

Beyond Orientalism: The Threefold Hermeneutic of Vedic Deities

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Abstract

This paper challenges the enduring Orientalist tendency to reduce Vedic mythology to a primitive nature-worship analogous to the dismissed paganisms of the Graeco-Roman world. It contends that such readings, tacitly conditioned by Christian theological presuppositions, systematically obscure the sophisticated philosophical architecture of the *Rgveda*. In response, the paper recovers an indigenous, multilayered exegetical tradition—codified by Yāska (c. 600 BCE) and revitalised by Swami Dayānanda Sarasvatī in the nineteenth century—which interprets every Vedic deity simultaneously across three irreducible planes: the spiritual (*adhyātmika*), the cosmic (*adhidaivika*), and the social-physical (*adhibhautika*).

Through detailed exposition of this tripartite hermeneutic and its affinities with Western structuralist approaches, particularly the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant, the paper demonstrates that the Vedic pantheon constitutes a systematic classificatory apparatus for ordering nature, society, and the soul. The recovery of this indigenous framework offers a post-Orientalist paradigm for Vedic exegesis that is semantically adequate, philosophically coherent, and genuinely resonant with the tradition's self-understanding.

Keywords

Vedic hermeneutics, Yāska, Dayānanda Sarasvatī, Orientalism, structuralism, tripartite interpretation, *Rgveda*, Nirukta

1. Introduction

The interpretation of the *Rgveda* has long laboured under the shadow of Orientalist presuppositions that systematically reduce its mytho-poetic content to a primordial register of nature-worship. Within this prevailing paradigm, the Vedic *devas*—Agni, Indra, Sūrya, and their cohort—are predominantly construed as personifications of elemental forces, phantasmal projections of a pre-scientific consciousness grappling with the inexplicable phenomena of the external world. This hermeneutic trajectory,

forged in the crucible of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century comparative philology and perpetuated by figures such as Max Müller, effectively aligns the Vedic cosmos with the dismissed paganisms of the Graeco-Roman world, thereby denuding it of any profound theistic or philosophical gravity.

The enduring tenacity of this reading is not merely an artefact of historical scholarly inertia; it betrays a deeper theological genealogy. Western scholarship, tacitly conditioned by Christian categories of revelation, idolatry, and the sharp Creator–creation dichotomy, has habitually relegated mythopoeic traditions to a pre-theological stage of intellectual evolution. While the institutional and aesthetic grandeur of Greek and Roman civilisations commands admiration, their religious speculations are consigned to the periphery of authentic spirituality—a judgment that reflects more about Protestant hermeneutics than about the internal coherence of pagan thought itself. In India, however, this binary encounters a fundamental historical resistance. Christianity never achieved cultural hegemony on the subcontinent, and consequently, Vedic mythology never devolved into a defunct relic. It persists as an integral, living organon of Hindu religiosity, continuing to inform modern Indian philosophical and social thought. This divergence exposes the Orientalist template as not merely inaccurate, but theoretically inadequate for grappling with the semantic density and ontological ambition of the Vedic corpus.

From an Orientalist perspective, the mythology of the *R̥gveda* purveys a world-view no different from the one imposed by modern scholarship upon the Graeco-Roman world. The Indian scholar is vehemently opposed to such an approach, shaped as it is to such a large extent by the pervasive, if subtle, influence of Christian theology. Notwithstanding the acknowledgement of the grandiose splendour of Greek and Roman civilisations, and the degree to which their institutions influence the ethos of present-day Western civilisation, the Christian world rejects entirely any suggestion that Greek and Roman mythology bear vestiges of profound theistic speculation; in short, where religion was concerned, the Greeks and Romans were relegated to the realm of the pagan. In India, however, Christianity has failed to hold sway; Indian myth has remained a part of the body of Hindu/Vedic literature and the worldview proffered by it still informs modern Indian thought.

Consequently, the prevailing nature-myth exegesis fails spectacularly to account for the reflexive, self-conscious character of Vedic speculation evident even within the *Saṃhitās* themselves. To read the celestial Sūrya solely as the physical sun, or the atmospheric Indra merely as the storm-god, is to wilfully overlook the remarkable insights of the *Ṛsis*, who articulated a coherent cosmology wherein natural phenomena operate as the visible vesture of a transcendent, yet immanent, moral and spiritual order. The procrustean imposition of a Christian-tinged naturalism thus obscures the intricate architecture of Vedic theology, which conceives reality not as a dichotomy of Creator and creation, but as a graduated continuum of being—a continuum where the physical, the social, and the transcendent are profoundly interpenetrated. The *devas*, in this indigenous framework, are not arbitrary personifications but relational nodes within a systematic taxonomisation of cosmic, social, and psychological forces, each of which is fully real and fully revelatory within its proper register. The conclusion that in Vedic religion natural forces by virtue of their being inexplicable in terms of the

then available knowledge of scientific laws were animated and personified to the extent that every element of nature was seen as the domain of a particular deity would be a blatant denial of any credit to the remarkable insights of the sages evidenced in the Vedic verses.

In response to this enduring hermeneutic deficit, the present paper recovers and rehabilitates an indigenous exegetical tradition of remarkable sophistication. This tradition finds its foundational codification in Yāska's *Nirukta* (c. 600 BCE), specifically its seventh chapter, the *Daivata Khaṇḍa*, and experiences a powerful revitalisation in the nineteenth-century reformist project of Swami Dayānanda Sarasvatī. Dayānanda's axiomatic imperative—a "Return to the Vedas"—was predicated not on a rejection of modernity but on a reclamation of Vedic authority against colonial denigration. Crucially, he operationalised Yāska's nascent tripartite schema to develop a comprehensive hermeneutic that reads every Vedic deity across three irreducible, yet complementary, semantic planes: the spiritual-mystical (*adhyātmika*), the cosmic-natural (*adhidaivika*), and the social-physical (*adhibhautika*). This is not an allegorical fancifulness but a rigorous methodology grounded in the philological discipline of etymological root-analysis (*nirvacana*), ensuring that each interpretation remains tethered to the verbal fabric of the text itself.

The central thesis of this paper is that this tripartite framework constitutes a rigorous, non-reductive hermeneutic that does justice to the intrinsic polysemy of the Vedic text. It is not a late apologetic contrivance imposed upon the *Rgveda*, but rather a theoretical explication of a semantic potentiality latent within the hymns themselves. On the *adhyātmika* plane, the *devas* are appellations of the Supreme Being or modalities of individual consciousness—Agni as the inner light of awareness, Indra as the thunderbolt of discriminative knowledge, and Varuṇa as the moral conscience immanent in the soul. On the *adhidaivika* plane, they are the elemental and celestial forces structuring the physical cosmos—fire, wind, sun, water, and atmospheric electricity—each operating according to discernible natural laws. On the *adhibhautika* plane, they emerge as archetypal functionaries within the social order: kings, teachers, soldiers, and architects, whose authority derives from their cosmic correlates. This multi-dimensional reading ensures that the Vedic verse speaks with simultaneous authority to the domains of metaphysics, physics, and ethics, thereby resisting any reduction that would confine it to a single register.

For a journal dedicated to Vedic Science, the implications of this recovery are substantial. It dismantles the lingering positivist bias that dismisses Vedic cosmology as primitive superstition, revealing instead a systematic classificatory apparatus that forges ontological continuity between the macrocosm of the heavens and the microcosm of human society. By demonstrating that the Vedic pantheon operates as a relational system of symbolic correspondences, the paper establishes the foundational hermeneutic necessary for any serious interdisciplinary engagement between Vedic studies and the philosophy of science, sociology, or cognitive psychology. The Vedic text emerges not as a fossilised artefact of a bygone age, but as a dynamic matrix of meaning—one that encodes a coherent vision of reality in which the natural, the social, and the transcendent are reconciled through a shared symbolic grammar. Vedic theism and its pantheon, in terms of the new scholarship, are seen as a system of classification,

a tangible means of conceptualising the cosmos, distinguishing between multiple types of force and power operating within it. The pantheon is thus an organised system implying definite relationship between the various gods—a particular way of apprehending reality and expressing it in symbolic terms.

To substantiate these claims, the paper proceeds in four movements. It first critically interrogates the theological genealogy of the Orientalist reading, exposing its unacknowledged Christian presuppositions. Second, it systematically expounds the tripartite interpretive system as articulated by Yāska and formalised by Dayānanda, providing concrete illustrations of how specific deities function across the three planes. Third, it engages in a comparative analysis with Western structuralism, particularly the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant, to highlight convergent intellectual responses to the problem of mythic polyvalence while insisting on the distinctiveness of the Indian tradition. Fourth and finally, it explores the pantheon as a classificatory taxonomy that simultaneously orders nature, society, and the psyche, arguing that this symbolic arrangement constitutes the very foundation of Vedic epistemology. The paper thus aims not merely to correct a historical misreading, but to offer a robust methodological paradigm for the future of Vedic exegesis—one that is internally consistent, philosophically defensible, and genuinely resonant with the self-understanding of the tradition it seeks to illuminate.

2. The Theological Genealogy of Orientalist Readings of Vedic Myth

This section undertakes a critical genealogy of the Orientalist framework that has dominated Vedic scholarship since the eighteenth century. It argues that the foundational categories of comparative religion—especially the binary between theistic revelation and pagan nature-worship—are themselves products of a specifically Christian intellectual history. Figures such as Max Müller, despite their philological erudition, operated within a horizon wherein the Greeks and Romans were relegated to a pre-theological stage of human development, their myths functioning as aesthetic curiosities rather than genuine vehicles of transcendent truth. This judgment, the paper contends, was never purely scholarly but was always already mediated by a Protestant hermeneutic that located authentic religion in inward faith and scriptural authority, thereby excluding mythopoeic traditions from the sphere of legitimate theology.

When this framework was exported to India, the Vedas were subjected to a similar reduction: the *devas* became personifications of natural forces—Agni as fire, Indra as storm, Sūrya as the sun—and the hymns were read as primitive attempts to propitiate an unpredictable environment. What was systematically effaced in this reading was the reflexive, self-conscious character of Vedic speculation, the evidence of which is scattered throughout the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Upaniṣads* but is already nascent in the *Samhitās* themselves. The section further examines how Christian theology, with its insistence on a sharp distinction between Creator and creation, rendered unintelligible the Vedic conception of a continuum between the divine, the natural, and the human. In the Christian frame, nature is inert and passive; in the Vedic frame, nature is already saturated with cosmic and moral significance. This fundamental ontological discrepancy is the unacknowledged source of the Orientalist misprision.

Modern scholarship has amply illustrated the dangers inherent in an approach which evaluates different civilisations from a standardised viewpoint, and which disregards certain idiosyncrasies that arise out of the particular ethos of each civilisation. The conclusion that in Vedic religion natural forces by virtue of their being inexplicable in terms of the then available knowledge of scientific laws were animated and personified to the extent that every element of nature was seen as the domain of a particular deity would be a blatant denial of any credit to the remarkable insights of the sages evidenced in the Vedic verses. Indian scholars, from the nineteenth century onward, have mounted vigorous counter-readings—notably Dayānanda's—that reject the pagan label not by denying the natural referents of the deities but by insisting that such referents are only one stratum of a much deeper symbolic architecture. The critique of Orientalism is not a mere gesture of postcolonial resentment but a necessary precondition for any serious hermeneutic engagement with the Vedic text.

This recognition fundamentally transforms the interpretive enterprise. The *devas* are no longer passive objects of primitive projection but active principles within a coherent intellectual architecture. The task of the modern scholar, therefore, is not to dismiss the Vedic pantheon as a relic of primitive thought, but to decode its structural logic and retrieve its philosophical content. This is precisely the task that the indigenous hermeneutic of Yāska and Dayānanda enables, and to which the present paper now turns.

3. Yāska's *Nirukta* and the Foundations of Vedic Exegesis

This section provides a sustained examination of Yāska's *Nirukta*, the foundational text of Vedic etymology and interpretation, with particular attention to its seventh chapter, the *Daivata Khaṇḍa*—the chapter on deities. The paper situates Yāska within the broader tradition of *Vedāṅga* scholarship, wherein the imperative to preserve and transmit the Vedic corpus generated concomitant disciplines of phonetics, grammar, and hermeneutics. Yāska's innovation lies not in inventing exegetical categories but in systematising a pre-existing oral tradition that recognised the inherent polysemy of Vedic language.

The *Nirukta* operates on the principle that the *ṛks* (verses) are not univocal but yield multiple legitimate meanings depending on the interpretive context. Yāska distinguishes between three primary modalities of signification: the sacrificial-ritual, the cosmic-natural, and the spiritual-transcendent, although he does not use the later terminology of *adhibhautika*, *adhidaivika*, and *adhyātmika*. This tripartite schema is not arbitrary but reflects a deep structural intuition about the nature of Vedic language itself: the *devas* are simultaneously words, forces, and principles. Dayānanda uses the method of translation prescribed by Yāska in the seventh chapter of the *Nirukta* entitled *Daivata Khaṇḍa*—The chapter on Deities. He states that there are three meanings that can be attributed to the *ṛks*.

Yāska's hermeneutic is further distinguished by his rejection of the *aitihāsika* (historical-mythological) school of interpretation, which he deems superficial, in favour of a *naidāna* (etiological) method that traces each name to its verbal root and thereby recovers its functional essence. This etymological discipline is not a reduction of myth

to mere linguistics but rather an affirmation that the deity's name encodes its entire range of cosmological, ritual, and psychological operations. The section also addresses Yāska's controversial classification of the deities into three regional groups—those of the earth (*pārthiva*), the atmosphere (*āntarikṣa*), and the firmament (*daivika*)—which prefigures the later cosmological triads. Dividing the deities into those whose place is the earth, those whose sphere is the atmosphere and those whose place is the firmament, Yāska (*Nir.* 7.5) records that the whole of the deities could traditionally be reduced to these three: Fire, Wind, Sun—the first on earth, the second in the air, the third in the highest region. This classification, while ostensibly regional, carries profound hermeneutic implications, for it establishes that each deity operates across multiple domains—that Agni, while principally terrestrial, also manifests in the atmosphere as lightning and in the heavens as the sun.

Yāska provides the earliest extant theoretical justification for a non-reductive reading of Vedic myth, and his work constitutes the indispensable precursor to Dayānanda's more fully articulated tripartite system. The *Nirukta* establishes the principle that Vedic language is intrinsically polysemic and that any adequate interpretation must honour this polysemy by reading each *ṛk* at multiple levels simultaneously. This principle, once established, becomes the hermeneutic cornerstone upon which Dayānanda builds his comprehensive exegetical project.

4. Swami Dayānanda Sarasvatī and the Revival of Vedic Hermeneutics

Swami Dayānanda Sarasvatī (1824–1883), founder of the Ārya Samāj, inaugurated a "Return to the Vedas" movement that represents a watershed in modern Hindu self-understanding. Dayānanda's project was at once reformist and conservative: he sought to purge Hinduism of what he deemed later corruptions—idolatry, polytheism, caste rigidity, and Purāṇic mythology—while simultaneously affirming the Vedas as the unique and infallible source of all legitimate religious and moral authority. Dayānanda's hermeneutic, though motivated by apologetic concerns, possesses genuine theoretical sophistication and merits serious scholarly attention independent of its sectarian context.

Central to Dayānanda's method is his adoption of Yāska's tripartite interpretive framework, which he renames and systematises as the three *arthas*: *adhyātmika* (pertaining to the supreme Spirit or individual consciousness), *adhidaivika* (pertaining to the cosmic elements and natural forces), and *adhibhautika* (pertaining to the physical world and social institutions). Unlike Yāska, however, Dayānanda applies this schema with unprecedented rigour and consistency to the entire *Ṛgveda*, producing commentaries that read every deity-name across all three planes in every occurrence. In the light of these deities, the Vedic verses can be interpreted on multiple planes: social plane, cosmic plane, and mystic plane or spiritual plane. Sometimes these interpretations are called *Adhibhautika*, *Adhidaivika* and *Adhyātmika*.

Dayānanda's distinctive contribution lies in his systematic application of the *adhibhautika* interpretation to the social and political domain. Dayānanda has tried to interpret these verses on the social plane, and thus in his interpretation, *Agni* may stand for a learned person, a leader of the society; *Indra* would be a king or the officer

commander of an army; *Soma* would be a person of tranquillity, or a graduate of a spiritual academy; *Varuṇa* would be a learned preacher or a teacher or a defence minister; *Savitā* would be a teacher or inspirer; *Pūṣan* would be the sustainer of the people and hence, may be the head of an administration; *Ṛbhu* would be an architect, and *Marut* the soldier of an army.

On the cosmic plane the *devatās* are Nature's bounties; for example, *Agni* would mean fire, electricity or the sun; *Indra* is the sun or electricity or lightning; *Soma* is the medicinal plant or curative principle in any medicinal herb; it may be moon too; *Varuṇa* is water, sea or cosmic plasma; *Mitra* is vital breath; *Savitā* is the sun; *Viṣṇu* is the sun or *yajña*; *Pūṣan* is the earth; *Ṛbhu* the rays of the sun and *Marut* the atmospheric wind.

On the spiritual or mystic plane, the same *devatās* will have other connotations. Aurobindo has his own fascinating system of mystic interpretation; on this plane, these terms stand for appellations of one and the same God; sometimes they refer to the soul, and so often to the mental behaviours or to the different states of consciousness. When applied to God, *Agni* is foremost adorable and omniscient Lord; *Indra* is the resplendent Lord; *Soma* is the Lord worthy of our affection and devotion; *Varuṇa* is our Lord of justice, venerable and acceptable; *Savitā* is the creator Lord; *Viṣṇu* is the omnipresent Lord; *Pūṣan* is the sustainer Lord; and *Marut* is the vital breath.

Dayānanda's broader epistemological commitments include his rationalism, his rejection of *avidyā* (ignorance) as a valid hermeneutic principle, and his conviction that the Vedic text, properly interpreted, is entirely consonant with the discoveries of modern science. This latter conviction, while problematic from a historical-critical perspective, is significant because it demonstrates Dayānanda's refusal to confine the Vedas to a primitive past; for him, the text speaks contemporaneously to all domains of human experience. The criticisms levelled against Dayānanda—that his readings are forced, allegorical, and anachronistic—themselves presuppose a naive literalism that the Vedic tradition never endorsed. Dayānanda's innovation lies not in distorting the text but in making explicit a semantic potentiality that was always already latent within Yāska's hermeneutic. His system was developed independently of Western structuralism, which emerged only decades later, thus constituting a remarkable case of convergent intellectual evolution. By grounding his interpretation in indigenous authorities (Yāska, Pāṇini, the *Upaniṣads*) rather than colonial categories, Dayānanda effectively reclaims the Vedic text from Orientalist appropriation and restores its status as a living document capable of guiding individual conduct, social organisation, and spiritual realisation.

5. The Three Planes: A Detailed Exposition with Illustrative Examples

The need to interpret the deities at the various levels arises out of their operation in different capacities in the different worlds. Indra, god of rain in the firmament, becomes the mortal king ruling over his kingdom on earth. The gods of the heaven and firmament are the elements which also symbolise certain human virtues; on the earth they depict the various social relations. This section provides a comprehensive exposition of the three interpretive planes with concrete illustrations drawn from the *Rgveda*.

5.1 The *Adhyātmika* Plane (Spiritual-Mystical)

On this plane, the deities are read as appellations of the one supreme Godhead (Parabrahman), or alternatively, as symbols of the individual soul's states, faculties, and spiritual aspirations. Aurobindo has his own fascinating system of mystic interpretation; on this plane, these terms stand for appellations of one and the same God; sometimes they refer to the soul, and so often to the mental behaviours or to the different states of consciousness. Thus, Agni is not merely fire but the foremost adorable and omniscient Lord, the inner light of consciousness that consumes ignorance. Indra becomes the resplendent Lord who wields the thunderbolt of discriminative knowledge. Soma is the Lord worthy of affection and devotion, the bliss that accompanies self-realisation. Varuṇa is the Lord of justice, venerable and acceptable, the moral order immanent in conscience. Savitṛ is the creator Lord who impels all beings towards their ends. Viṣṇu, on this plane, is the omnipresent Lord who pervades all existence. Pūṣan is the sustainer Lord who nourishes the aspirant on the path. This is not a monotheistic reduction in the Abrahamic sense but a recognition that Vedic polytheism is itself a symbolic grammar for articulating the ineffable. The *adhyātmika* reading is further enriched by the Upaniṣadic equivalence between the cosmic and the psychological—the *adhidaiva* and *adhyātma*—which finds its most mature expression in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's correlation of the five elements with the five vital breaths.

5.2 The *Adhidaivika* Plane (Cosmic-Natural)

This plane interprets the deities as the elemental and celestial powers that constitute the physical cosmos. *Agni* would mean fire, electricity or the sun; *Indra* is the sun or electricity or lightning; *Soma* is the medicinal plant or curative principle in any medicinal herb; it may be moon too; *Varuṇa* is water, sea or cosmic plasma; *Mitra* is vital breath; *Savitā* is the sun; *Viṣṇu* is the sun or *yajña*; *Pūṣan* is the earth; *Rbhu* the rays of the sun and *Marut* the atmospheric wind. This plane is the one most frequently emphasised by Orientalist scholarship, but such a reading, when isolated, is profoundly incomplete. The cosmic interpretation is not a terminus but a foundation—it establishes the material reality within which human existence unfolds and upon which ritual action operates. Moreover, the deities are not random natural forces but are arranged into a tripartite hierarchy that mirrors the structure of the universe itself (earth, atmosphere, heaven), and this organisation is further correlated with the three vital airs (*prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*) and the three Vedas (*Rk*, *Sāman*, *Yajus*). Thus, the cosmic plane is already proto-scientific in its impulse, aspiring to a comprehensive taxonomy of natural powers.

5.3 The *Adhibhautika* Plane (Social-Physical)

This is Dayānanda's most distinctive contribution, wherein the deities are interpreted as human archetypes and social functionaries. In his interpretation, *Agni* may stand for a learned person, a leader of the society; *Indra* would be a king or the officer commander of an army; *Soma* would be a person of tranquillity, or a graduate of a spiritual academy; *Varuṇa* would be a learned preacher or a teacher or a defence minister; *Savitā* would be a teacher or inspirer; *Pūṣan* would be the sustainer of the people and hence, may be the head of an administration; *Rbhu* would be an architect, and *Marut* the soldier of an army. This plane, far from being a mere allegorical

contrivance, reflects the Vedic understanding of the social order as a microcosm of the cosmic order. The king, on earth, exercises the same dominion that Indra exercises over the atmosphere; the teacher dispenses the same illumination that Sūrya dispenses from the heavens. This is not a reduction of the divine to the human but an affirmation of their mutual participation and interdependence.

6. Structuralist Affinities: Lévi-Strauss, Vernant, and the Comparative Method

This section situates the tripartite Vedic hermeneutic within the broader context of Western structuralist approaches to myth, arguing for a productive dialogue rather than a unidirectional influence. Claude Lévi-Strauss' approach to myth is an attempt to pursue the intellectual quest for order in a world that is apparently in a state of flux and chaos. The prevalence of myth in all ancient civilisations provided him with the opportunity to discover this order by identifying sequences that occurred in them. He was able to represent these recurrent patterns diagrammatically and systematise them into an organised nucleus representing an emergent order from apparent chaos.

While Lévi-Strauss's method is revolutionary in its systematic ambition, two limitations are identifiable: first, his preoccupation with syntax over semantics means that he says little about the actual referential or ethical content of myths; second, his model tends toward a universalism that effaces the specific cultural embeddedness of each mythic tradition. While structuralism has been superseded by other schools of Literary Theory, it is important to remember that its initial concern was not with literature in general but specifically with the nature of the myth.

This paper then turns to Jean-Pierre Vernant, whose refinement of structuralism is more germane to the Vedic case. Vernant, in his studies of Greek mythology, demonstrated that the gods are not merely narrative agents but relational nodes within a complex system of classification that encompasses natural phenomena, social roles, and psychological dispositions. His analysis of Zeus is particularly instructive. Vernant (1982: 92) comments that the same dominion that Zeus has over the universe and the king over his subjects is also exercised by the head of each family in his own house. In this way the power of Zeus establishes the connections between various types of human activities, social relations and natural phenomena. It links them together but does not confuse them. The Greeks knew perfectly well that a king was not a force of nature and that a force of nature was not the same as a deity. Nevertheless, they saw them as linked, interdependent, as different aspects of a single divine power. This is precisely the kind of polyvalence that the Vedic tripartite system articulates.

Vernant reminds us that modern scholarship has amply illustrated the dangers inherent in an approach which evaluates different civilisations from a standardised viewpoint, and which disregards certain idiosyncrasies that arise out of the particular ethos of each civilisation. This warning applies with equal force to the interpretation of Vedic religion. A system similar to that of structuralism was advocated by Dayānanda in the middle of the nineteenth century and he used as authority Yāska who is dated at 600 BC. Their convergence is not a matter of borrowing but of parallel intellectual responses to a common human problem—namely, the need to conceive a cosmos that

is at once physical, social, and transcendent.

Structuralism has been significantly modified by scholars like J.P. Vernant and is being successfully applied to a number of classical and older literary texts. The techniques of structuralist analysis enable a clarification of the logic that governs the relations among the various expressions of order in the human world and in the literary work that mirrors and transforms the world. The structuralist approach enables an understanding of the systematic relationships among symbols although it contributes little to the unravelling of their real meaning. C. Segal affirms the significance of the role of the myth in establishing or maintaining the social order; another important observation relevant to the repetitive nature of Vedic hymns and verses is the effect of redundancy in this process of re-encoding. Despite the flaws inherent in Structuralism as a school of literary theory, one should not forget that its initial concern was myth; this paper therefore regards the structuralist approach as vital to the understanding of the neo-Hindu trends in interpreting the *Rgveda*. The comparative exercise, when conducted with proper methodological caution, reveals that the Vedic tripartite system is not an exotic anomaly but a fully rational and structurally coherent interpretive framework that deserves a place in the global history of hermeneutics.

7. The Pantheon as a System of Classification

This section synthesises the preceding analyses into a unified theoretical statement: the Vedic pantheon, as interpreted through the tripartite model, constitutes a system of classification that performs an ontological and social function of the highest order. The *devas* are not discrete entities but nodes within a relational network that maps the entire cosmos—from the highest heaven to the most mundane social transaction.

This classificatory function operates at multiple levels simultaneously. First, it provides a taxonomy of natural forces, enabling the Vedic practitioner to conceptualise the universe as an ordered, hierarchical structure governed by discernible laws. Second, it furnishes a model of the social order, wherein each human role—priest, king, teacher, soldier, artisan—is correlated with a divine archetype, thereby legitimising and stabilising social hierarchies. Third, it offers a map of the inner psychological landscape, identifying the various faculties of the soul (reason, will, emotion, breath) and their corresponding divine correlates, thus facilitating spiritual discipline and self-knowledge.

This threefold mapping is not incidental but essential to the Vedic project: the same ritual that propitiates Agni in the sacrificial fire simultaneously invokes Agni as the inner light of consciousness and Agni as the leader of the community. The sacrifice is thus a microcosm wherein the three worlds—heaven, atmosphere, earth—are brought into harmonious alignment, and this alignment is re-enacted at every level of existence. This insight has profound implications for the study of religion: it challenges the still-prevalent assumption that myth and ritual are primarily about belief or social solidarity and insists instead that they are fundamentally about *order*—the ordering of nature, the ordering of society, and the ordering of the soul.

Gonda supports and lends greater importance to Hopkins' view that "there are obvious threes all around us: earth, air, and sky..." Gonda goes on to explain the

remarkable ancient practice of adding, in stating the numerical value of an entity or concept, the whole to the number of its components. This implies that a number exceeding a given quantity by one summed up and moulded into one complex the entities constituting that quantity. It follows that the number three can often be described as the higher synthesising unity of which the other two—two other entities—are parts or individual aspects.

Kunhan Raja makes an invaluable observation on the nature of the three worlds. There are the three worlds of *pṛthvī*, *antarikṣa* and *dyaus*, the Earth, the atmospheric region and the celestial region. In the *pṛthvī* region, matter predominates; the *antarikṣa* region, activity predominates; and in the *dyaus* region, sentience predominates. These are the three layers in the course of evolution on the basis of finesse so far as the matter side is concerned; in the celestial region, matter is least predominant, and as such there is extreme finesse, and in the atmospheric region, there is a greater ratio of matter in relation to the celestial region and that region is grosser than the celestial region. The earthly region is the grossest. Kunhan Raja further explains how the five Elements of the latter day philosophical systems evolved out of this notion of the initial division of Ṛgvedic cosmology into the three worlds: the earth and the atmosphere and the heaven are only symbols to denote the three layers. It is these three that developed into the first three of the Five Elements in the later day philosophical thought pattern.

The Vedic system transcends the polytheism-monotheism binary: it is not a primitive polytheism that the *Upaniṣads* later overcome, nor is it a veiled monotheism that merely wears multiple masks. Rather, it is a polymorphous monism—a recognition that a single divine reality manifests itself across an infinite multiplicity of forms, each of which is fully real and fully revelatory within its proper plane of reference.

8. Conclusion: Towards a Post-Orientalist Vedic Hermeneutic

This paper has contended that the Orientalist reading of the Vedas as primitive nature-worship is not merely incomplete but systematically distorting, and that this distortion is rooted in a theological genealogy that the Orientalists themselves never fully acknowledged. In response, the paper has recovered and rehabilitated an indigenous hermeneutic—the tripartite system of Yāska and Dayānanda—that offers a more semantically adequate and philosophically coherent framework for interpreting the Vedic corpus. This system, far from being a late apologetic invention, is grounded in the earliest strata of Vedic exegesis and possesses a structural sophistication that anticipates certain elements of Western structuralism.

The paper has further demonstrated, through detailed analysis of specific deities, that the three interpretive planes are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing, and that their simultaneous application is essential for grasping the full semantic range of the Vedic text. On the *adhyātmika* plane, the deities reveal their transcendent and psychological dimensions; on the *adhidaivika* plane, they disclose their cosmic and natural operations; on the *adhibhautika* plane, they manifest as social and political archetypes. Together, these three readings constitute a comprehensive hermeneutic that does justice to the text's inherent polysemy.

The implications of this argument extend beyond Indology to the broader field of

comparative religion and literary theory. If the Vedic text is read exclusively on the cosmic plane, it appears as a primitive nature-religion; if read exclusively on the spiritual plane, it appears as a belated mysticism retrojected onto ancient verses; if read exclusively on the social plane, it appears as a political document in disguise. Only the simultaneous operation of all three planes does justice to the text's own self-understanding.

The paper calls for a renewed engagement with the indigenous exegetical traditions of India, not as antiquarian curiosities but as living resources for contemporary hermeneutic practice. This does not imply a wholesale endorsement of Dayānanda's apologetic project, nor a rejection of the critical tools of modern scholarship. Rather, it suggests that the most productive path forward lies in a critical dialogue between Indian and Western traditions, wherein each is allowed to interrogate and enrich the other.

In a globalised world where religious texts continue to shape collective identities and political imaginaries, the manner in which we read and interpret these texts matters profoundly. A post-Orientalist Vedic hermeneutic, of the kind sketched in this paper, offers not only a more accurate account of the past but also a more responsible and creative engagement with the present. The setting into motion of a revised moral code must be seen to rise from the mysterious silence of the Mahātma when he must have been horror-struck on contemplating the death of dharma and the abyss of blood-filled chaos growing wider. The rebirth of dharma lies, not in a rejection, but in a responsible, creative negation, that is, in a transcendence of the national funk as represented by its monumental expression in the 1950 Constitution. The recovery of the tripartite hermeneutic is thus not merely an academic exercise but a contribution to the ongoing project of cultural and spiritual renewal—for the good of all Indians. For the good of all.

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