

Sanātana Dharma during the Vedic Period: A Concept Based on Ṛta

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Abstract: Sanātana Dharma, often translated as the Eternal order, in the Vedic period was intrinsically rooted in the cosmic principle of Ṛta—the universal law that sustains both the natural and moral order of existence. In early Vedic thought, Ṛta governed the harmonious functioning of the cosmos, the cycles of nature, and the ethical conduct of human beings, serving as the metaphysical foundation for dharma. The hymns of the Ṛgveda depict Ṛta as an impersonal yet all-pervading principle maintained by the devas, especially Varuṇa and Mitra, whose vigilance ensured the preservation of truth, justice, and cosmic regularity. Rituals (yajña), social duties, and personal virtues were understood as expressions of alignment with Ṛta, making adherence to it both a spiritual and practical necessity. Over time, the conceptual framework of Ṛta evolved into the more structured notion of Dharma, yet its essence continued to inform Vedic religion, ethics, and law. This paper examines Sanātana Dharma during the Vedic period through the lens of Ṛta, highlighting its role as the eternal, unchanging principle that underpinned cosmic stability, social order, and moral responsibility. Even though four Vedas emerges about Ṛta; Especially Ṛta is a key concept of the Ṛgveda, refers to the universal law of harmony, truth, and order that upholds nature, the cosmos, and human society. Therefore, this study refers to Ṛta in the Vedas. To examine the concept of Sanātana Dharma as understood during the Vedic period, with special emphasis on its philosophical and ethical foundation in the principle of Ṛta—the cosmic order. The study aims to explore how Ṛta shaped Vedic thought, ritual practices, moral values, and societal organization, and to highlight its role as the eternal, unchanging law underpinning the idea of Sanātana Dharma. This study is basically a descriptive study. It is noteworthy that the Historical method and Comparative methods are also being used in appropriate circumstances. Collecting Data is subject to content analysis.

Index terms : Sanātana Dharma, Veda, Ṛta, Satya, Eternal path, Cosmic Order, Hinduism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world. It is not just a religion; It is a way of life. Hinduism is the only religions whose name itself is “incorrect”. The actual name should be “**Sanātana Dharma - सनातन धर्म**”, “**Vaidika Dharma - वैदिक धर्म**”. In historical - religious literature terms used to signify the faith were Vaidika

Dharma (the religion of the Vedas) and Sanātana Dharma (the eternal faith). Hindu prefer to call their religion as “Sanātana Dharma”. “Sanātana” means ‘Eternal’ and ‘Everlasting’. Dharma means ‘Natural law’ or ‘Righteousness’. Faith of Hindus was given the name of ‘Hinduism’ in English language. The term Hindu is of geographic origin. It was the name given to people settled along the river Sindhu (Indus) in the north-west India thousands of years ago.

In the Vedic period, Sanātana Dharma means “eternal law”. It was intrinsically connected to **Ṛta**, the Vedic principle of cosmic order, truth, and moral harmony. Ṛta governed the movements of the universe, the rhythm of nature, and the ethical framework of human life. Seen in natural phenomena like **sunrise, seasons, rain**, etc. It was upheld through righteous living, adherence to truth, and performance of sacred duties (yajña, dāna, and moral conduct). By aligning with Ṛta, individuals and society maintained balance between the divine, the natural world, and humanity, ensuring prosperity and spiritual growth. The **Vedic gods**, especially **Varuṇa and Mitra**, are described as **guardians of Ṛta (ऋत)**. Over time, this universal order evolved into the broader concept of Dharma, forming the enduring foundation of Sanātana Dharma.

2. THE CONCEPT OF ṚTA & SANATANA DHARMA

2.1 Ṛta-ऋत

The word Ṛta referring to "to move in a proper way," derives from Sanskrit word ‘**Ṛ**’ (ऋ). Its meaning in the R̥gveda being "to go the right way, be pious or virtuous". It governs the functioning of the **cosmos, nature, and human life**. Ṛta (ऋत) implies **the right path, the correct order, and that which is true and eternal**. In the Vedas, ṛta has been used quite frequently, but in later scriptures its use dwindled. In its place, words like satya and dharma have been recurrently used, often carrying the same connotation as ṛta. In the Mahabharata, Bhagavat Gita and other sacred texts, ṛta means ‘true’, and at times ‘truth personified’.

2.2 Sanātana Dharma - सनातन धर्म

The word **Sanātana** means **eternal, timeless, perpetual, Dharma**. Derived from the root "dhr" (धृ) which means ‘to hold’, ‘to support’, ‘to prop up’—the moral order, duties, and laws that maintain harmony in the universe. **Sanātana Dharma**, the term signifies **a way of life that aligns with the eternal cosmic order**. It is the ancient spiritual and ethical framework that underlies what is now commonly known as Hinduism. Unlike religions with a single founder or fixed historical starting point, Sanātana Dharma is considered **beginning less (Anādi)** and **everlasting (Ananta)**, rooted in universal truths that apply to all beings, in all times and places. Sanātana Dharma was primarily the human aspect of Ṛta during the Vedic era.

Ṛta = Eternal cosmic law.

Sanātana Dharma = Eternal human duty to live in harmony with Ṛta.

3. VEDAS

The **Vedas** are the most ancient and revered scriptures of Hinduism, forming the bedrock of **Sanātana Dharma**. Sanātana Dharma originates in the Vedic tradition, preserved in the Vedas- India's most ancient sacred texts- believed to be '**Apauruṣeya** (अपौरुषेय- "not of human origin" or "not authored by any person"). The Vedic concept of Ṛta stands as a foundational principle in ancient Indian thought.

Ṛta-ऋत, (Cosmic & Eternal order/ Law) is the earliest concept, forming the foundation of cosmic and moral order. **Satya-सत्य** (State of Actuality) supports Ṛta by expressing it through truthful speech and action. **Dharma-धर्म** (Path of Righteousness) emerges later as a social and individual application of Ṛta and Satya. Performing sacrificial deeds in a way that reflects cosmic balance is known as ritual accuracy, or **Yajña**. Social harmony is upholding varṇa-āśrama responsibilities in order to maintain **community order**. **Ecological responsibility** is the understanding that nature is interdependent and holy.

In Vedas, Ṛta (ऋत) is the principle of natural order, It controls the functioning of the universe and everything it includes. The word 'Ṛta' (ऋत) is seen as effectively equivalent to Brahma (ब्रह्मा). Ṛta (ऋत) appears to be synonymous with सत्यस्वरूपः ब्रह्मा. Imperishable power or cosmic orderliness and good reputation. In the Veda, 'Ṛta' (ऋत) has been called the root of the creation. **The creation which appears as punaḥnava- पुनर्नवा (becoming new again) due to Mahāpralaya- महाप्रलयः (End of the world) and Navasṛṣṭi- नवसृष्टि (New creation) is inseparable from the previous creation due to this 'Ṛta' (ऋत).** Ṛta (ऋत), the divine law, is revealed in four Vedas. But, **detailed more number of times in the Ṛgveda when compared to other Vedas.**

3.1 Ṛgveda -(ऋग्वेद) :

The Ṛgveda, the oldest of the vedas, contains numerous hymns that extol Ṛta as the principle that governs both the celestial and terrestrial realms. Deities like Varuna are depicted as guardians of Ṛta, ensuring that cosmic order is upheld. The hymns emphasize that adherence to Ṛta leads to harmony and prosperity, while its violations result in chaos and suffering.

“ऋतं सत्यं परं ब्रह्म ” (Rta and Satya are the supreme Absolute (Brahman).

Thus,

“एकोम् सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति” (Ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti) (Rgveda:1.164.46)

It does not merely express religious pluralism; it proclaims the unity of Truth (sat). This one Truth is seen in the cosmos as Rta and lived in human society as Dharma.

Just as natural laws manifest in diverse phenomena but are governed by one principle (Rta), so too the divine is one but described in many ways.

3.1.1 Varuṇa and Rta (वरुण-ऋतः)

Varuṇa and Rta are deeply connected concepts in Vedic thought, especially in the Rgveda.

He is principle guide of Rta. Varuṇa is Protectors of huge Yajna- यज्ञ through the Rta- ऋत.

“यो बिभर्ति पथ्या जघ्नुषो नोऽर्णवृता रोदसी चर्षणिभ्यः ।

यो देवो मर्त्यस्य चष्टेऽन्तः स नो मित्रो वरुणो मामहेद तेन ॥ ” (Rgveda (ऋग्वेद): 1.25.7)

“He who upholds the paths of the sun, knows the ocean’s secret depths,upholds heaven and earth for all beings- May that divine Mitra-Varuṇa protect us by Rta.”

3.1.2 Agni and Rta (अग्नि - ऋतः)

Agni sustains Rta by making the ritual effective. connects the human realm to the cosmic law. Without Agni, the ritual (yajña) — a core expression of Rta (ऋत)— would not reach the gods.

“अग्निं होतारं ऋतधीतम् मनीषा

सत्यश्रवसं अध्वरस्य शृङ्गम् ॥”

(Rgveda (ऋग्वेद) : 3.1.1)

Agni, the priest, who possesses the wisdom of Rta, of true fame, the peak of the sacrifice.” This shows Agni as the embodiment of Rta in ritual form.

3.1.3 Āditya and Rta (आदित्य- ऋतः)

The Sun is often invoked as a symbol of truth, cosmic order, and the divine law of Rta.

"Surya, the eye of the Aditya , He is the one who upholds both the sacrifice and the cosmic order (Ṛta)."

(Ṛgveda (ऋग्वेद) : 1.115.1)

Rṣi **Kakshivan** (ऋषि कक्षिवान) while praying to **Ushas** (उषस्) says-

ऋतस्य रश्मिम् अनुयच्छन् मानः।

भद्रं भद्रं ऋतमःसुताः धेहि॥

(Ṛgveda (ऋग्वेद) : 1.123.13)

That verse means, "He who walks the path of Ṛta's light—Bless him, bless him, O child of truth!".

The same word 'ṛta' gives different meaning in the sense of various like Indra- इन्द्र , Agni- अग्नि , Soma- सोम , Mitra- मित्र and Varuna- वरुण . Example Verse: ऋग्वेद 2.30.1 , ऋग्वेद 3.12.2 , ऋग्वेद 3.12.20, ऋग्वेद 3.13.2, ऋग्वेद 3.61.6, ऋग्वेद 4.3.11, ऋग्वेद 9.113.4, ऋग्वेद 10.190, ऋग्वेद 4.3.10.

3.2 Yajur Veda (यजुर्वेद) :

Yajur Veda- “ **Sri Rudram**” : The importance of यज्ञ (Yajña) and इष्टि (Iṣṭi) close connection with ऋत and सत्य . “The power of truth and ṛta increases in the world through the practice of rituals/ sacrifices. ”

“ऋतम् सत्यं अमृतम् सत्याग्निन् पुरव्यं आङ्गीस्वधारम्”

(Yajur Veda (यजुर्वेद): 11.47)

("ṛta, satya, and amṛta (nectar of immortality) are embodied in the fire of truth (satyāgni)).

Another Example Verse: यजुर्वेद 17.82, यजुर्वेद 17.83 , यजुर्वेद 16.3, यजुर्वेद 12.111.

3.3 Sāmaveda (सामवेद) :

The concept of ṛta (ऋत) is invoked to maintain the **cosmic harmony** and to emphasize the importance of performing rituals in accordance with the laws of the universe.

“अग्निं होतारं ऋतधीतिम् मनीषा

सत्यश्रवसमध्वरस्य शृङ्गम् ॥”

(Sāmaveda (सामवेद):1.2.1: from Rgveda 1.2.1)

"Agni, who is the hotṛ, who possesses ṛta-minded thought, of true fame, the peak of the sacrifice." (Agni is directly linked to Ṛta as the divine priest who guides the ritual correctly.)

3.4 Atharvaveda (अथर्ववेद):

The Atharva Veda seem to expand the meaning of ṛta (ऋत) . while praying to Aditya, it is said,

ऋतस्वर्तेणादित्य यजय मुघतेनः।

यज्ञ यत् यज्ञवहसः शिक्षन्तो नोऽप्शेकीम्।

(Atharva Veda (अथर्ववेद): 6.114.2)

“Through the ऋत -ṛta and the power of the Sun (Aditya), those who perform sacrifices with devotion guide us, teaching the correct way to perform them without deviation.” Further example verse:

अथर्ववेद 5.6.56, अथर्ववेद 17.1.16.

4. VEDA AS THE FOUNDATION OF DHARMA

Manusmṛti 2.6 explains that , Veda is the Primary Source of Dharma,

“ वेदोऽखिलो धर्ममूलं स्मृतिशीले च तद्विदाम् ” (vedo'khilo dharma-mūlaṁ smṛti-śīle ca tad-vidām) / (Manusmṛti: 2.6)

“The Veda in its entirety is the root source of Dharma, and next to it are the Smṛtis and the conduct of those who know the Veda; also, the practice of virtuous people and the satisfaction of one's own pure conscience constitute the basis of Dharma.”

This verse teaches that Dharma is founded on four bases – the Veda, Smṛti & conduct of the learned, the practice of noble people, and one's pure conscience.

5. AT THE END OF THE VEDIC ERA

The idea of Dharma (social, moral, and spiritual law) eventually developed from Ṛta. Sanātana Dharma, which derives its authority from Vedic revelation, evolved to refer to the everlasting moral precepts that guide all individual and community behavior. According to the Upaniṣad and Brāhmaṇa, Dharma was specifically associated with the upkeep of the cosmos. The highest degree of congruence with Sanātana Dharma was considered to be the inner realization of Brahman.

6. Conclusion

During the Vedic era, Sanātana Dharma was the human manifestation of Rta, the everlasting cosmic order, rather than a distinct religion. It required people to recognize the interconnectedness of all existence, live honestly, and carry out their responsibilities with sincerity. This early idea eventually solidified into the more expansive and philosophical concept of Dharma that emerged in later Hindu discourse. The Vedic period thus shows us that Sanātana Dharma's roots are not just in moral laws but in cosmic harmony, making it as much about the movement of nature as about the conduct of human beings.

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