognize it, is "verily" (*va*) the revelation of a mystery. A hidden power, the veritable source of all "selves" in creation, took up form in the particular manifestation of the sacrificial animal. In the act of sacrifice, the particular form of the hidden power is released, and reunited with itself. Those who realize this truth become one with that power and transcend the realms of life and death. Generally, the Upaniṣadic sages refer to that unseen power, principle, or reality as Brahman or the Self (*ātman*).

Ātman and Brahman

The word "*brahman*" originally referred to a hallowed power within the sacred utterances (*mantra*) of the Vedic ṛṣis, but by the time of the Upaniṣads was used to signify ultimate reality itself. This is not to say that the Upaniṣads as a whole are consistent in the way they depict Brahman. Vedānta

philosophy, for instance, which is rooted in interpreting the teachings of the Upaniṣads, has produced an assortment of schools that reflect the variations in Upaniṣadic depictions of the nature of Brahman. Brahman can represent the underlying essence of the material world. Brahman is mostly unseen, hidden to the senses, and even to rational thought. The Upaniṣads depict Brahman as supreme (*parā-brahman*), and it is also designated as Nirguṇa Brahman (Brahman beyond attributes) and as Saḡuṇa Brahman (Brahman that can be characterized).

Brahman is consistently identified as intrinsically connected to the innermost being of all things in existence, including our selves. Thus the Self (*ātman*) is often used as a synonym for Brahman, with which it is identified. In the *Katha Upaniṣad*, for example, the youth Naciketas consults the Lord of Death, Yama, on the question of whether anything endures beyond the death of one's body. Yama delivers a teaching on Brahman and Atman, pointing out that the Supreme Lord is the innermost Self (*ātman*) of all beings, who

although one, appears to have manifold forms. Only the wise, who recognize the Supreme Lord (i.e., Brahman) within themselves, attain eternal joy (*Katha Upaniṣad* II. ii. 12). The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (I.4.10) also presents this perspective when it points out that whoever knows "I am Brahman" (*aham brahmāsmi*) becomes all of reality. Not even the gods can prevent it, for that person is then the very Self (*ātman*) of the gods. However, the gods are displeased with this for such an individual is freed from serving them. Just as animals serve human beings, so too those who do not know the Self, serve the gods.

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (Chapter Four), a young man named Śvetaketu is instructed by his father Uddālaka Āruṇi in the knowledge that he did not receive despite 12 years of conventional Vedic education. Although he was proud and arrogant, thinking himself to be well educated, Śvetaketu was surprised to discover that he did not learn how that which is unperceived may be perceived, and how the unknowable may be known. Uddālaka explains to his son that just

as a close examination of a pair of nail scissors can lead one to discover that it is actually made of iron, discovering the underlying essence of seemingly diverse particular things is a vital beginning. By knowing iron, one may then know the nature of all things made of iron, since the particular form that it takes is simply linked to a word that names it. Although this verbal designation appears to give it a distinct existence, in fact it is really still just iron. So too, when the underlying essence of all things is known, all things that derive from that underlying essence may be known. That underlying essence, Uddālaka calls Being, only one reality, without any other. All the various manifestations of the cosmos, Uddālaka explains, from fire to water to plant life and the myriad creatures in existence, from a lion to a mosquito, have their root in Being, have Being as their abode, and Being as their support. The whole world has this subtle essence as its Self. His father exclaims, “That is the True. That is the Self (*ātman*). That is You (*tat tvam asi*), Śvetaketu.”

Uddālaka further explains that just as rivers

appear to be different even though their source and destination is the ocean, so too creatures imagine themselves to be separate beings, unaware of their true source in Being. Just as a tree does not die when one of its branches is cut, the Self does not die, he explains, when the body dies. Asking Śvetaketu to break apart the tiny seed of a fig (*nyagrodha*) tree, Uddālaka demonstrates that there is virtually nothing visible remaining, and yet the majestic tree exists precisely because of that subtle essence within the seed. Asking Śvetaketu to sip salt water from a glass repeatedly, his father illustrates how, although the salt is invisible, it permeates the water thoroughly. So too, he explains, the Self is not perceived, although it is everywhere. Uddālaka emphasizes that finding a spiritual teacher enables one to recognize their predicament of bondage to ignorance until they fully realize the Self.

Śruti and Smṛti

The four genres of [Vedic literature](#) that are appended to each other, namely the Saṃhitas,

Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads, are collectively regarded as *śruti*. The term *śruti*, derives from the Sanskrit verbal root “*śru*,” to hear. It is intended to evoke the idea that the contents of these texts were divinely perceived (i.e., heard) or revealed to the *ṛṣis*. Thus the authorship of this literature is purported to be some greater unseen power, channeled through the semi-divine perceivers (*ṛṣi*) with whom their teachings are associated. All other religious literature is classified as *smṛti*, which derives from the Sanskrit verbal root “*smṛ*,” to remember. Thus *smṛti* is literature that is held to have been composed by human beings and passed down as tradition through the generations. *Śruti* and *smṛti* set up a dichotomy between “revealed” and “traditional” religious literature, granting a special status and authority to what are loosely called the Vedas, the Veda, or Vedic scripture.

Despite the distinction between *śruti* and *smṛti*, the categories are somewhat permeable. For instance, we note that for certain orthodox groups, only the *Ṛg*, *Sāma*, and *Yajur* Ve-

das were originally regarded as *śruti*, with the *Atharva Veda* only becoming a later addition to the category. Similarly, subsequent religious literature often strives to be included in the sacrosanct, revealed category. The *Mahābhārata* epic, for instance, lays claim to being a fifth Veda, although this claim is not taken very seriously. However, the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which is part of the *Mahābhārata*, enjoys a remarkable authority and sanctity among contemporary Hindus, giving it the status of *śruti* in all but its official designation. Some Hindus would like to deem it an Upaniṣad to include it within the category of *śruti*.

And while the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas enjoy the prestige of being *śruti*, their content is little understood by most Hindus and has marginal impact on their religious lives. The so-called “lesser Upaniṣads” could arguably be categorized as either *śruti* or *smṛti*. The influence and authority of some of these “lesser Upaniṣads” is greater on particular Hindu sects than the so-called “principal Upaniṣads.” An early classification scheme, found in a Dharma Sūtra text, claims that there

are both Vedic and Tantric (or Āgamic) *śrutis*. This would appear to be reasonable, since the Tantras and Āgamas have been arguably even more influential in the fabric of Hinduism than the Vedas. However, orthodoxy does not accept Āgamic scripture as *śruti*. Thus while the conventional designation of *śruti* is a telling hallmark of orthodoxy, *smṛti* literature plays no less of a role in shaping the religious lives of Hindus.

A significant feature of sacredness relates to whether or not a text is transmitted orally or in writing. Although we now tend to think of “texts” as written objects, prior to the advent of writing texts were memorized and transmitted orally. *Śruti* literature continues to be transmitted orally because committing it to writing is regarded as diminishing its sacredness. This does not mean that the Vedas were never written down. The Brahmin scholar Sāyaṇa wrote valuable commentaries on the Vedic Saṃhitās and other Vedic literature in the 14th century, and many scholars think that written versions of the Vedas may have existed by the 3rd century BCE.

However, despite being part of the written tradition for centuries, particular families of Brahmins have maintained the tradition of memorizing and reciting the Vedas. The Upaniṣads were only rendered into written Latin in the early 19th century from 17th century Persian translations.

Other Vedic literature

By the fifth century BCE, a variety of texts had developed that were classified as primary and secondary appendages (*aṅga*) to [the Vedas](#). The primary appendages are called the Vedāṅgas and the secondary ones are the Upāṅgas. These appendages developed as adjuncts to the knowledge (*veda*) deemed necessary for the priestly class, or were aids for the performance of priestly duties. They are often composed in the form of *sūtras* (aphoristic verses). There are six categories of Vedāṅgas. These are: 1) Śikṣā, literally, “instruction,” in the rules for proper pronunciation of the Veda; 2) Vyākaraṇa, or “grammatical analysis,” such as the works of Pāṇini; 3) Chandas or “prosody,” which explain the various me-

ters used in Vedic recitation; 4) Nirukta, or “lexicon” of the meanings of Vedic terms, such as that by Yāḁṣa; 5) Jyotiṣa, or “astrology”; and 6) Kalpa, or explanations on ritual action. The Kalpa literature, or Kalpa Sūtras, followed the divisional scheme of the four Vedas and were appended to them. Thus the Kalpa Sūtras attached to the *Sāma Veda* would be studied by *Sāma Veda* Brahmins. Each Kalpa Sūtra has four parts: 1) Śrauta Sūtras, which dealt with elaborate public rites; 2) Gr̥hya Sūtras, dealing with life cycle rites (*saṁskāra*) and household rituals; 3) Dharma Sūtras, on moral prescriptions for householders; and 4) **Śulva Sūtras**, concerning the measurement and construction of ritual spaces, demonstrating aspects of early **mathematical sciences**.

The Upāṅgas are traditionally grouped as follows: 1) Purāṇa, or “antiquities,” which are mythological texts with pseudo-historical content; 2) Nyāya, or treatises on “logic”; 3) Mīmāṁsā, which refers to textual interpretation or “investigation” of the Vedas; and 4) Dharma Śāstra, or the codices on behavior regarded as appropriate and

aligned with the cosmic order (i.e., dharmic).

Astrology

Astrology has played a significant role in Hindu life from Vedic times, when its study was regarded as supplementary to the Vedas themselves. The study of luminaries (*jyotiṣa*) in the heavens was deemed vital for determining the appropriate times for conducting rituals. The celestial forces are known as *graha*, literally “graspers,” semi-divine forces that affect human activities. The nine *grahas* or *nava-graha* are: **Sūrya (the Sun)**, **Candra (the Moon)**, **Maṅgala (Mars)**, **Budha (Mercury)**, **Guru or Br̥haspati (Jupiter)**, **Śukra (Venus)**, **Śani (Saturn)**, and Rāhu and Ketu (North and South nodes of the moon, related to the points where the lunar orbit intersects the solar ecliptic). **Rāhu** and **Ketu** are thus not “planets” or even heavenly bodies like the Sun and Moon, but astronomical points in space. When the Sun and the Moon simultaneously fall on Rāhu and Ketu a solar or lunar eclipse occurs. This exemplifies the grasping power of these celestial phe-

nomena, which periodically “swallow” the Sun or the Moon. Like Western astrology, [Hindu astrology](#) recognizes [the same 12 signs of the Zodiac](#). However, it adds a system of 24 lunar mansions (*nakṣatra*), which enriches the sophistication of its interpretations.

A Hindu myth, widespread across many parts of Asia, tells how the gods and demons cooperated briefly to churn the ocean of milk and extract “nectar of immortality.” The gods were the first to drink of this nectar, but a demon disguised himself as a god and sat among them. Just as he sipped the nectar, the Sun and the Moon, between whom he was seated discovered his disguise. Viṣṇu immediately hurled his discus and severed the demon in two. Unfortunately, it was too late, for he had tasted the elixir of immortality. His fierce, four-armed upper part is Rāhu, and his dragon-tailed lower half is Ketu. Burning with anger and thirsting for vengeance, Rāhu and Ketu tries to devour the Sun and Moon whenever they come near, leading to partial or total eclipses. During eclipses, it is still a tradi-

tion to shriek at the heavens to repel the demon from his act of revenge.

Rāhu and Ketu stand as an example that challenges the simplistic application of scholarly categories in the study of religious phenomena. Hinduism is replete with such phenomena. For one, Rāhu and Ketu belong to a branch of Hinduism, astrology, which many would not classify as traditionally “religious.” But [the grahas](#) form a vibrant component of Hindu religion. Many Hindu temples have *nava-graha* shrines, which receive regular attention, particularly on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Tuesday is said to be ruled by Mars, and Saturday by Saturn, both of which, like Rāhu and Ketu, are pernicious *grahas*. Offerings are made to the [grahas](#), and other deities may also be worshipped to solicit their aid in warding off inauspicious [planetary influences](#). Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are weighty categories in many spheres of Hindu belief. Astrological considerations play an important role in determining the appropriate periods in the year for weddings and times in the day that are most

auspicious for the performance of religious rituals. Astrological charts are routinely consulted when determining whether marriageable partners are suitable. Hindu astrology is also closely paired with gemology, the fabrication of jewelry, and the bodily sciences. For instance, an astrologer might prescribe wearing a necklace made of crystal beads or a ruby set in a silver ring placed on a particular finger of a particular hand in order to circumvent inauspicious influences.

Rāhu and Ketu also demonstrate that *jyotiṣa* includes the science of astronomy, for their “positions” are not based on visible heavenly bodies, but on mathematical calculations grounded in astronomical observations. Furthermore, the tales of the demons reflects a juxtaposition of astronomical science and mythic creativity. It is naïve to suggest that the mythic tale of Rāhu and Ketu reflects a pre-scientific explanation of a natural phenomenon, which should disappear with the “real” understanding of what was “actually” occurring during an eclipse. It is evident that the “scientific” understanding of the phenomenon is

ancient, and coexists with its mythic exposition. Immature studies by outsiders have often failed to penetrate the complex layers and multiplicity of meanings embedded in the symbols of the Hindu tradition. It is instructive to remind ourselves of this in our exploration of Hinduism.

Āyurveda

The traditional Hindu knowledge (*veda*) of life (*āyus*), forms a body of literature sometimes classified as an Upaveda, a supplement to the Vedas. Other Upavedas include treatises on the fine arts and music, on politics, and warcraft. Āyurvedic medicine is still widely practiced in India today, alongside with modern Western-styled medicine. The three most highly regarded classical [texts of Āyurveda](#) are the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, and the *Vāgbhaṭa Saṃhitā*, each named after the physician-sages who codified the teachings of ancient ṛṣis that are believed to have been originally transmitted from the [gods](#). The works themselves date from the 1st to the 7th centuries CE, but certainly are

based on medical knowledge from preceding centuries.

Āyurveda differs from the host of other regional and folk healing methods because it is grounded in a complex philosophy and [theory of bodily science](#). Illness (*roga*, *vyādhi*) is typically believed to be caused by an imbalance of humors of the body. There are three humors (*tri-doṣa*): phlegm (*kapha*), bile (*pitta*), and wind (*vāta*), associated with the water, fire, and air elements respectively. The Āyurvedic approach to healing consists in diagnosing which of the humors are out of balance and then prescribing primarily [herbal medicine](#) or dietary changes to restore the balance. The [study of Āyurveda](#) therefore requires an understanding of the various qualities (*guṇa*) inherent in substances in the body (e.g., blood, bone, fat) and the created world. While there are three fundamental *guṇas*, there are twenty subcategories of these. The fundamental *guṇas* are the *sattva* (pure, luminous), *rajas* (energetic), and *tamas* (dark, heavy). Among the subcategories are heat-producing,

cooling, slimy, and rough substances. The three *guṇas* are associated with the Sāṅkhya school of Indian philosophy. In its theories of matter and atoms, Āyurveda also draws upon concepts derived from Vaiśeṣika philosophy.

A person's bodily constitution is primarily categorized according to the *doṣa* that is dominant, although most people's constitutions are combinations of all three. Since the *vāta* or *vāyu doṣa* (the air/wind humor) is believed to control breathing, expulsion of wastes, and the movement of thoughts, an imbalance can lead to worries and insomnia, or constipation. And because the *kapha doṣa* (the water/phlegm humor) is associated with bodily fluids, an excess can produce congestion, or laziness. The *pitta doṣa* (the fire/bile humor) is believed responsible for digestion; thus imbalances can produce indigestion and ulcers.

Internal imbalances are believed to be triggered by external causes, and Āyurveda also incorporates diagnoses based on pernicious agents such as poisons (e.g., snake bites), injury,

and affliction by a wide range of spirits (*bhūta*), particularly for psychological illnesses. Besides dietary modifications, treatments include surgical procedures, massage, fumigation, enemas, baths and sweating. The preparation and wearing of amulets, recitation of sacred phrases, and the performance of special rituals are also among its therapeutic prescriptions.

Physicians and patients who are exploring approaches to healing beyond those conventionally associated with modern Western medicine have been turning to some aspects of [Āyurveda](#). A well-known current exemplar is [Deepak Chopra](#), whose teachings on psycho-physical health combine non-dualistic Vedānta philosophical perspectives with Āyurveda and Western medicine. Various Indian institutions such as Banāras Hindu University have been offering accredited degrees in Āyurveda.

Key Points in this Chapter

- The Vedic Saṃhitās are the most esteemed literary works of the Āryans.
- The *Atharva Veda* contains hundreds of original hymns dealing with an assortment of topics with differing concerns from the other three Saṃhitās.
- Some scholars speculate that most Vedic deities are male due to an Āryan patriarchal social structure.
- Indologist Max Müller speculated on the origin of religion. However, such speculation is currently unpopular due to lack of evidence to support such theorizing.
- The “cosmic order” was important to Āryan civilization, as was the degree to which all aspects of life were aligned with it.
- Sacrificial rites (*yajña*) were elevated in the Brāhmaṇas to an importance that surpassed the gods, for it was believed that *yajña* itself maintained the cosmic order.
- Tradition holds that any text with secret teachings is an Upaniṣad. The Āraṇyakas,

forerunners of the Upaniṣads, have similar associations with secrecy and philosophical speculation.

- The Upaniṣads are concerned primarily with the nature of Absolute Reality (Brahman), the true nature of the individual self (*ātman*), and the relationship between the two.
- The four genres of Vedic literature that are appended to each other (namely, the *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, and Upaniṣads) are regarded as *śruti* (divinely revealed), whereas all other religious literature is regarded as *smṛti* (traditional).
- By the fifth century BCE, texts developed that were classified as primary and secondary appendages (*aṅga*) to the Vedas, namely the Vedāṅgas and the Upāṅgas.
- Since ancient Vedic times, astrology has been regarded as a vital supplement to the study of the Vedas themselves.
- Āyurveda is considered supplemental to the Vedas, and this status ensures that Āyurvedic styles of medicine are well regarded and still widely practiced in India today.

[Additional material at Hinduism Online](#)

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