

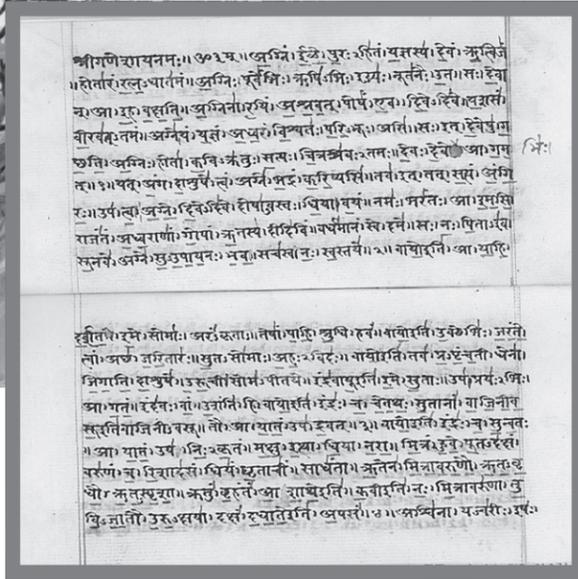
‘Meaningless’ mantras and birdsong?: discovering the Vedas

Veda, from the Sankrit root ‘vid’ (‘to know’), literally means ‘knowledge’. It conjures up ideas of ancient and sacred texts brimming with knowledge and wisdom. Moreover, to most Hindus the Vedas are the divine base on which present-day Hinduism rests. The Vedas were not originally books, however, but orally transmitted insights into the vernacular of the time and place. Frits Staal’s book invites readers to take a fresh look at the Vedas and the people who first brought them to India.

Annette van der Hoek



The insight that mantras and birdsong are similar is quite new, but the fact that rituals (for instance of territory and mating) are also performed by animals is something the Vedas themselves already mention: ‘the layers of grass on which offerings are made, constitute a nest’.



Staal, Frits, ed. 2008. *Discovering the Vedas Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights*. Penguin Books India, New Delhi. 419 pages. ISBN 978 0 14 309986 4

[...] *This creation-from where it came to be, If it was produced or if not- He who is the overseer of this world in the highest heaven, He surely knows. Or if he does not know...?*

STAAL’S BOOK CONSISTS OF FIVE PARTS. The first extracts information from the oral tradition and from the field of archeology in order to paint a picture as historically realistic as possible – a picture of the Vedic people and their route of migration that led them from the Tarin Basin through what is now Kazakhstan towards present day Pakistan and India. Along the way they picked up Soma, an intoxicating drink made from a plant, that was to become a trademark item of the Vedic culture. Also along the way, and with time, the language of these Vedic travellers changed, from Indo-Iranian into what has become known as Indo-Aryan.

For so long we have been taught that hordes of Aryans invaded the Asian subcontinent with their horses and chariots. Staal says that this was geographically impossible. Instead he suggests they must have been a relatively small group of people, carrying their knowledge of horses and chariots in traditional ways - in the form of riddles or sing-song sayings, along often mountainous terrain that simply wouldn’t have permitted travel with horses and chariots. Staal also questions the notion of caste so often ascribed to the Vedic era. As a small and nomadic group the Aryans couldn’t have afforded or imposed strict rules of caste and hierarchy but would instead have intermingled and intermarried with the more indigenous tribes they found on entering the subcontinent. According to Staal, caste must have been a late or even post-Vedic instruction.

Part two of the book, twice as long as any of the other sections, provides information, selections and translations of the four canonised Vedas and of the Upanisads, also known as ‘the-end-of-the-Vedas’ and as sessions of ‘sitting-down-close’ between teacher and pupil containing the beginnings of Indian philosophy.

A famous poem from the Rigveda (RV 10.129) which Staal presents as a poet’s ‘thinking-out-loud’ and which needs no further explanation, is a timeless question of man:

The non-existent did not exist, nor did the existent exist at that time. There existed neither the mid-space nor the heaven beyond. What stirred? From where and in whose protection? Did water exist, a deep depth?

Death did not exist nor deathlessness then. There existed no sign of night nor day. That one breathes without wind through its inherent force. There existed nothing else beyond that.

Part three, in Staal’s own words, ‘attempts to shed light on mantras and rituals about which many absurd statements circulate’ and which are ‘the chief channels through which Vedic contributions entered what came to be known as Hinduism’.

‘Meaningless’ mantras
Mantras, says Staal, are meaningless. Not only because they were so historically when the early portions of the Rigveda were guarded by a few families in a language not spoken by most of the people that surrounded them but also because intrinsically mantras seem not to convey meaning in the way a natural language does.

Two of the reasons given for this apparent meaningless character of mantras – which are nevertheless experienced as powerful – is that they are often contradictory or inconsistent and that although there is a tradition to teach and transmit the sounds of a mantra there is no tradition to teach or transmit its meaning. The form of the mantras, therefore, seems much more important than their meaning.

Mantras resemble birdsong
Part three explains, in quite some linguistic detail, that the syntactic structure of a mantra is, interestingly, often closer to birdsong than it is to natural language. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the use of sheer indefinite repetition – a,a,a,a,a – which is not a part of our everyday sentence construction and in the use of sequences – bha, bhu, bhi, bho – that again natural language wouldn’t feature except for maybe in a child’s play with words.

In this way mantra is akin to ritual, another important feature of the Vedic culture. Ritual too consists of practically unchanging, fixed, recursive and at first sight meaningless actions that differ from actions in daily life. And again, though rituals are handed down from one generation to the next, their meanings are not.

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Parts four and five are the shortest in the book and both briefly scan the horizon of the subject at hand, and its movements inwards and outwards. What can we learn from the Vedas, asks Staal? And in what broader perspective can we put them?

Above inset: *Rigveda manuscript written in devanagari script.*

Just as a certain ritual (the Shrouta ritual) developed from the directive ‘facing East’ to ‘facing in all directions’, Staal too sees that with the breakdown of the different Vedic schools and the emergence of classical Upanisads a development towards universality occurs within the Vedic civilisation. The Vedas don’t represent a religion, he says, with a certain narrowing outlook, but rather a civilisation. One that can teach us too, to look in all directions.

It could teach us even to look towards directions we don’t know or yet understand and that the constructed language of a mantra might be pointing at – similar to the way in which a mathematical equation describes part of reality in a language not known to all.

Buddhism, Staal feels, give the Vedas a broader scope as Buddhism is in some respects closer to the Vedas than some of the later developments of Indic thought and religion. Staal sees not only similarities in ideas and basic philosophy between the two but also observes that some centuries after our ‘Vedic nomads’ – and dictated by the same mountainous area – Buddhism traveled partly the same route.

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Staal is originally a logician. His approach uncovers a great deal about the Vedas and the people who first brought them to India: logical insights that do away with some notions about the Aryans that even ‘Indians and Indologists’ grew up with. But a verse containing information on horse-rearing and chariot-making, can still be deeply philosophical at the same time – standing on his chariot, the excellent charioteer leads the horses wherever he wishes. Praise the power of reins, the ropes follow his mind’ (RV 6.75.6). And a mantra that is so called ‘meaningless’ can still convey a lot of meaning at levels other than the apparent meaning of its words. Especially since the contradictions and inconsistencies that Staal sites as proof for the apparent ‘meaninglessness’ of mantras are known in several Indian poetic and spiritual traditions to convey the fullness of life and it’s paradoxes. It is precisely through the clarity of Staal’s logic that this opening – or even missed opportunity – shows. This leaves scope for deeper probing into meanings behind the apparent ones or the missing ones. Perhaps to be explored in another book?

Annette van der Hoek
Samvaad – Institute for Indian studies
Rotterdam Business School
annette@samvaad.nl