
UNIT 12 LEELA DUBE*

Structure

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to

- outline the biographical details of Leela Dube;
- explain the socio-historical environment which influenced her work;
- explain her central ideas; and
- discuss the impact of her work on anthropology, sociology and women's studies.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Leela Dube was born in pre-independence India. Her socialization was impacted both by the home and nationalist atmosphere of that time. Her work was pioneering as she combined the insights of anthropology with women's studies. She used the 'comparative method' of anthropology to bring in insights of different cultures to explain the position of women. She wrote several books including *Sociology of Kinship* (1974) and *Matriliney and Islam: Religion and Society in the Laccadives* (1969)(with A.R Kutty). One of the books that brought together many of her insights from her academic and field experiences was *Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields* (Dube, 2001). Apart from exploring caste and gender relations, this book analyses the various ways in

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which existing social mores in the form of poems, common sayings, and stereotypes have a deep and lasting impact on creating and maintaining female inferiority in the social system.

Let us first look at the socio-historical context which influenced her work.

12.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Leela Dube was born on 27 March, 1923 in a traditional Brahmin family in Maharashtra. Her father worked in the state judiciary of the Central Provinces and his work took the family to different places. She had three sisters and a brother. It is important to understand her life as the different life stages of family life had a great impact on her work as she herself has narrated in various places. In her family set up girls were brought up affectionately and school education for girls was taken for granted; and, depending upon individual interests and inclinations, entering college and university too were live possibilities (Dube, 2000). An independent career was not considered important – education was important for a certain class status and in case of any contingency. Marriage was considered extremely important for women. Most of the women got married by the age of 20. The women who remained unmarried were either responsible for taking care of their family or were involved in the nationalist movement. Leela Dube grew up at a time when the nationalist movement was at its peak. Many of her family members including her father were in the British services which embarrassed her as she felt drawn to the movement. She did not actively participate in the movement but followed some of the tenets such as ‘India made’ and attended some of the meetings of the Quit India movement.

Within her home Leela Dube was exposed to the regular reading of the Hindu texts such as Ramacharitmanas as well as the Marathi and Bengali literature in the form of novels and stories along with its translations of world classics related to Marxism. Availability of different literature at home and reading extensively developed her analytical and critical skills which were to help her later in her work. The literature that she read and heard about talked about women in different ways – the ways in which they faced difficulties, status within marital relationships, tasks they should follow and so on. At a young age she questioned some of the depictions of women in these stories and also developed an admiration for the strength that women showed in some of these stories. Reading also developed an understanding of ‘*women’s vulnerability, deprivation and oppression*’. Marathi magazines of the day carried articles related to denial of inheritance, dowry, child marriage, condition of widows, lack of education of women, tyranny of caste, economic disparities.

In the background that she grew up she was not sure about her own goals and looked as marriage with a ‘superior’ (intellectually not economically) man as her salvation as this would help her in clarifying her goals. The manner in which she achieved that also shows her single mindedness about gaining independence and retaining her ability to make decisions about her life. While pursuing her M.A in Political Science in Nagpur University she heard about a distinguished young

man Shyama Charan Dube. He seemed to fulfil the ideas she had about a possible husband and belonged to the same caste. Through her family members she extended a proposal which was accepted by both the families and they were married in a simple civil ceremony.

In present times it hardly seems an achievement but in 1945 it displayed her ability to maintain her autonomy. The choice of similar caste was important as she herself states that growing up in a loving family she was not inclined not to rebel. Instead she chose to balance her aspirations with the needs of the family. This continued in her marital life as well and was also the reason for her interest in the area of gender, kinship and the position of women within the household.

Through her marriage she was introduced to anthropology as a subject. She collected data for her husband S.C. Dube's work and worked as an assistant researcher before branching out on her own. Her professional life coincided with the Indian independence and the subsequent growth of the nation. Growing up in an era where the anti-colonial environment dominated, it is not surprising that ultimately the anthropology that she practised and wrote about was anti-imperial and focused on groups which had previously been silenced.

Her first journey in anthropology was through engagement with her husband's work with the Kamar's where she worked on to obtain from Kamar woman some information on essentially 'feminine matters'. Subsequently, she started work on her dissertation related to women amongst the Gonds of South Chattisgarh. Her work is discussed more in detail in the later sections.

She worked in Sagar University from 1957 to 1975 in Sagar University. Formally, she started teaching at the university from 1960 onwards. Her research, writing and academic outreach activities were voluminous, through her many stints as research fellow and visiting professor at Universities and Institutes all over India. She was associated with ICSSR in different capacities: as Senior Fellow, Director (Sociology) and National Fellow. In women's studies, her journey started with her nomination as a member of the National Committee on the Status of Women, Government of India which produced the landmark report *Towards Equality*. She was also chair of the Tenth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. As an important office-bearer, she organised a symposium along with others which was published later as a book *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development* in 1986. Subsequently, she continued in the field with her involvement with the Indian Association of Women's Studies and her stewardship of a major IAWS conference *Women and the Household in Asia* which resulted in five edited volumes that were early milestones in the field. She was part of the global women's studies community, as Vice President of the International Women's Anthropology Conference, Chairperson of the Commission on Women of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences and other honorary positions.

According to Madan (2017), Leela Dube began as a woman anthropologist studying women and from that perspective culture and society, and remained so until the very end (ibid: 382). She remained wedded to the qualitative approach, combining careful attention to ethnographic details with insightful interpretations of the same to bring to life, as it were, the nuanced richness of interpersonal relations in the setting of the household, the family, and the larger kinship and descent groups (ibid: 390). She considered gender studies as her major field in the last two decades of her life.

She was influenced by the work of Irawati Karve in the area of family, kinship and gender. Malinkowski and Katherine Gough's work on kinship systems also inspired her. In the course of her career she won several awards, in 2007 she was given the UGC's Swami Pranavananda Saraswati Award for 2005 and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Indian Sociological Society.

Box 12.1 Beginnings of Academic Work of Leela Dube

In her PhD dissertation Dube explored the lives of Gond women from Chattisgarh. It was during this period that her understanding of gender disparities increased and she saw the differences in the lives of Gond women as compared to the upper caste women, subtleties of their dependence and the nuances of their disabilities, and these women's strategies and manoeuvres for creating a living space for themselves (Dube, 2000: 4040). Through her research she talked about not just gender relations but also about relationships amongst family members and aspects of aging. For example, she outlined how most people in the Gond society were defined through their 'usefulness' or 'labour'. She quotes in her paper a Gond woman- 'I earn my rice (*bhat*) by looking after this grandchild.'" Through these examples she emphasized how throughout their life trajectory women have to justify their existence.

After working in the area of women for her dissertation, Dube focussed more on caste, family and kinship. In her work on *Sociology of Kinship: An Analytical Survey of Literature* she covered a vast area of work including marriage, kinship and families, literature on tribal societies, caste and communities inheritance patterns, mother right, exchange theories, alliance theories and so on. It provides an important and extensive source of information. In writing this she was able to transcend the received disciplinary distinction between anthropology and sociology as she chose to link kinship studies, traditional playground of anthropologists with the sociology of the family—a sub-field of sociological research, developed within the so-called 'modernisation' paradigm (Uberoi, 2017:404). This extensive survey of literature covered women only peripherally (Sharma, 2005:31). Even though her PhD work had covered Gond women, Dube moved away from focussing on issues of women to the traditional anthropological topic of kinship studies. The next section deals with the reasons for transforming Dube's work.

12.3 CENTRAL IDEAS

Leela Dube's work presented the interface between gender and kinship. During the 1960's and 1970's women studies scholars did not take into account anthropological or ethnographic materials and anthropology described family and roles of women without questioning them. It was Leela Dube who bridged these fields, catalyzing the development of gender and kinship studies in India. She sensitised women's studies scholarship to the methods and theoretical insights of anthropology, not to mention the reverse, alerting anthropology to the possibilities of women's studies scholarship. In the early debate about multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity in women's studies, she held that feminists must also engage with the fundamental debates of their own primary disciplines to avoid being ghettoized and marginalized.

Dube's research and fieldwork experiences among shifting cultivators (Kamars in Andhra Pradesh), settled agriculturists (Gonds in Chhattisgarh) and in a multi-caste village with Rajputs as the dominant caste (western UP), gave her a sense of the sweep of patrilineal kinship, despite variations across caste, class, tribe and region. Her work on matriliney and Islam (Lakshadweep Islands) not only provided a glimpse of a different set of life trajectories for women under a different kinship system but drove her to take on traditional anthropological expositions on the 'matrilineal puzzle'. Her comparative survey of kinship across various countries of South and South-East Asia strengthened her conviction that kinship systems are not just symbolic and esoteric but have material consequences for the well-being of its members (Ganesh, 2012: 402).

She brought out issues of power and hierarchy through vignettes of everyday life in a non-judgemental manner.

In this unit, Leela Dube's work is presented in historical framework. We explore her initial forays into anthropology and studies of kinship, her increasing focus on gender in her work and then ensuring the 'feminisation of anthropology' structurally by introducing the subject of gender in different national and international platforms.

12.3.1 Towards Equality

The invitation to be a part of the Committee on the Status of Women which was involved in writing the 'Towards Equality', report was an important catalyst in the life and works of Leela Dube. This report was submitted to the government of India in 1974. At the time she was invited to work on the report there was a rising consciousness about women's oppression and cultural organization of gender and the need to work on these issues within social sciences (Dube, 2000: 4044). Important publications in the field of 'anthropology of women' had begun to make an appearance. These writings advocated an urgent need to recognise women's lives and situations as a legitimate area of ethnographic enquiry, questioning too, the misconceptions and misrepresentations of women in the discipline and beyond (ibid: 4044).

Towards equality became a reference point for substantial research across disciplines as it brought out the vulnerable position of girls within the household especially the natal household which discriminates against the girl child in terms of nutrition and health needs, marriage - facts that Dube had brought out in another book on Women and Kinship as well. A large number of studies were commissioned focusing on women in relation to religion, kinship, marriage and marriage payments, work, “prostitution”, tribes, caste and purdah among other themes leading to expansion of her interest areas (Palriwala, 2012:33).

At the same time, the CSWI exercise brought Indian women activists and academics into productive dialogue with a global community of ‘second-wave’ feminists, whose shared agenda took shape during the 1975 U.N. International Year of Women. The Tenth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, held in Delhi in 1978, provided the occasion for Leela Dube (chairperson of the Commission on Women of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences [IUAES], 1976–1993) to frontally address the issue of the neglect of women in mainstream anthropology (Dube, 1986).

Another important transformation in her work came with the supervision of A.R. Kuttu’s work on matriliney in Lakshadweep. She was fascinated by the combination of Islam (considered to be essentially a patriarchal religion) with the matrilineal descent system. She herself visited Lakshadweep and undertook research in that area. This work brought explored a society that accepted two sets of rules simultaneously (Dube, 1994). Her work in Kalpeni brought interesting insights about a rare culture through in-depth analysis of property and its devolution. This research gave insights about how women gained more power in the matrilineal system even situated within a patriarchal religion. It also gives an example of the flexibility of Islam and that it depends on practice. The information about the region and their practice was based on ethnographic research and interviews and in her article on *Conflict and Compromise: Devolution and Disposal of Property in a Matrilineal Muslim Society* published in 1994 there is a detailed and intricate picture created of a Matrilineal system under the rubric of Islam and how both systems co-exist. This work becomes important in today’s context as it clearly shows the manner in which the local contexts can redefine an existing institution.

These influences in combination increased her interest in the area of studying gender and understanding it in relation to kinship relations. In a sense this change gave her a uniqueness her work which was now began to represent insights from anthropology and women’s studies.

12.3.2 Women and Kinship

Leela Dube considered the study of kinship important in studying gender as it provided an appropriate context for understanding gender in society ”(Dube, 1997:151). According to Dube, women had always been relatively more ‘visible’ in anthropology than in other social sciences in consequence of the importance of

sex as ‘one of the important organising principles of society’, and anthropology’s ‘special emphases on the study of kinship, family and marriage in “other cultures”’ (Dube, 1986: xii). In this sense, the alliance of gender and kinship, which she believed lay at the core of the project of feminist anthropology, was virtually pre-ordained.

Dube favoured the comparative method used in anthropology and its use was evident in the UNESCO-sponsored survey report, *Studies of Women in Southeast Asia* (1980). This report was explicitly undertaken with the dual purposes of critically assessing the existing body of knowledge on the status of women in Southeast Asia and simultaneously preparing the ground for the promotion of women’s studies as an academic discipline, both in the region and globally. From her own disciplinary standpoint as an anthropologist, it could be said that this study was also a part of her long term objective to correct the ‘invisibility’ of women in anthropological discourse (Dube, 1986).

Her interest in using the comparative method to study women in South Asia was further consolidated in her book on *Women and Kinship: Perspectives on gender in South and South-East Asia*. Here, she explores kinship systems in South and South East Asia and their impact on the position and rights of women. She argues that the study of kinship is actually the study of gender. Through exploring kinship systems and family organizations and their impact on inheritance and resource distribution, female sexuality, seclusion of women, bodily processes, living spaces, marriage, nutrition and education she brings out in detail the differences and similarities amongst the everyday lives of women living in these regions. Towards the end she concludes that it is the concept of bilaterality in South-East Asia that enshrines the principle of flexibility and it accepts hierarchies of age, seniority and class rather than of gender (Dube, 1997: 157). This makes the position of women in South-East Asia stronger.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What were the factors that led to increased focus on women in Leela Dube’s work? Explain briefly.

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- 2) Outline the chief argument in Leela Dube’s book, *Women and Kinship: Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia*.

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12.3.3 Construction of Gender

In an important article 'On the Construction of Gender: Hindu girls in Patrilineal India' Dube (1988) traces the mechanisms through which girls develop a gendered identity by examining the rituals and ceremonies, language and practice of families. Her focus was on Hindu girls as she examined her own socialization as well.

She begins with emphasizing that gender differences that are culturally produced are always interpreted as being rooted in biology (Dube, 1988:WS11). She explains this by using the 'Seed and Earth' analogy. This analogy has been examined by her in several other papers and is very important in understanding gender relations. This concept is extremely powerful and has been extensively discussed in Women's Studies in various places.

The reason for the secondary status given to women comes from the understanding of women as passive receptacles. "Man provides the seed the essence-while the woman provides the field which receives the seed and nourishes it. A child shares the father's blood" (Dube, 1988: WS11). Within the natal group a woman transferability and non-functional nature is empathized while within the marital family her *instrumentality* is emphasized. This unequal social arrangement is perceived as the arrangement of nature which gives different roles to men and women in procreation. She further explains how gender roles are lived out in terms of family structures and kinship which makes rules about recruitment, marital residence and rearrangement of the family. These in turn are impacted by the institution of caste.

Through different expressions and idioms used in different languages she brings out the manner in which girls are made aware of their secondary status. For example, a Telugu expression states "Bringing up a daughter is like watering a plant in another's courtyard" (Dube, 1988: WS12). In her paper she does not offer a simplistic picture- she gives several examples of how girls are valued as they become 'objects' of worship before menarche. She explains how the temporary status of girls in their natal household and short visits there after marriage are emphasized by various Puja across the country e.g. Durga Puja in Bengal and Gauri Puja in Karnataka. Again the custom of worshipping and feeding virgin girls (pre-menarche) that is prevalent in large parts of the country help in emphasizing the feminine role for women and contrasts with the post menarche more 'dangerous' stage. She explains that one of the reasons constraints are placed on female sexuality is because their future is tied to being a wife and mother. Motherhood is the highest achievement in a woman's life. Marriage is the gateway to motherhood. Everything else is secondary to these two goals (Dube, 1988: WS 14).

Socialization of girls was also impacted by the idea of women as gatekeepers of caste, as boundary marker. She was one of the first scholars to introduce this idea and used this to explain violence against women as well. According to her, women as boundary markers became 'repositories of honour', such that violence

against women was an outcome when social hierarchies were threatened. The other aspect of violence against women that Leela Dube engaged with vigorously was the debate about sex-selective abortions. Her writings in this area merged as a response to Dharma Kumar's article in Economic and Political weekly about the moral and policy implications of amniocentesis. In her responses, interesting insights about preference of a particular child emerged with examples from different countries of South Asia. She explained the practice of female infanticide in different societies and its implications such as practice of polyandry (because of less number of women), abduction of women and so on. This debate also strengthened her previous arguments of how women were accorded different status in different parts of South Asia.

Box 12.2: Leela Dube's Contribution to Anthropology, Sociology and Women's Studies

Leela Dube was responsible for introducing women's concerns in mainstream sociology and anthropology. She simplified concepts of anthropology in a manner which allowed other disciplines such as women's studies to use them to analyse gender relations. Discussions of power and hierarchy which were missing from the domestic domain in the studies of kinship were introduced by her work. Through her work in the area of gender and kinship the relationship of aspects like nutrition, inheritance, education, living spaces, marriage with the kinship organization have also been explained.

Her comparative work in South and South-East Asia helped us to see what can exist and what does exist in bilateral societies. Her insights were rooted in the different kinds of field work that she had done- Kamar tribe of shifting cultivators, Gond women who were settled agriculturalists living in close interaction with the Hindu castes. She conducted field work in a large multi-caste village in western UP and also studied that matrilineal Muslims of Lakshadweep island. She also visited South and South Asian countries for comparative work (Ganesh, 2001:16).

Leela Dube was very sensitive to the diversities that existed in different systems and brought out the manner in which these impacted women in different social systems. For example, she highlighted how food and rituals surrounding it have been used to control women's thoughts and movements. Her anthropological insights have been very influential in understanding the status of women across societies. In addition to that her insights about women have enriched anthropological and sociological understanding of kinship and family.

One of the main reasons for her wide ranging influence is also the engaging style in which she wrote which was accessible to everyone. Her writings often included reflections from her own life and it is this reflexivity that enriched her work.

Dube emphasized that in Southeast Asia women have a freedom of action and decision making which is not found in South or East Asia (Dube, 1983: 1633). Using studies of fertility, family planning and population control she argued that

it was the value given to women and not ‘demand-supply’ principle (as mentioned by Dharma Kumar) that ensures birth and survival of a female child. She questioned the idea of cash incentives for having children as she felt that such incentives will perpetuate the social–structural arrangements which need to be changed and reaffirm existing perceptions and values of people (Dube, 1983, 1634).

Check Your Progress 2

1) Fill in the blanks.

(i) Dube’s article ‘On the Construction of Gender’ is based on the socialization of _____ girls.

(ii) Leela Dube’s PhD work focused on _____ women.

2) Briefly examine the reasons that leela Dube gives for better status of women in Southeast Asia.

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12.4 IMPORTANT WORKS

Some of Dube’s important works are:

Visibility and Power: Essays on women in society and development (edited), 1986

Women and Kinship: Comparative essays on gender in South and South-East Asia, (1997)

Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields (edited), 2001

12.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit began with the biographical sketch of Leela Dube and socio-historical background in which she grew up. The influence of her background is seen in her work as the central ideas of her work are presented. She worked on issues of women in her dissertation and moved on to kinship systems. In the initial years she was not really the questioning or analyzing the position of women. Gradually after being a part of the ‘Towards Equality’ report she discussed more about issues of power and hierarchy and that status accorded to women in different kinds of societies and kinship systems. Her work helped in gendering sociology and anthropology and brought anthropological insights to women’s studies.

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12.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Being a member of the committee to examine the status of women in writing the 'Towards Equality' Report led Dube to explore the vulnerable position of girls within the household especially the natal household which discriminates against the girl child in terms of nutrition and health needs, marriage. In the early 70's when she was invited to become a member of this committee a large number of important publications on 'anthropology of women' also came out. Further, her work on status of women in Matrilineal societies increased her interest in comparing social position of women in different descent systems.

2. In the book, *Women and Kinship: Perspectives on gender in South and South-East Asia* Leela Dube explores kinship systems in South and South East Asia and their impact on the position and rights of women. She argues that the study of kinship is actually the study of gender. Through exploring kinship systems and family organizations and their impact on inheritance and resource distribution, female sexuality, seclusion of women, bodily processes, living spaces, marriage, nutrition and education she brings out in detail the differences and similarities amongst the everyday lives of women living in these regions. Towards the end she concludes that it is the concept of bilaterality in South-East Asia that enshrines the principle of flexibility and it accepts hierarchies of age, seniority and class rather than of gender. This makes the position of women in South-East Asia stronger.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) (i) Hindu
(ii) Gond
- 2) In her book, *Women and Kinship* Dube argues that the principle of bilaterality in which descent can be traced through matrilineal or patrilineal line provides better status to women in South-East Asia. She states that it is a principle of flexibility and it accepts hierarchies of age, seniority and class rather than of gender. This makes the position of women in South-East Asia stronger.

THE PEOPLE'S
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GLOSSARY

- Advaita** : The vedantic philosophy of Sankaracharya, which believes in the existence of one God.
- Ameliorative** : A measure which leads to the welfare or betterment of a social group
- Amniocentesis** : It is a pre-natal test in which a small amount of amniotic fluid is removed from the sac surrounding the fetus. It is usually done to detect certain kinds of birth defects and can also be used for the purpose of sex determination.
- Bilaterality** : Descent which can be traced through either the matrilineal (through the mother) or the patrilineal (through the father) line.
- Canonical** : The laws, rules or general principles of a religion
- Comparative Method** : Involves the study of social processes across nation-states, or across different types of society
- Compartmentalisation** : To divide anything into separate sections. In the unit, it refers to the limits put to the boundary of a social science like history, economics, political science or sociology.
- Ecological** : The study of plants, animals people or institutions related with the environment
- Ethical Relativism** : Variation of values from one culture to another is called ethical relativism.
- Forum** : An assembly or programme for discussion of public matters related to either social-political or economic matters
- Humanistic** : It is that system of thought or action which is based on the nature, dignity and ideals of human beings.
- Idealist** : A person, whose behaviour or thought is based on ideals such as, those of a visionary or impractical dreamer, or those of an adherent or practitioner of idealism in art, philosophy or literature
- Idolatrous** : Worship of a statue or image of God
- Kinship** : One of the main organizing principles of human society. Kinship systems establish relationships between individuals and groups on the model of biological relationships between parents and children between siblings and between marital partners.

- Missionaries** : Those concerned with religious missions, in the context of this unit, the term refers to persons sent by religious (Christian) community to convert heather (non-Christians).
- Mono-cultivation** : The cultivation of one cash crop year after year which depletes the soil of its nutrients making it infertile
- Multi-ethnic** : A society having many races and cultures, like India is a multi-ethnic society
- Orientalists** : Those scholars who study the Eastern cultures like China, India, Pakistan etc.
- Patronage** : The protection and encouragement given to certain arts, crafts and architecture by a ruler, landlord or a rich and powerful person.
- Persecution** : To discriminate against some people or a social group on the basis of religion, caste or class, for example, the persecution of the Jews in Europe on religious grounds
- Polyandry** : Term denoting the marriage of one woman to two or more men. Rarely encountered form of marriage and usually occurs when one women marries two or more brothers. This is usually some to maintain land and property within one family.
- Rationalist** : A person who believes in accepting reason as the only source of knowledge and as the only basis for forming one's opinions, beliefs or course of action
- Renaissance** : It means a rebirth or revival in a literal sense but it also refers to the great revival of art, literature and learning in Europe in the fourteenth, fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries.
- Universalisation** : The process in which culture specific values become part of the value system of a larger society, such as a nation or the universe.
- Vedanta** : A system of Hindu monistic (belief in one God) or pantheistic (belief in many Gods) philosophy based on the Vedas

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