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


STAAAL’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 Tarim 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 Aryan invaders 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 mingled 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. When they found themselves in an area – Buddhism traveled partly the same route.

For too long we have believed that hordes of Aryans invaded the Asian subcontinent with their horses and chariots. Staal sees not only similarities in ideas and basic philosophy between the two but also observes that some centuries after the Aryans invaded the area – Buddhism traveled partly the same route. Staal is originally a logician. His approach uncovers a great richness of life and its 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 of Staal’s logic that this opening – or even missed opportunity – shows.

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, bhuh, bhū, bhū - 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 unchanged, 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.

The insight that mantras and birdsong are similar is quite new, 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’.