

Vedic Philosophy and Ideal Human Settlements

Harish Tripathi¹, Taiyaba Rashid^{2*}

¹Faculty of Architecture and Ekistics, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi- 110025, India

²Faculty of Architecture and Ekistics, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi- 110025, India

*taiyabarashid[at]gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

Abstract: *The study of Vedic literature provides a lot of matter to human kind for introspection; it aims to build characters of the believers; and it does a great service to the humanity on whole. This paper is based on a doctoral thesis which discusses the idea of ideal human settlements in the light of the Ekistics and the Vedic philosophies towards the common goal of welfare of mankind in totality. The paper aims to look back at the Vedic philosophy and establish its greatness and relevance in addressing the common issues of human settlements in totality as holism is the underlying current. It is an attempt to rediscover the gem that it is. The paper tries to answer several questions logically by going through what has been said in the Vedas and interpreting it in the context of human settlements for seeking excellence and well-being for humanity.*

Keywords: Vedic literature, ideal human settlements, Ekistics, holism.

1. Introduction

The Vedas are the ancient scriptures that are sacred in India and renowned the world over. The word 'Veda' literally means knowledge. The root word is 'vid'-- to know. The Vedas are thus texts that provide knowledge of the previously unknown and enlighten the reader with seamless wisdom. It is a religious system which according to the Hindus, comes from God, and was promulgated by the mouth of Brahman [1]. There are four Vedic Samhitas-- the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Saam Veda and the Atharva Veda—which are considered the most sacred texts of Hindus. These are said to be shruti or texts divinely revealed to the ancient rishis (sages) [2]. Many years ago, the Vedas were referred to as 'trayi' or three. There must have been some point of time when there were only three Vedas [3]. These are acknowledged widely to have been the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Sama Veda. The Atharva Veda is believed to have been a later addition to the sacred canon.

For Hindus, of course, the traditions of Sanskrit literature are still sacrosanct. Vedic prayers are still said; televised serializations of the Sanskrit epics can bring the entire nation to a hushed standstill [4].

This research paper is based on a doctoral thesis entitled "Parallel between Ekistics and Vedic Philosophy towards Ideal Human Settlement" and it examines closely how the Vedic philosophy strives for the betterment of societies. This paper attempts to determine the relevance of the Vedas in current times with respect to building strong societies.

2. Objectives of the Research

The main objective is to examine and establish whether the Vedic philosophy is in spirit with the provision of ideal human settlements. It shall be established that the philosophy of the Vedas is holistic in nature. The ultimate objective shall be to establish the greatness and universal nature of the Vedic philosophy pertaining to human settlements.

The paper tries to answer the question logically by going

through what has been said in the Vedas and interpreting it in the context of human settlements.

3. Research Question and Methodology

The first question that underlines this research is whether there is any relationship between the Vedas and the concept of "ideal" human elements at the philosophical level. And if there is a connection, how it can be established and proved shall remain the central idea of this discussion. It implies that it shall be investigated whether the Vedic philosophy aims to bring human settlements to 'ideal' situations by guiding their growth and transformations as a comprehensive system.

The component of the Vedic philosophy is extremely vast. After much reflection and deliberation, the Vedic Samhita edited by Pandit Sri Ram Sharma Acharya and Bhagwati Sharma and published by Yug Nirman Yojana Vistar Trust Gayatri Tapo Bhumi Mathura (Revised edition 2013) has been read, hymn by hymn and their meaning been derived in context to this study.

4. Ideal Human Settlements

The ideal human settlement shall be the one which provides happiness and satisfaction to its people and reduces the exploitation and wastage of resources, natural and man-made, to an extent that it is ensured that consumption does not happen at the cost of one's present counterparts and future generations. The inhabitants should feel proud of their settlements. It should provide them to them a sense of security and all means to achieve dignified livelihood. It should be holistic in nature. It should take care of all their biological, physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs. They should be fearless, free and find no threat to their own future or to the future of their coming generations and are free to work to achieve their aspirations in a fair and healthy manner. Their health and their relationship with nature should never be compromised and they should live like a part of nature itself, while constantly striving to achieve balance and attempting to make things easier for them [5].

5. The Vedic Philosophy

Unlike the Bhagavadgita and the Ramayana, the Vedas have always remained an unknown entity, an enigma to Indians; and unlike the former, no Indian home will have a copy of any of the four Vedas. Yet, as the very roots of our culture, they hold the most central and pivotal place in our religious life [6]. We, in our ignorance, regard the Vedas more or less resembling our present day gods and rituals. But they are not. They are, according to Romila Thapar [7], 'primarily manuals of rituals', an entirely different phenomena-if we may call it so—set of gods and deities, rituals totally opposite to our present ones and as elaborate as one would find overwhelming, and values and lifestyle. A vibrant, wholesome, fight-oriented vigorous culture natural to those earliest times, when one was wandering in search of basic needs of life such as food and shelter, and trying to adjust with the harsh prosaic realities of life.

Vedic and post-Vedic literature has a tremendous amount of scientific knowledge which will be extremely beneficial to humanity [8]. Sri Aurobindo undertook an in-depth study of Hindu texts, including the Vedas. His work on these texts culminated in a book, 'The Secret of the Veda' [9]. He felt that the Vedic Samhitas should be understood at two levels—the outer and the inner. The outer rituals and ceremonies were for the common people whereas, for the initiate, there were hidden, inner mysteries in the same words.

The Vedic knowledge was not just religious, in the sense of exalting the divine, but also philosophical, in the sense of asking metaphysical questions and determining the limitations of what can be known. Religion is so closely associated with philosophy that sometimes the boundaries are blurred. Stanley Cavell contends, "When philosophical questions—whether God or the world exists, whether we are asleep or dreaming that we are awake—arise, they cannot be put aside. They are urgent [10]."

Here, in this paper, it is attempted to look at the Vedas from a different point. The Vedas, in their teachings, have many recommendations for the mankind and these aim mainly to make their settlements ideal.

Many planning systems have been put forward to make the city a better place to live in [11]. India has always been a land of great cities. Civilization in the sub-continent is said to have had its highest institutional expression in the cities, where all types of people met and its "great tradition" was elaborated and refined. The Indian city has had many reasons for its existence: there were capitals, ports and emporia, centres of handicraft production, pilgrim, temple and monastery cities, educational centres and garrison cities. Many had more than one function. Whereas cities like Banaras and Patna have had a long continuous existence, many Indian towns were quickly set up or abandoned. Kuldhara in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan and Fatehpur Sikri near Agra Uttar Pradesh are some examples. Such settlements were prey to shifting courses of rivers, erratic rains and floods, defunct harbors due to silting, whimsical rulers and countless invasion and wars. The remains of many of such

cities still thrive with activities, and today a few of them have become part of the large cities. The traditional Indian city has always been "energy-conscious". Evidence of such cities in the past and those surviving even today tells us that adherence to the above concepts resulted in a healthy and wholesome civic life. It is crucial that large scale planned settlements be seen in totality; not as mere edifices, but as an entire system, where people live, work and play [12].

Mega cities have caused mega problems. The seers of India rejected the concept of metros or mega cities. They preferred smaller settlements set in rural settings. Man cannot survive without agriculture. They were against the idea of conquering nature, preferring to see man's growth in blending with nature [13].

John Ruskin in *The Poetry of Architecture* (1839) and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (May 1849) notes that all good architecture is the expression of national life and character. The genius and character of a nation is unmistakably stamped on its architecture and planning. The modern system of planning takes into account specific needs, but is holistically unconscious.

Previous cultures have tended to deny some areas of development while acknowledging and encouraging others. With the present convergence of the findings of anthropology, cross-cultural studies, psychophysical research, and studies into the nature and function of brain, we are beginning to have in hand a perspective on human possibility as profound as it is provocative. This perspective allows us to turn the corner on our humanity, exploring and experiencing the astonishing complexity and variety of the world of the possible human. It is virtually a new introduction to the human race [14].

As Ekisticsians, we find no inconvenience; in fact we rather take the privilege to proceed this discussion further by using as sub-titles the five elements of Ekistics-- Nature, Anthropos, Society, Shell and Network while we find relevant readings from the Vedic scriptures to substantiate this research work.

3.1 Nature

The Vedas emphasize on the elemental forces of nature. There are gods of the Sun, Wind, Water, Fire and Earth that have been mentioned time and again in the different books of the Vedas.

The Sun is considered to be the most important of all the natural forces and the solar energy is said to be enshrined in all biotic and physical components. The manifestation of the Sun God in the form of the solar energy can be experienced in all that we see around us. The sun god is said to inspire the grey matter of human minds and hence develop their intelligence and intellect. Therefore, the Vedas worship the Sun, pray to it and show gratitude to it for harbingering all forms of life on the earth.

Water is said to constitute and comfort the bodies of living organisms and overcome the diseases, constraints and shortcomings of beings. It is said to have healing and

medicinal properties. It is said that all elements that are required for sustenance are present in water which is also a manifestation of all types of energies it possesses. And from water only, all medicines are derived. Thus, water is said to have therapeutic significance. Water is recognized as bliss and is regarded as absolutely essential for all human beings. It is said to provide shelter which is particularly the case of aquatic floral and faunal life. And it is regarded as nourisher and compared to how a mother nourishes her child before and after its birth. Water is said to provide nourishment to all living organisms due to its minerals and properties.

Water cycle in nature indicates the processes like transpiration, evaporation, condensation and precipitation which all work together to keep the cycle of life going on earth by providing freshness to all the weary souls and by fulfilling all their nutrient requirements. It has been acknowledged that water in deserts is scarce and in hydrous countries, it is available in abundance. It has also been mentioned that water can be extracted from the earth too. All these together bring out some remarkable characteristics of scientific knowledge of that era. Firstly, the people in the Vedic era knew about the natural forms like deserts, wetlands and coastal areas. Secondly, they even had a fair knowledge and understanding of exploiting ground water for human use. It has also been mentioned that flowing waters, like rivers and streams, have self-cleansing properties.

The flow of a river allowed by goddess Saraswati, whose water is said to be holy benefits all living beings. The human settlements are known to exist since times immemorial in the fertile river valleys, be it the Mesopotamian civilization between rivers Tigris and Euphrates, or the Egyptian civilization on the banks of the mighty river Nile, or the very powerful Mesoamerican Mayan civilization in the drainage basin of the Usumacinta River. This is because the settlers were able to take advantage of the agricultural potential of the fertile alluvial river valley and the commercial traffic of the river too. These river valleys also provided sufficient water for agriculture, drinking and other uses. And, if we talk about the Gangetic plains in India today, it is among the world's most densely populated areas.

The Vedas state that good, healthy and high-yield varieties of plants are developed by scientists and agriculturalists after much discussion and deliberation. So, it is a scientific method which is adopted to increase food production. This gives us a glimpse into the Vedic society which was scientifically progressive in nature and relied upon research and development to find solutions for the betterment of the entire society in general.

The earth is credited with the possession of water because on its surface only all the useful hydrological resources exist and from its own natural filtration through different soil layers only water is cleaned naturally. This very well justifies the earth as being the guardian of water. It recognizes the earth as a place that deserves oblation since it shows a lot of patience for all its tenants and provides them with all that they require in spite of all the harm that they do to it.

3.2 Anthropos

A. L. Basham, in his famous work 'The Wonder That Was India' (1954), states:

“In no other part of the ancient world were the relations of man and man, and of man and the state, so fair and humane. To us the most striking feature of ancient Indian civilization is its humanity [15].”

The Vedas aim to teach men the just and fair way of life. They stress on good moral conduct in every aspect of life, sacrifices that should be made for the good of others around them, generosity which they must show to all their fellows they share their lives with, kindness which they must practice with all the creatures they share the earth with, strength of character and physique they must possess in times of tests.

Prayers have been made in the Vedic hymns for increasing all types of wealth that exist on earth. The types of wealth as identified by Hindu religious scholars consist of ten types. Maayadhan refers to silver, gold, cash and other forms of tangible currency. Kaayadhan refers to body as a system and the overall health of human beings. Streedhan means the gift of a life-partner who is the soulmate and with whom one spends the entire life in the institution of marriage. Putradhan refers to the wealth of offsprings and progeny. Aayudhan means longevity of life. Bhoodhan means land, property and real estate. Dhaanyadhan refers to food and the associated affluence and affordability. Maanyadhan means a respectable social status and a distinguished position in society. Kaamdhan refers to the pleasures of love and romantic physical intimacy. Parlokadhan means the wealth of spirituality and god-believing and god-fearing soul.

The Vedas tell about the qualities of great men. People who are alert and can protect themselves from laziness and lethargy; get all knowledge, wisdom, success and peace. So, in order to be great and to achieve heights, one must guard oneself against inactivity and idleness; and keep on toiling to reach one's goal. They also talk about purification of physique, soul and character for the attainment of ultimate good in the long run. The Vedas call upon men and urge the entire mankind to take care of and watch their behavior, preach the truth and knowledge, and abstain from wrong deeds which might harm others as well as their own characters and strength. The teachings of the Vedas into account the senses of men and their physical and emotional needs. And it is this total system of man which should be in balance and be healthy, happy and pleased for making settlements livable and ideal.

Therefore, we can see that ideal human settlements did not just mean having perfect physical layouts and materialistic possessions but there was more to it even at that period of time. The Vedic philosophy largely mentions how men should behave, what their code of conduct should be, how their attitudes should evolve on a micro level. It actually seems to have an intention of making highly livable, harmonious and peaceful human settlements.

3.3 Society

The Vedas urge upon men to assemble on a common platform, to think together, and to work together for achieving a common goal. The Vedas, in their essence, talk about upliftment and harmony in societies. There are instances of mentioning the castes based occupations in the Vedas. Though during the Vedic times these castes were based entirely on profession and could be changed in one's

life by changing profession; in due course of time they started to be perceived by the society based on birth, which indeed is a great anomaly of Hinduism today.

There are references about economic upliftment of the societies too; there is a general want for wealth and status. There are instances of wanting to obtain the three types of wealth primarily. The legacy one carries forward handed down by older generations, the wealth of contentment that one feels after doing good to somebody, and the wealth of knowledge that one discovers on travelling and visiting far-off places—are the three types of wealth hence talked about for the overall upliftment of the society.

The Vedas mention the consciousness people had against enemies for security and the strong feeling of resentment that did not spare them; they were largely intolerant against them. At the spiritual level, it could mean not tolerating evils and wickedness due to high standards of morality that prevailed above all. There is the need for peace against wars as evident from the scripture.

There is emphasis upon the virtue of generosity. It says that the person who cannot help his friend with even the basic necessities of everyday life due to him being miser is not the one worth befriending, and his house too is not a desirable place to stay as he does become a host to his guest but only half-heartedly.

Rewarding those worshippers who engage in war for the greater good of humanity against evils; who bring up their children as good human beings with supreme morals and wisdom; and who are always eager to gain knowledge and wisdom depicts the societal and moral values which prevailed during the Vedic times.

Gods are, time and again, invoked to increase wealth and bring good fortune, which show that economy played a major role in the Vedic societies, and it still continues to play the chief role in the development of societies.

Protection is sought in a societal set-up. This point towards the security requirement of a society, which was taken care of by walled cities in olden times. Social evils and crimes like theft, deceit and treachery for the purpose of earning wealth are detested and people are deterred from adopting them. There are warnings that have been given that such practices would bring sorrow. Security and safety of society was hence very important.

A lot of significance is given to familial setup, relationship ties and the strength and willingness of relations to sacrifice for the good of each other.

A dwelling made up of a healthy family of father, mother, siblings, offspring; and a close association with friends brings strength to societies on the whole. People are advised to respect the elders, love the youngsters and give due consideration to people from the same age group. Thus, there is a feeling of inclusiveness, mutual respect and belonging that should prevail in society and be its characteristic feature.

There are references about the king being all powerful and the reins of statehood being in his mighty and worthy hands. Thus, the well-being of societies, according to the Vedas, also relies upon a healthy and strong law and administrative

system.

The Vedas talk about land and water resources—with land as the ultimate provider of food—grains, fruits and vegetables; the abode and carrier of seas, oceans, rivers, canals, lakes, ponds and wells which are our water resources. Hence, land provides prosperity to all and brings bliss to all professions, be it farmers, artists and merchants. Hence, earth is the ultimate provider of prosperity and wealth. This notion is carried further and it is stated that the earth provides the best types of trees and medicines and has divine qualities which promote knowledge, valiance, truth and love leading to all luxuries and welfare of masses. Land is recognized as provider of all crops, resources nourished by precipitation and creating habitable situations for all professions to prosper such that scholars, warriors, businessmen, artists and servants together live happily and peacefully. Therefore, it has been established from these hymns that land is itself a resource and a commodity of the community—as is recognized by scientists, scholars, planners and Ekisticians today.

3.4 Shell

Vedas talk about shells in various hymns, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. They talk less about their descriptions of shell but at philosophical level one is able to have an insight about their visualization of their shells.

Though under the umbrella of shells, not many things have been said in the Vedas, we cannot overlook the fact that the Vedas talk about living with dignity and prosperity. Cities have been referred to as 'nagaras', forts and houses have been mentioned in the Vedas. There are discussions about houses for cows for the gaupalaks (professionals who rear cows for milk). There is a certain degree of grandeur and excellence that can be associated with the Vedic houses and residences upon their references.

There are discussions about the towns developed in plain areas and those developed on hilly terrain. It is always desirable to provide cities with maximum resources like water and to eradicate the chances of diseases in cities, for instance by building towns away from swamps and marshes for security against disease-causing vectors. Therefore, it has to be acknowledged by the scholars of present times that the Vedic towns were very logically situated; and the topography and availability of resources too played a major role in it.

The Vedas talk about permanent, strong homes which provide weather-proofing against adverse weather conditions. There is an indication of what we call 'sustainability' and 'climatically responsive architecture' today, in which suitable materials, technology and orientations are used to make houses and other buildings respond to the local climate. There are references about the pleasure of owning a house and properties, which gives financial security to people to make them happy and safe along with their family and friends.

It is indicated through hymns that people in the Vedic era were aware of the hierarchies of settlements formed of hamlets in forests, followed by communities which are again followed in ascending order by villages and towns.

Vedas associate shells with grandeur, elitism, prosperity and delight. There is no denying the fact that suitable and healthy

shells and their appropriate composition and planning would bring prosperity, delight and health to the inhabitants. The Vedic philosophy hence desires and aspires for the best quality people can get in shells for the delight, comfort and happiness of the entire mankind.

3.5 Network

In various hymns we get an insight of networks available in the Vedic era. We also get idea about their philosophy pertaining to networks.

The Vedas have strong references in terms of transportation and want for excellent speeds in networks. The Vedas paint a picture setting high aspirations in terms of speed and hence technology for human beings. Though propagated in an entirely different context and time zone, the Vedas envisaged thousands of years ago the vision which we are living today. Thus, the domain of network seems to be restricted only to the concept and aspirations of the rapid transit and not as its realization and manifestation.

Thus, this entire discussion presents an insight into the Vedic society and culture. It gives a lot of matter to human kind for introspection; it aims to build characters of the believers; and it does a great service to the humanity on whole.

6. Conclusion

The Vedic philosophy has an entirely different context with respect to the contemporary town planning practice, and is propagated in a different time zone but the basic principles and aims of well-being of humanity remain the same. It is holistic in nature, seeking excellence and well-being for humanity. It is a great philosophy and undoubtedly a boon to the entire humanity irrespective of race, religion, gender and geographic location. If followed by its true spirit, great human settlements can be achieved which shall be ideal.

7. Future Scope

New research of the contemporary concept of sustainability and the Vedas should be a next step in this field to explore the subject further and to investigate how contemporary town planning practice matches with the spirit of the Vedas.

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Author Profile



Architect Harish Tripathi received the B.Arch degree from Government College of Architecture, Lucknow in 1993, and the M.Ekistics degree from Jamia Millia Islamia in 2009. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Architecture from Jamia Millia Islamia. He is also the Principal Architect at Architect Harish Tripathi & Associates, New Delhi, India and has undertaken a number of architectural projects in his career spanning twenty-four years.



Architect Taiyaba Rashid received the B.Arch degree from Jamia Millia Islamia in 2016 and is currently pursuing M.Ekistics degree from the same institute. She has a strong inclination towards academics and has already started getting her research papers published at reputed platforms. She is young and has just started her career and is looking forward to achieve more milestones in due course of time.