

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MODERN IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF VEDAS IN SHAPING CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2025.6607>

ABSTRACT

The Vedas are foundational texts that shape ethical beliefs in Indian culture. They provide guidance on moral behavior, social roles, and responsibilities, emphasizing concepts such as dharma (duty) and karma (cause and effect). Through hymns and teachings, the Vedas influence daily life, art, and governance, promoting values like truth and compassion. Their teachings are relevant to both personal spirituality and communal experiences, continuing to impact contemporary discussions on ethics. The Vedic era played a crucial role in shaping Indian society, culture, and religion. It began thousands of years ago with the creation of the Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures. These texts contain spiritual knowledge and reflect social structures and ethical principles. The Vedic tradition continues to influence modern Indian life through religious ceremonies, festivals, and social customs. The concepts of dharma and karma remain central to people's understanding of their responsibilities today. Engaging with ancient texts like the Vedas helps individuals understand themselves and their cultural heritage, shaping identities and connecting past, present, and future experiences.

Keywords: Vedas, Cultural Heritage, Ethical Belief, Indian Society, Religion

India is a land bound together by countless traditions, languages, and customs, holding within it a cultural wealth that stands unmatched in the world. Over the passage of thousands of years, its civilization has absorbed and refined influences from religion, philosophy, trade, migration, and interaction, shaping a culture that is both deeply spiritual and morally grounded. From this long historical evolution emerged a vision of life where ethical thought and duty became integral to human existence, illuminating the Indian way of thinking and living.

The great epics of India — the Ramayana and the Mahabharata — are living reservoirs of moral reflection. They explore ideals such as truth, courage, compassion, and devotion to righteousness. These works transcend the boundaries of storytelling; they serve as guides that illuminate the ethical path of humanity. Similarly, folktales, maxims, and ancient proverbs carry forward the timeless moral essence of Indian civilization from one generation to another. In this way, India's cultural heritage shines as an unending light — one rooted in truth, compassion, and reverence for all forms of life.

Cultural legacy has an important part in defining modern identity. It includes the traditions, attitudes, and practices passed down through generations, which influence how people and groups identify themselves now. As cultures grow, they frequently combine historical features with modern ideas, resulting in a distinct identity that honours the past while embracing the present. This dynamic interaction between legacy and identity promotes a sense of belonging and continuity, allowing people to navigate their cultural environment with a better awareness of their origins. Cultural awareness involves understanding diverse beliefs, practices, and values, with religious texts shaping these identities. Studying these texts fosters empathy and respect, crucial in today's interconnected world, where collaboration and coexistence are essential. Religious texts play a significant role in shaping modern identity by providing moral guidance, cultural values, and a sense of community. These ancient writings influence how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world, often serving as a foundation for personal beliefs and practices. In a rapidly changing society, many people turn to these texts for stability and meaning, blending traditional teachings with contemporary experiences. This interaction between ancient wisdom and modern life helps individuals navigate their identities in a complex and diverse environment.

The Vedas, which are a compilation of ancient sacred writings from the Indian subcontinent, significantly influence the ethical principles and moral structure of Indian culture. The Vedas consist of four texts: the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda, and the Atharvaveda. These ancient Sanskrit texts, which span thousands of years, cover a broad spectrum of knowledge, including philosophy, rituals, and hymns that capture the social and spiritual atmosphere of their day. Principles like truth (satya), righteousness (dharma), and the value of family and community are all emphasized in the Vedic teachings, and these ideas are still relevant in Indian society today. "The Vedic texts are the oldest and most authoritative sources of knowledge and wisdom in Sanatana Dharma. They consist of four Vedas – Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda – and their ancillary texts, such as the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads. The Vedas are considered to be the revelations of the supreme reality, Brahman, to the ancient sages, known as Rishis. The Vedas contain hymns, prayers, rituals, mantras, and teachings that cover various aspects of life, such as cosmology, philosophy, ethics, spirituality, science, art, and culture" ("Navigating Dharma Sankat: Truth and Ethics in Vedic Wisdom").

The Vedas are important sacred texts that explore different aspects of human life. They provide spiritual wisdom about the divine and the universe, along with philosophical ideas that inspire deep thinking about existence and morality. The Vedas also describe rituals and ceremonies that guide religious practices and community events. Additionally, they offer advice for leading a meaningful life, focusing on ethical behavior and personal growth. Overall, the Vedas are essential for understanding the spiritual and cultural history of ancient India. Learning about the different kinds of Vedas—like the Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda—helps us see how each one has its own special role in spiritual activities, rituals, and the development of ideas in Hinduism. Each type plays an important part in the overall structure of Vedic literature. Each of these Vedas is further divided into four primary categories, which are the Samhitas (mantras), the Aranyakas (details regarding rituals and ceremonies), the Brahmanas (explanations of rituals and ceremonies), and the Upanishads (explorations of meditation, philosophy, and spirituality). Additionally, some scholars propose a fifth category, known as the Upanasas (worship). "The Vedas are the backbone of the entire Hindu civilization. They are the bedrock and foundation for all Indian knowledge systems. Our

traditions, practices, lifestyle and even rituals are all derived from the Vedas. To give you a sense of how old/ancient they are — There is no literature or record of any history of this civilization prior to the Vedas. The word Veda (वेद) translated means “Knowledge”. Along with Vidya, it is derived from the root word of “Vid” meaning “to know”. From the Dharmic standpoint, Vedas are containers of knowledge at all times” (Siddharth Balaji, Jun 20, 2023).

Spirituality serves as a fundamental and pivotal aspect of human existence, influencing our thoughts, emotions, and connections with ourselves and others. In contemporary society, there has been a noticeable decline in faith, accompanied by an impatience that permeates various aspects of life. This erosion of traditional values has led to a diminished sense of brotherhood among individuals, resulting in a more isolated existence. Furthermore, many people find themselves relentlessly pursuing materialistic pleasures at the expense of deeper connections and fulfilling relationships. This pursuit often comes at the cost of severing familial ties that once provided support and stability. Additionally, there is an unsettling trend towards sexual degradation that reflects broader societal shifts and challenges our collective understanding of intimacy and respect. Modern society grapples with a multitude of significant issues, including persistent conflicts and wars that disrupt communities; violations of human rights that undermine individual dignity; the rapid technological boom that brings both innovation and ethical dilemmas; pervasive gender inequality that limits opportunities for many; and the rising levels of depression and stress affecting mental health across diverse populations. In Indian society, several pressing problems have emerged, including the alarming rise of communalism, which threatens social harmony; an unprecedented population explosion that strains resources and infrastructure; widespread instances of child abuse that compromise the well-being and future of young individuals; challenges faced by backward classes who continue to struggle for equality and opportunities; various issues impacting women, such as gender discrimination and violence; as well as the pervasive problems of alcoholism and drug addiction that affect individuals and families across different socio-economic strata.

The Vedas have a profound influence on modern life. They emphasize the importance of living a good and honest life, promoting values like truthfulness, kindness, and respect for others. These principles are crucial in building strong relationships and creating a positive environment in various aspects of life. The Vedas also teach about health and wellness, emphasizing the connection between humans and nature, and the importance of protecting the environment. This has led to a growing movement towards sustainability and eco-friendly practices. The Vedas also encourage balance between personal desires, family responsibilities, and social duties, promoting happiness and well-being. They also inspire creativity and the pursuit of knowledge, encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving in various fields. By embracing these ancient ideas, we can create a better and more harmonious world for ourselves and future generations. The Vedas offer valuable insights to address significant issues in Indian society, including communalism, child abuse, the challenges faced by backward classes, women's rights, and problems like alcoholism and drug addiction. These ancient texts emphasize harmony, justice, and community well-being. The Vedas promote a balanced approach to life that respects individual rights while uplifting marginalized groups. They foster values like compassion, respect, and integrity, which can help combat communalism and promote unity among different communities. In relation to child abuse, the Vedic teachings highlight the importance of protecting all forms of life, encouraging the creation of safe environments for children. For backward classes and women's empowerment, the Vedas advocate for equality

and the importance of education, urging society to move beyond biases and ensure the dignity of every individual. Regarding alcoholism and drug addiction, the teachings suggest adopting a disciplined lifestyle focused on health and well-being, promoting healthier choices. By applying the timeless principles found in the Vedas, we can work towards a more inclusive, just, and harmonious society. “The Vedas preach 'Atmavat Sarva Bhuteshu' i.e. 'Regard every being like your own self.' The key feature of the approach of the Vedic sages (rishis) in propounding this noble thought was to implant it in peoples' hearts (emotional core) and minds by linking it with deeper psychology. This, in the Vedic scriptures like the Smritis, Puranas and other ancient text is reflected in integrating the civil and social duties with religious faith” (“Vedic Solutions to Modern Problems”).

Indian philosophers have emphasized the significant role that the Vedas play in shaping spiritual, philosophical, and cultural understanding within the tradition of Indian thought. The ancient sages Vasishtha, Atri, and Vishvamitra established the foundational principles of Vedic philosophy, significantly influencing the spiritual milieu of early India. Vyasa played a crucial role in the compilation of the Vedas, thereby safeguarding their transmission and availability for subsequent generations. Prominent philosophers such as Adi Shankara, Ramanujacharya, and Madhvacharya further developed the Vedanta tradition by offering distinctive interpretations and exegeses of the Upanishads, thereby enhancing the depth and diversity of philosophical inquiry. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Shripad Damodar Satwalekar are key figures in modern Indian philosophy, known for their emphasis on the Vedas and Vedic thought. These philosophers, while grounded in traditional texts, reinterpreted ancient ideas to address contemporary societal challenges. Their work underscores the ongoing relevance of Vedic teachings and explores how these principles can be woven into modern life. Each philosopher contributed a unique perspective, fostering a dialogue between ancient wisdom and the pressing issues of their time, including social reform, spirituality, and identity in a changing world. This blend of traditional and modern thought inspired a generation of thinkers and leaders dedicated to uplifting and educating society through Vedic principles. “Dayananda considered the Vedas to be the books of all fields of knowledge, and he has written his commentaries to prove this point. Aurobindo has given a psychological interpretation of the Vedas. Satwalekara follows the line of thinking of Dayananda to a certain extent” (Roy 34).

The Vedas remain highly relevant today, providing wisdom for navigating modern life's challenges and promoting peace and prosperity. Their teachings can foster resilience, ethical behavior, and a deeper understanding of oneself and relationships, contributing to personal growth and societal harmony. Professor R.L. Kashyap writes in his article Message of the Vedas in the Modern Context, “Every society has great respect for its ancient books. But the Vedas have to be respected and studied because the wisdom in it is highly relevant for the modern society also, even though we are far removed from the Rig Vedic society by several thousands of years” (Kashyap 22). The Vedas serve as a timeless reservoir of knowledge that emphasizes the significance of truth, justice, and righteousness. Their teachings advocate for kindness towards all living beings, fostering a sense of harmony with nature and promoting unity within communities. By encouraging self-realization, the Vedas guide individuals toward attaining inner peace and elevating their consciousness, thereby enhancing the overall quality of life. Their enduring wisdom continues to resonate, offering profound insights that are relevant across generations. Mantras hold significant power, and in today's environment, this

particular mantra serves as a heartfelt wish for happiness to everyone across the universe. To quote Mantra from Upanishad:

Om, May All be Prosperous and Happy,

May All be Free from Illness.

May All See what is Auspicious,

May no one Suffer.

Om Peace, Peace, Peace.

-Mantra from Upanishad. (“Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah”).

The impact of the Vedas on contemporary identity and thinking is profound and multifaceted, as illustrated by the enchanting mantra. These ancient texts provide a foundation for various cultural, philosophical, and spiritual principles that continue to influence modern society. By examining the teachings embedded in the Vedas, one can appreciate how they inform values, ethics, and beliefs, guiding individuals in their personal journeys and shaping collective identities. The Vedas encourage introspection and a deeper understanding of the self, fostering a connection between past wisdom and present-day living. Ultimately, their teachings remain relevant, providing insights that contribute to the ongoing evolution of thought and identity in today's world.

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