

THE GREAT HINDU TRADITION

An insight into Vedic Principles,
Sastras and Heritage



Sri Sarma Sasthriyal

The Great Hindu Tradition

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Sri Sarma Sastrigal

Translated by V S Kumar

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Dedicated to my parents

Brahmasri V. Srinivasa Sastrigal

Srimathi Subhalakshmi Ammal

Sri Ramajayam

PREFACE

Dear reader,

With humility, I thank you for having chosen to read this book.

It is likely that your curiosity about our Sanatana Dharma and interest in our rituals made you reach out for this book; it is also likely that you are moved by a desire 'to do the right thing' as enjoined by our *Sastras*. 'I have now come to that age when I must start getting spiritual' could be a thought in some of you. 'How is spirituality connected to rituals?' could be another question in your mind.

This book is born out of many such queries that have been posed to me by well-meaning people, genuinely interested in knowing more about our *Dharma*.

My responses and explanations have often struck a chord as logical and sometimes even scientific. Of course in today's modern world, with changing conditions of day-to-day living, one would find it difficult to lead a life based on our *Sastras* alone, But one can retain the basic principles and practise the *Sastras* to a significant degree.

Dharma Sastra is a combination of the most profound principles covering every aspect of existence – past, present, future and beyond. The sages who lived in our land thousands of years ago had the ability to receive divine vibrations and give them shape in Sanskrit - a language known for its richness in grammar and phonetics. Does that sound like spiritual fiction? Well, it isn't, if one looks at the analogy of a radio set picking up invisible electromagnetic signals from a far-off radio station and converting them back to melodious music.

Hindu Dharma is a combination of philosophy and rituals. The modern thought process finds rituals irrelevant and I have often been asked whether we can retain the great precepts and do away with mindless rituals. I would only say that rituals, which can be defined as *Vedic practices*, are the means to ensure that precepts are assimilated and ingrained, and hence have a great deal of meaning and purpose.

The Law of Karma, known as *Karma theory*, is a strong, and sometimes cold, intimidating principle to many. But one can find an identical theory operating in any other Life Science: the theory of cause & effect, of action & reaction. The Law of Karma is just that.

And when I speak in the following pages about several rituals including *Pitru karma*, I am attempting to show you how the Law of Karma applies beyond worldly boundaries.

In this book I claim no unique expertise nor have I said anything new. I have selected a few topics and tried to interpret the wisdom of the ancient sages in a simple language. My purpose is to satiate an immediate thirst, and create the desire to drink deeper. My idea is to debunk the myth that "our religious philosophies and rituals are too complex for me to follow and are only meant for learned saints and sanyasis". *Dharma Sastra* is indeed for a common person like you and me.

This volume also contains translations of some Tamil books I have written earlier on these subjects.

English has come to be accepted as a language of convenience in our multilingual milieu, and I would like to reach out to all those curious people who will be comfortable getting their answers in English.

I have attempted to be as definitive as possible in the treatment of topics covered in this book; and should any reader have a different perspective, I would recommend that he clears his doubt with elders or the family Purohit.

I bow to the Supreme Almighty and the sages through several thousands of years, without whom we would have lost this ocean of knowledge and bliss, my Guru Sri R. Sankarji, my venerated father Brahmasri V. Srinivasa Sastrigal (disciple of the great Mahan Brahma Sri Uthukkadu Sankara Ghanapadigal of Raja Patasalai, Kumbakonam) under whose tutelage I learnt the Vedas, my wife Viji and other supportive family members, my friends and well-wishers who have showered love, affection and encouragement, and you, my dear reader, who have encouraged me with your interest in Vedas, the subject of my enduring passion.

Loka samasta Sukhino bhavantu

May all the beings in all the worlds be happy.

Chennai

Sarma Sastrigal

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To be honest, I never dreamt of writing a book in English on a subject as diverse like the one attempted now. I have written some books and articles in Tamil and I was privileged to receive some kind words of praise from many of my well-wishers. This English book became a reality thanks to Sri R Balajee of Chennai, Sri R Ramakrishnan, former Executive Director of Ashok Leyland and Sri R Sairam, Jankalyan, Chennai who encouraged me to edit and publish my various writings in this current form.

I owe a deep sense of gratitude to Sri V S Kumar of Chennai who has greatly helped me in doing the entire translation. He also took interest and helped me regroup the contents and present them in a more logical fashion. The contribution of Sri Seshadri Desikan of Srirangam, Sri S Mani of Chennai and K Srinivasan, Swami Vivekananda College, Chennai were also significant in the area of translation and I am ever indebted to them.

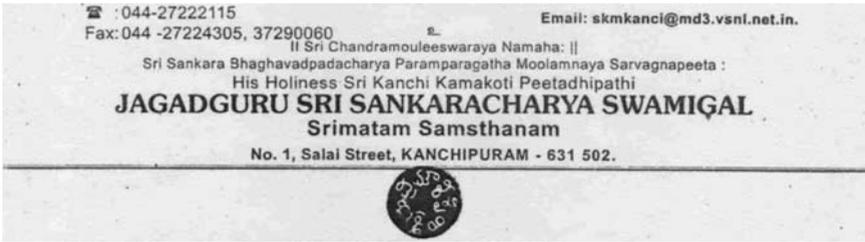
I also express my thanks to Sri G Suresh of R K SWAMY BBDO Private Ltd., and his team for the DTP work, excellent cover design, and illustrations that have further enriched the volume. Equally, I must thank my friend and printer Sri V Ravi of Jaiganesh Offset Printers, Mylapore, Chennai for taking up the task of printing this in such a short time.

I reserve my final and affectionate gratitude to my family friend dear Sri Srinivasan K Swamy for his guidance, support and encouragement without whose help this book may never have been published!

I pray at the feet of the Almighty Mother to bless all those who have contributed to the book and their family members with health, prosperity and happiness.

Chennai

Sarma Sastrigal



Vikruti Aswina Sukla Chaturdasi
Sri Sankara Samvatsaram 2520
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Sanatana Dharma, now popularly called Hinduism or Hindu Dharma or Hindu tradition, is a code of ethics, a way of living through which one may attain the enlightenment or liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The Hindu tradition is the world's most ancient culture and socio, spiritual and religious tradition. It represents much more than just a religion, it is a way of life with a coherent and rational view of reality.

Hindu tradition does not denote a creed of religion but represents a code of conduct and a value system that has spiritual freedom as its core. It is God-centred rather than prophet centered, experience based rather than belief based, inherent in nature and inclusive of all, both imminent and transcendent, and it loves all and excludes none. Our Hindu tradition never creates fear of God but makes God manifest in the human heart not in an anthropomorphic form but as the absolute and universal one in whom all diversities reside in perfect harmony.

The rituals of our tradition are prescribed by the sages of yore for the individual and social welfare. The rituals may be performed on specific occasions or at the discretion of the individual or community. They may be performed by an individual or group either in public or in private or before specific people. The purposes of rituals are varied: religious obligations or ideals, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioner, strengthening of social bonds, social and moral education, demonstration of respect or submission, stating one's

affiliation, obtaining social acceptance or approval for some event or, sometimes, just the pleasure of the ritual itself. '*Svakarmana tamabhyarchya siddhim vindati manava*': is the dictum of the Gita. One can attain the spiritual freedom by performing the rituals as enjoined in the Vedas by surrendering all actions along with their fruits to the Lord. Rituals help building a free sense of group identity.

Brahmasri Sarma Sastrigal, an ardent devotee of our Srimatam, has written many books in Tamil on the performance of Vedic rituals. His latest book *The Great Hindu Tradition* in English seems to be an encyclopedia on the rituals of our Sanatana Dharma. It is observed that he has taken great strain in bringing out this book only to make the younger generation of the Hindu community realize the intricacies of the Vedic way of life. This book will certainly help them know about our hoary heritage.

We appreciate the continuous and steadfast endeavour of Brahmasri Sarma Sastrigal in publishing such valuable and useful books on the traditional Hindu way of life.

We pray Sri Maha Tripurasundari Sameta Sri Chandramouleswara Swami to shower Their blessings on Brahmasri Sarma Sastrigal and those who are involved in publishing such valuable books. We bless his continuous, selfless and enduring service that brings welfare to all.

Narayanasmriti:

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VEDA PRABHAVAM



Vedas mean....

Veda means *Jnana* or ultimate wisdom.

Yasya nisvasito Vedaha. Vedas are the very breath of Sarveswara, the Supreme Being. They are synonymous with God.

The Vedas are the foundation of our Sanatana Dharma and are the revelations of Eternal Truth. Our worship of the Supreme Being is through recitation and worship of the Vedas. Vedas are unique in that they offer a range of *Jnana* that covers the existent and nonexistent, the gross and the subtle, the past, the present, the future and beyond.

The Vedas have been preserved from time immemorial with phonetic exactitude, preservation of tonal accent and uncorrupted by any insertions.

Can there be anything more wondrous than this?

Sruti is another familiar name for the Vedas. *Sruti* means resonance, and the venerated Rishis were endowed with faculties to receive these divine vibrations and pass them down the ages by a process of precise phonetic recitation.

Learning was by listening, recitation & assimilation and *not* by recording or reading.

Each sound of the Vedas that was taught to the disciple had a specific tonal quality, called *swara*, and the teachings had to be learnt without blemish, by listening alone. Vedic mantras were passed on from generation to generation by our unique *Guru-sishya parampara* i.e., teacher-student relationship.

Thus over time the Vedas have been preserved in their pristine purity.

Some more names of Vedas

Aamnaaya and *Nigama* are two other names for the Vedas.

Aamnaaya: *Aamnaaya* has meanings like sacred, handed down by repetition.

Nigama: *Nigama* denotes the command that the teachings be followed in letter and spirit, with nothing left vague or susceptible to dilution.

The Vedas are also termed as *Apaurusheya*, i.e. not created by any agent. There are some more names for the Vedas like *Anushrava*, *Trayi*, *Brahma* etc.

Are Rishis the author of Vedas?

Vedas are *Apaurusheya* -- not created by a person, even a rishi. Had Rishis created them, they would have been called *Mantra-kartas*. Instead Rishis are called *Mantra-drashtaas* - they discovered the mantras, they perceived the Vedas through their superior wisdom. They listened and understood the ever-present Vedas and passed them on to posterity.

Vedas are the creation of the *Sarvagna* (omniscient) *Sarweswara* (the Supreme Lord) as per His own *sankalpa*, divine resolve. Eswara taught the Vedas first to Lord Brahma not through recitation but by His divine resolve. A detailed description of this could be had from a reading of *Srimad Bhagavatam*.

A modern-day analogy is transfer of data from one electronic device to another through wireless transmission.

After Brahma, *Prajapatis* standardized the transmission of the Vedas by a particular method known as *sandhai* and *thiruvai* that is prevalent even today in *Veda pathasalas*.

The Vedic language

Sanskrit, the most ancient of all languages, is the language of the Vedas. We have seen that they were born out of the *sankalpa* of Sarveswara. The Vedas are His very wisdom. Their language is His language.

While on the subject I would like to make a related observation. There is historical evidence to show that Tamil and Sanskrit have been in vogue from very ancient times. And like Sanskrit Tamil is independent of all other languages. Sanskrit is even more ancient than Tamil.

One would be able to infer this from the realization that the Vedas have their origin in ageless past, and were recited for the first time in Sanskrit. This alone is sufficient to indicate that Sanskrit is as old as the Vedas.

We are aware that most of the languages of the world have expanded and enriched themselves by freely borrowing words from other languages. But Vedic Sanskrit is complete in itself with specific grammar and prosody that have not changed with the times. Here we speak of the Sanskrit of the Vedas, which is different from the Sanskrit that later came to be used as a social language.

How old are the Vedas?

There have been numerous debates and "researches" on the age of Vedas, made both in our country and across the world. It is impossible to determine the exact age of the Vedas. However, we see that many scholars all over the world have assigned various age estimates. While linguistic experts put the Vedic period as

4,000 years old and the experts in Astronomy by and large concur, archeologists say it could be 5,000 years old. Some German scholars and archeologists including Prof. Maeterlinck say that the Vedic period could be at least a few lakh years old. In his well-known book, *Satyartha Prakasam*, Maharishi Dayananda asserts that if we consider that 6 manvantaras and 28 chaturyugas have passed by so far, the Vedas should have been in existence for at least 196,08,53,000 years! We can only say that all findings are inconsistent and are at best educated guesses.

Many Western scholars have done their 'research' on the Vedic period, but unlike other religious scriptures the Vedas themselves defy precise declaration of their age. No scholarly research can fix the period because the Vedas are beyond the most sophisticated methods of modern-day sciences.

Vedas are the very breath of Sarveswara. They have no origin that can be defined by man-made coordinates they are omnipresent.

The Vedas are divine.

The four Vedas

The Vedic statement *ananta vai Vedaha* means Vedas are infinite.

To illustrate this we have an interesting episode in *Kaataka Prasna* appearing in the Yajur Veda. With the blessing of Lord Indra, Sage Bharadwaja performed Veda *adhyayana* for three life spans. Pleased by this, Eswara appeared before him and granted him a boon. Sage Bharadwaja requested the Lord to grant him yet another lifespan so that he could complete *adhyayana* of the rest of the Vedas. Eswara smiled and showed him a mountain that comprised the Vedas, took three handfuls of soil from the mountain and told the Sage "this is all you have learnt so far". This was only to show the sheer magnitude of the Vedas and the near impossibility of mastering them even with all the time at one's command.

The Vedas are four in number. This may appear confusing when we regard the volume of the Vedas as infinite. The numbering of Vedas as four and the classification is by taking *lakshana* or characteristic and not *grantha* or the letter as the criterion. Sri Veda Vyasa classifies the Vedas into:

1. Rig Veda
2. Yajur Veda (Krishna & Shukla)
3. Sama Veda
4. Atharva Veda

Generally each Veda is a combination of the following groups of texts:

1. Samhitai
2. Braahmana
3. Aaranyaka
4. Upanishads

1. *Samhitai* is the mantra portion of the Vedas, and is considered as the main text of the Vedas.
2. *Braahmana* is elucidation of the practices and main mantras. It classifies the Vedic rituals and duties, and delineates the methods of performing them.
3. *Aaranyaka* offers deeper meaning and gives the philosophy of the first two parts.
4. Upanishads form the part of *Jnana Kanda*. These give *marga* or guidance for those seeking liberation and salvation. Upanishads are philosophical in nature.

While there is some difference of opinion on the exact number of Upanishads, 10 of them, listed below, are considered very important as they have Bashyas of Sankara, the earliest commentaries available. The names of these 10 Upanishads and the Vedas to which they belong are given hereunder:

End of Preview.

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