

# ST.GALLEN SYMPOSIUM

## Global Essay Competition 2023

**Title:** Solving New Age Problems with Old Age Tools – The Grandeur of Hindu Scriptures

**Essay:**

### INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is often said to be one of the finest and safest treasures to acquire. But what good is knowledge that is never put to use? Imagine James Watt inventing the steam engine just to go get groceries from the nearby supermarket. Imagine getting hold of Picasso and then using him to win the Pictionary contest at the local comic book store. Imagine the world getting robbed of all such famous inventions/personalities. It would not be as scintillating of a place as it is today, would it? That is precisely what unapplied knowledge does to us. It stops us from realizing the true potential of humankind. A similar thing is happening today in South-East Asia, in the heart of mainland India, where the relevance and the eternal wisdom of the Hindu scriptures are dying a slow death.

### HISTORY (BACKING UP A LITTLE)

Scriptures are specific texts that the followers of the Hindu religion consider sacred. An expanse of vast knowledge within, these literary pieces cover a plethora of domains such as music, dance, architecture, astronomy, science, mathematics, medicine, and wellness. They are considered the bedrock on which the Hindu religion sustains. As we go deeper into it, they are subdivided into two parts – first, we have the *Shruti* scriptures. These were passed on by word of mouth for thousands of years before they were written down for further preservation by *Rishis* (a common word for Hindu sages).

Among these are the '*Vedas*'. *Veda* means to know, so they are essentially the books of knowledge. Knowledge not about chemistry or biology or physics but about the nature of reality itself. The crux of Hinduism, though, lies in the latter parts of the *Vedas*. They contain short snippets of philosophic knowledge called the *Upanishads*. They tell us about the concept of *Atman* and how to proceed toward *Moksha*, among other things. Notions like these are beyond thrilling and hence escape simple verbal explanation. Thus, these ideas have been presented in the form of poetry. Why poetry? Because it can transcend ordinary words and gives you an understanding of things that are otherwise difficult to explain.

Furthermore, the learnings from all *Upanishads* are tied together in one single text, The *Bhagavad Gita*, a holy book. The beautiful part about this book is that it not only tells us about the theories of the Hindu religion but also about how to put them into practice.

Having said that, the troublesome part about these texts is that they are too abstract in nature. They are more idealistic and principle-oriented than people can relate to. This leads us to the second part of the scriptures – the *Smritis*. The *Smritis* use the art of storytelling to present the same ideas found in the *Upanishads*. Stories with the mighty Hindu gods and demigods at the forefront. Some of these stories are merely developed to communicate the abstract idea of the corresponding *Upanishad* through the tool of narrative. However, some are actual accounts of the lives of gods with proven historical bases. Those two stories, or epics (due to their extended lengths and timelines) are – The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata*. Like the *Shrutis*, the *Smritis* were also passed on through generations through narration before finally being written down. While I agree that this narration might have led to subtle alterations in certain parts of the epics over the years, it certainly does not take away any credibility or authenticity from their larger purpose. Scientists in the modern era have found physical shreds of evidence from many parts of these epics. Even the celebrated American astronomer Carl Sagan openly admitted to believing in the Hindu religion and everything it stands for.

## PIECES OF EVIDENCE

As part of this essay, I want to advocate for broader acceptance of the scriptures in the modern-day world and show you how they are one of the greatest legacies we have acquired from the previous generations. I present my argument in the form of some short anecdotes/facts from the *Shrutis* and the *Smritis*. While you go through these snippets, I urge you to look at them free of any dispositions and from a lens that tries to extract greater utility out of them by placing them in today's context –

- *The Earth-Sun distance postulate*  
Using one of the verses of the *Hanuman Chalisa* (a devotional hymn in praise of a Hindu god, Hanuman), the exact distance between the Earth and the Sun can be directly calculated. The hymn was written back in the early 16th century, and the calculated distance (~149 million km) is surprisingly close to the estimation made by scientists today (~153 million km). As a reference point, the first time any modern astronomer came out with a good enough calculation was not until the second half of the 17th century, roughly two centuries after the hymn was written.
- *The Power of Yoga*  
Yoga is a set of mental, physical & spiritual practices and has been constantly mentioned throughout the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. Though the origins of Yoga as part of Hindu philosophy go thousands of years back, lately, western culture has also started adopting it. Still, one major misconception about Yoga is that it is just a therapy for increasing flexibility. While physical strength and mental well-being are natural consequences of Yoga, the goal of Yoga is more far-reaching. Its potential is gradually unfolding as healthcare practitioners today have started using it as a tool against diseases that are otherwise incurable through allopathic medicine.
- *The Hindu ladder of life*  
The teachings of *Vedas* talk about the concept of *Purusharthas*, which means “objectives of men”. The *Purusharthas* are further divided into four categories (or four aims of human life) – *Dharma* (righteous conduct in life), *Artha* (pursuits of security), *Kama* (pursuits of pleasure) and *Moksha* (total liberation of life). It is said that by following the *Purusharthas*, one can fulfil the true purpose of human pursuit. An American psychologist introduced a similar concept in 1943 that the world now famously knows by the name of “Maslow’s hierarchy of needs”. Much like the way proposed by Abraham Maslow, the *Purusharthas* also follow a hierarchal order of things – fulfilment of a sense of security (*Artha*) and pleasure (*Kama*) is followed by an ethical life (*Dharma*) beyond self-interest. And this finally leads to *Moksha*, or ‘transcendence’ as Maslow called it in his revised version of the pyramid.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Now that we have looked at some examples from the scriptures that the scientific community has more or less accepted, I bring you some more thought-provoking tales. They serve as the focal point of the many reasons I am writing this essay. These tales have, for now, stayed in the backdrop of other exciting tales that our sacred texts offer. They do not have much scientific backing as of now, and as part of this essay, I hope they serve as a guide to the scientists today/tomorrow in choosing the next areas of their focus –

- *The animal-human duality*  
Lord Ganesha is one of the most worshipped deities of the Hindu pantheon. He is prominently known for his elephant head. As per the *Puranas*, his father, Lord Shiva, cut off Ganesha’s head in anger. Furious at this sight, Shiva’s wife, Parvati, commanded that her son be brought back to life immediately. At this point, a head of an elephant was placed atop the boy’s body. Not only does this tale tell us that head transplantation is indeed possible (as already in

contention among the medical science community), it hints at something much bigger. It solves the obstacle of donor body selection – can the human body also function with a head of an animal on top of it? Is such an interplay of living beings possible?

- *The many worlds supposition*  
There is a story in our *Puranas* wherein Lord Brahma (whom the Hindus call “The Creator” of the universe) pays a visit to Lord Krishna and discovers a shocking truth about life. Lord Krishna summons innumerable Brahmas from other universes in his backyard, all slightly different from each other in some shape or form. This act was primarily to show the Brahma, who came to visit, that there are infinite universes in reality and that he was the creator of only his single universe. The modern scientific community today debates the reliability of the multiverse theory, precisely what the story above depicts. If we were to believe in Lord Krishna, it would rest this debate once and for all.
- *The sweat-fertility conjecture*  
Several independent scientific studies today tell us that human sweat contains DNA information. But the bigger question is how we take this further to make the most out of it. To guide us toward one fascinating possibility, we have the story of Makaradhwaja and how he was born. After burning down Lanka (yes, this is the modern-day country Sri Lanka), Lord Hanuman took a dip into the ocean to cool himself down, and a drop of his perspiration fell into the mouth of a mighty fish named Makara. This impregnated the fish, and Makaradhwaja was born. I know this sounds irrational given our current understanding of human biology, but what if this is possible? What if we are yet to achieve that level of sophistication in science & technology? What if we can really extract fertility from the sweat of an individual?

## HOW TO PRESERVE IT?

*Apaurusheya* is an idea of Hindu philosophy often used to describe the *Vedas*. The Sanskrit word *Apaurusheya* translates to “not of a man” or impersonal. It is also said that the *Vedas* are eternal and know no boundaries of space and time. While I subscribe to this ideology, I personally think that there lies another piece of the puzzle that the concept of *Apaurusheya* fails to capture when placed in the contemporary world. That missing piece of the puzzle is also the reason behind the narrow acceptance of the scriptures today. That missing piece is that there has always been a religious connotation attached to our scriptures. And over the years, people have drawn only the symbolic meaning out of the texts without understanding the underlying ideas. Hence, it has become like a black box in the overarching view of society.

To resolve these complications that we have developed for ourselves, I propose a three-pronged strategy that provides a holistic resolution –

- **As students:** During early schooling, all students should be introduced to the various tenets that our scriptures offer. These concepts should be promoted in the form of an experiential learning pedagogy. One where asking questions is always welcomed, and free-flowing discussions are encouraged. Questions ranging all the way from the existence of the scriptures to the far end of their application in our lives are answered. The principal idea behind this pedagogy is to address the curiosity bubbling in adolescents' minds so we can eliminate the mystery attached to it. Achieving that would be a giant stride forward towards creating a society where our past is not only acknowledged but also cherished.
- **As young adults:** Once the child has grown up and developed his intellect to a certain level, we can expose him to more engaging knowledge propagation models. At this point, he is free to make his religious choices, and thus, endorsing collectives that are based on community learning would make more sense. Something like what ISKCON is doing today but replicated more prominently (ISKCON is an institution with a global presence dedicated to spreading spiritual teachings of The *Bhagavad Gita* to society at large).

- **Parallely:** The third thing to focus on would be the revival of the Sanskrit language primarily because the essence of many beautiful offerings of our scriptures is lost in translation when read and taught in other languages. This can be done by the digital transformation of the entire process of teaching Sanskrit to the masses and also digitalizing the manuscripts so that people can read them at their convenience.

## CONCLUSION

The *Vedas* are said to be self-evident means of knowledge. They can be found in all cracks and crevices of reality. The cynic inside you might question me about their authenticity in the first place. The realist inside me would argue: "If something is making my life better, I do not care if there is historical/scientific backing to it". All things considered, I know these are difficult-to-digest pills, especially for non-Hindus who are hearing it for the first time, but we need to take this leap of faith, for it will increase the font size of our ambitions tied to the future of humanity.

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