

# THE LEGENDS OF THE VEDIC LITERATURE: IT'S COHERENCE WITH NARRATIVE AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF INDIA

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## Abstract:

Vedas are the basis of all cultural manifestations in India and the Vedas are the seeds, from which the huge tree of Indian thought has evolved. The great importance of the Veda lies in the fact that the philosophy, religion, civic conduct, practices, ritualistic practices and even religion of India are beautifully exposed in the Veda.

Since the days of the Vedas, various kinds of legendary narrations have taken place in India. These legendary accounts are very much interesting and have supplied adequate materials to the later Indian society. The term 'Myth' is equivalent to Greek word 'Mythos'. Myth means a story which is devoid of facts and related to a super human being. Man tries to explain the world and objects in myths. But the term 'Legend' at first comes through French from the Latin word 'Legenda'. That means 'to be said'. Legend means the story of a saint's life. The main theme of legends is the activities of popular human figures, viz. a king, a sage or semi-divine persons. Though the Vedic legends were mainly described to explain the justification, utility and significance of the sacrificial rites; yet they give us information of political, social, religious and philosophical conditions of the ancient India. There are some lessons as well as ethical values are incorporated with these legends. As for example, the legend of the birth of Dīrghatamas shows human affairs, the legend of Dadhyañc and the Mead shows surgical influence, the legend of Yama and Yamī forbids the union of blood relation, the legend of Saramā and Pañis shows greatness of God Indra, the legend of Trita shows the cruelty, the legend of Viśvāmitra and rivers shows the simplicity and fordable nature of female, the legend of Devāpi and Śamītanu shows the respect for the seniors etc. These legends are important not only from the historical point of view; it also presents the tradition and culture of India. The present paper is a modest attempt to analyze some ideas on Indian cultural heritage as scattered in the legends of the Vedic literature.

**Keywords:** Legend, Myth, Vedic literature, R̥gveda, Indian culture.

## Introduction:

The Vedas are the primary literary productions preserved in any branch of the Indo-European family. The Vedic literature is notable by refinement and beauty of thought and the skill in the handling of metre and language. Vedic literature holds a significant role in the Indian life and culture. They are regarded as a Divine revelation. The Vedas covers many subjects such as secular and religious hymns, magic songs, sacrificial songs, myths and legends, music, narrative and scientific ideas etc. The Vedic literature consists of the Vedas and the works allied to them.

The word 'Veda' is derived from the root *vid*, to know with the suffix *ac*. Veda means knowledge. The Veda is also known as *Āgama*, *Trayī*, *Chandas*, *Āmnāya*, *Śruti*, *Svādhyāya* etc. The great commentator Sāyaṇācārya says that the name Veda is given to the extent literature made up of *Mantra* and *Brāhmaṇa*. Āpastamba and Kātyāyana also define the Veda.<sup>1</sup> The knowledge as it is derived with the help of eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin, is called as earthly knowledge. But the knowledge that cannot be attained through these organs is called as Supernatural. This type of knowledge can be attained only through the Veda. This has been stated by ṛṣi Yājñavalkya.<sup>2</sup>

The Vedas are four in number. They are *R̥gveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. The *R̥gveda* is the oldest among all the texts of the Veda which contains hymns of religious as well as secular character. The *Yajurveda* contains all about the sacrificial acts which are to be performed by the Adhvaryu priest. The *Yajurveda* has been handed down traditionally into two texts, viz. the White *Yajurveda* and the Black *Yajurveda*. The *Sāmaveda* is a song book of Vedic rituals. It consists of verses, mostly taken from the *R̥gveda*, to be sung with a musical tone by the Udgātṛ priest. The *Atharvaveda* contains charms and chants to be used for offensive and defensive purposes.

The text of each Veda consists of four parts, viz. *Samhitā* or *Mantra*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka* and *Upaniṣad*. Towards the end of the revelation of Vedas there emerges a class of literature auxiliary to the proper cultivation and understanding of the Vedas. This literature has been named as the *Vedāṅga* literature. There are six types of *Vedāṅga*, viz. *Śikṣā*, *Kalpa*, *Vyākaraṇa*, *Nirukta*, *Chandas* and *Jyotiṣa*.

Apart from the above six Vedāṅgas, there are the Anukramaṇīs or Vedic indices. They give lists of the hymns, the author, the metres and the deities in the order in which they occur in the various Saṁhitās. Among the authors of the Anukramaṇīs, there are two authors who are very famous. They are —Śaunaka and Kātyāyana. The work *Brhaddevatā* which is attributed to Śaunaka is closely connected with the Vedāṅgas, as it performs more or less the similar function. It contains some legends, about forty in number, connected with different Gods and also something of the type of the Ākhyānas and the *Itihāsa*.

Legends have occupied an important place in the whole world literature and India is no exception. From the Vedic Period, there has been found various types of legends. These legends are very much significant as well as interesting from various perspectives. They give lessons to general people so that they listen, read and learn the actual basic morals. Though many of the legends lost their actual message, people just start believing in legend as they have faith in the deity or book but if they think in depth, it will surely find the actual message that is for the benefit of society. These legends have an abundant influence on the later Indian literary works of subsequent periods.

### Methodology:

In this study, the descriptive and analytical methods of study have been collected. The materials have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. After that, these are systematically analyzed and constructively synthesized. The scope of the present work includes, all the major aspects regarding the overall evaluation of the legends of the Vedic literature in very brief.

**Some prominent legends of the Vedic literature:** Among the legends of the Vedic literature, some famous legends have been discussed below —

**The legend of Dadhyañc and the Mead**— The legend of Dadhyañc and the Mead is one of the most important legends in the Vedic literature. According to this legend, Indra was well-satisfied with the son of Atharvan (i.e., Dadhyañc) and he gave him the spell. Then the seer became more brilliant. Indra told him not to speak the mead to anyone. If this mead is proclaimed to anyone, Indra would not let Dadhyañc escape alive. Once, the divine Aśvins requested for the mead from Dadhyañc in secret. But he told them what Indra had instructed him. After that they requested him to tell the mead through a horse's head so that Indra may not slay him for that. He told the secret mead to the two Aśvins by a horse's head. Indra cut off the horse's head of Dadhyañc but the Aśvins placed his own head again. The horse's head of Dadhyañc, cut off by the bolt-bearer with his bolt, fell in the midst of a lake on Mount Śaryaṇāvata. The head rises up from the waters and granted manifold boons on living beings.<sup>3</sup>

This legend is narrated in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, the *Śātyāyani Brāhmaṇa* also. This legend is also described by some later Vedic commentators such as Skandasvāmin, Veṅkaṭa Mādhava, Sāyaṇācārya and Mudgala in their respective commentaries.

**The legend of Trita**— Among the legends of the Vedic and the post Vedic literature, this legend is a prominent one. When Trita was following the cows, the cruel sons of the Sālāvṛkī cast Trita into a well and carried off all the cows from that place. Trita knows the formulas. He pressed Soma and called all the gods. Bṛhaspati heard that invocation. When Trita saw them coming he said them saying, 'Where, indeed, abides, the all-seeing power of this Varuṇa and Āryaman. I see all the gods and praise them but none of them sees me.' The three troops of the All-gods went to that sacrifice of Trita and took shares of it together.

This legend is also described by the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, the *Śātyāyani Brāhmaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Some Vedic commentators such as Skandasvāmin, Veṅkaṭa Mādhava, Sāyaṇācārya and Mudgala have also described this legend in their commentaries on the *Rgveda*, I.105.

**The legend of Dīrghatamas**— According to this legend, there were two seers' sons, Ucathya and Bṛhaspati. Mamatā was the wife of Ucathya. Ucathya was the elder and Bṛhaspati was the younger. Once when Mamatā was pregnant, Bṛhaspati said her for sexual intercourse. Then the embryo said Bṛhaspati, 'Here I am previously engendered; you must not cause a commingling of seed.' After that Bṛhaspati got irritated and said the embryo, 'Long darkness shall be your lot'. Thus Ucathya's son was born with the name Dīrghatamas (Long Darkness). The gods gave him eyes. He was cured of his blindness.<sup>4</sup>

The *Mahābhārata* also describes this legend. Sāyaṇācārya also narrates this legend in his commentary on the *Rgveda*, I.158.4 and the *Rgveda*, I.51.13. The *Nītimañjarī* has also mentioned this legend.

**The legend of Viśvāmītra and the rivers**— According to this legend the seer Viśvāmītra was the domestic priest of Sudās. Once they were going to perform a sacrifice. They reached at the confluence of the rivers Vipāś and Śutudrī. Viśvāmītra addressed them to be fordable for them by this hymn of the *Rgveda*.<sup>5</sup> The rivers at last favoured him with a fordable passage –

*yayātha dūrādanasā rathena /  
ni te naṁsai pīpyāneva yoṣā  
maryāyeva kanyā śasvacai te //*<sup>6</sup>

*ā te kāro śṛṇavāmā vacāmsi*

**The legend of Yama and Yamī**—This legend is narrated in the *Rgveda*, X.10. In this hymn, there is a dialogue between Yama and Yamī, the twin parents of human race. Here Yamī tempts her brother Yama to have sexual intercourse with her and she desired that Yama should induce an embryo in her womb. But Yama rejects, pointing to the internal laws of the gods that prohibit the union of blood relation.<sup>7</sup>

**Significance of the legends of the Vedic literature and it's coherence with narrative and cultural history of India:** Legends have occupied a remarkable position in the sphere of world literature. Since the days of the Vedas, different kinds of legendary narrations have taken place in India. These legendary accounts are very much interesting and have supplied sufficient materials to the later Indian society. Though the Vedic legends were mainly described to clarify the justification, utility and significance of the sacrificial rites; yet they provide us information of political, social, religious and philosophical conditions of the ancient India. These legends have also a great effect on the subsequent socio-cultural life of the Indian people. Some Purāṇic legends give us adequate knowledge of ancient India.

A legend generally describes the life of a noted person of ancient society, who may be a sage, king or a semi-divine being. So, a legend can easily impact the life of a man in the society. Some legends came to be the theme of poetic, dramatic and other literary compositions of later Indian writers. The legends are also significant for the study of Philosophy. Some Philosophical doctrines have originated through legends. The legends have also geographical and historical importance. Sometimes the legends provide us information about the names of many kingdoms, cities, mountains, rivers etc.

The legends give us some lessons. The legend of the birth of Dīrghatamas<sup>8</sup> shows human affairs and the prevention of unethical human sexuality. This legend also throws light on the power of a curse of a sage.

In the legend of Dadhyañc and the Mead<sup>9</sup> a surgical influence is seen. It also displays the technology. The Aśvins are twin gods of medicine and healing. They are the earliest known physicians having the capability to perform organ transplanting surgery. The legend of Dadhyañc and the Mead is an example of the beginning of the *Āyurveda*. Suśruta says, *Āyurveda* is of divine origin from Brahmā and Prajāpati learned the science from him. The Aśvins learned it from Prajāpati and communicated the knowledge to Indra, from Indra learned Dhanvantari. Suśruta, for the good of mankind, was ready to teach it to those who seek it on earth.<sup>10</sup> So, the present medicine and surgery is invented from that concept. This legend has also a geographical value. It provides us information about the name of a mountain, i.e. Śaryanāvāt. The horse's head of Dadhyañc, severed by the bolt-bearer with his bolt, fell in the midst of a lake on Mount Śaryanāvāt.

Consanguineous marriage is now abandoned in most parts of the world as it is proved dangerous for next generations. The children from such relations or marriage fall prey to genetic diseases. This modern scientific concept is told in the remote past which is presented by Yama and is written in the *Rgveda*. Yama was the first man who established the modesty or blush about sexual mating. Yama publicized the future which is prevalent in today's world.<sup>11</sup>

The legend of Trita<sup>12</sup> shows the cruelty. The legend of Viśvāmitra and the rivers<sup>13</sup> shows us the simplicity, fordable and obedient nature of female.

### **Conclusion:**

The Vedas are not ordinary texts. They are characterized of Divine revelations. The revealers of the Veda were scholars of great intuition. The Vedas are the source of everything that has been necessary for Indians. Therefore, with a view to know the history of India, the study of Veda is necessary. In the first part of this paper, there is a description about the Vedic literature. The meaning of the word Veda, it's other names, divisions of Veda, the *Vedāṅga*, the meaning of the term 'myth' and 'legend' are discussed in the introductory part. After that methodology, some prominent legends of the Vedic literature are dealt with in this paper. Among the legends of the Vedic literature, some famous legends are discussed briefly. In the next part of this paper, significance of the legends of the Vedic literature and it's coherence with narrative and cultural history of India are narrated. It can be concluded that Vedic literature is store house of myths and legends. These myths and legends contribute a lot to the mythological school of Vedic interpretation. They have occupied a significant place in the Indian literature. The legends also present the tradition and culture of India.

### **ENDNOTE:**

1. mantrabrāhmaṇayorvedanāmadheyam / *Āpastamba.Śrautasūtra.*,1.33
2. pratyakṣeṇānumitya vā yastūpāyo na vidyate /  
enam vidanti vedena tasmād vedasya vedatā //  
(quoted from Basu, Jogiraj, *Vedar Paricay*, p.,1)
3. *Bṛhaddevatā.*, III.17-24
4. *Ibid.*, IV.11-15

5. Ibid., IV.105-108
6. *Rgveda.*, III.33.10
7. Ibid.,X.10.2
8. *Bṛhaddevatā.*, IV.11-15
9. Ibid., III.17-24
10. *Suśrutasaṁhitā.*, 1.39
11. *Rgveda.*,X.10.10
12. *Bṛhaddevatā.*, III.132-137
13. Ibid., IV.105-108

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