

**Comments on the  
First International Conference on the Vedas  
July 1993**

The First International Conference on Vedas (Atharva Veda) was held in July 1993 in the Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium, United Nations, New York City. The Conference was an attempt to bring scientists and mathematicians together with Vedic pundits so as to have a dialogue. The main purpose of the Conference was to investigate the extent and the manner in which the Vedas are said to be the repository of all vijñāna.

Scientists and mathematicians are not willing to accept mere assertions. They expect an experimental/experiential basis to assertions. As a rule, Vedic scholars seem to be quite comfortable in the belief that Vedas are not only the abode of all jñāna but also of all vijñāna. Most of the evidence cited frequently in this regard pertains to computational algorithms and to some doctrines of astronomy, vastu sastra and ayurveda. The purpose and hope of the Conference was to explore and investigate in detail the correctness of the assertion that the Vedas contain all vijñāna; and the extent to which is valid in relation to the various branches of mathematics and the various physical and life sciences.

At this Conference there was a basic dichotomy between the approach of the scientists and mathematicians on the one hand and the traditional scholars on the other. While the scientists were not willing to accept other people's assertions on the basis of scholarship alone without any experiential verification, most of the traditional scholars seemed to be oblivious of the experiential component and be satisfied with quotation of authorities. Furthermore, the very learned pundits who were present seemed disinterested in dialogue or discussion about possible relation to Science. The paucity of people with a background in the Vedas as well as the Sciences was keenly felt.

The lack of understanding of the method of Science and Mathematics, their implications and consequences by most of the traditional scholars was reflected in their being able to provide encyclopedia-like information rather than their acting as masters of knowledge who could interpret the information and relate it to experience. In fact they seemed quite content in their belief that "all knowledge" is contained in the Vedas. Except for occasional allusions to computational algorithms (which one must recognize to be not all of mathematics!) there were disappointingly few references

to original verses in the Vedas which said anything about physical sciences (physics, chemistry, geology, biochemistry) nor too much about biology.

There were a few isolated presentations which were above criticism: two presentations on Vedic algorithms were quite good. The informative papers on vastu sastra and ayurveda even did not generate any dialogue.

Professor Richard Askey and Professor Ravi Kulkarni made timely interventions to illustrate the kind of questions that arise from a rigorous mathematical training; Professor Michael Witzel brought in philological criticism into the appropriate presentations. My own role was to intervene in the discussions to annotate, sharpen the conclusions and to inquire further into some of the presentations.

The purpose of the Conference would have been achieved to a much greater extent had there been a definite list of delegates/participants with their backgrounds and a list of presentations been available well in advance of the Conference. The two Conference Chairmen could then have planned a definite academic programme and decided ahead of time the list and order of presentations. The inability, however excusable by the Administration, to provide this advance information coupled with certain arbitrary decisions during the Conference seriously hampered the smooth choreography of the Conference.

Despite these shortcomings there were a number of personal meetings between the various participants which were both informative and rewarding. The Cultural Programmes were excellent.

Austin

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E. C. G. Sudarshan