

A glimpse of VEDIC LITERATURE

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(This article is an attempt to present the fundamental texts in what constitutes Vedic Literature. It is a road mark for those who want to set out the explore the depths of the Vedas).

The term 'Vedic literature' simply means literature based on or derived from the Vedas. The texts which constitute the Vedic literature are: 1. The four Vedas i.e. *Samhitas*, 2. the *Brahmanas* attached to each of the *Samhitas*, 3. the *Aranyakas*, and 4. the *Upanishads*.

The Vedas

The *Rg-Veda*, *Samveda* and *Yajurveda* are collectively known as *Vedatrayi*. Atharva Veda is considered a later addition. Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra* is considered to be the *panchama Veda* (fifth Veda). The *Rg-Veda* is the oldest among all Vedas. It must have been compiled over several centuries. Some of the earliest hymns are said to have been composed around 1500 BC. These were passed on from the teacher to the disciple, orally. The different parts (mandalas) are ascribed to different families of seers' e.g. Gautama and Kanva etc. It is the foundation of all the Vedic literature.

The *Rg-Veda* is neither a historical nor a heroic poem but is mainly a collection of hymns by a number of priestly families. The hymns addressed to various Gods such as Agni, Indra etc are recited at the time of sacrificial rites and other rituals. The *Rg-Veda* contains 1028 hymns (sukta) which are divided into ten mandalas and sometimes into astakas. Mandalas 2 to 7 are considered to be the earliest of all compositions.

The tenth mandala is said to have been added later as its language differs slightly from the other nine mandalas. It contains the famous Purushasukta that explains that the four varnas (Castes) (*Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*) were born from the mouth, arms, belly and the legs of the Creator. The universally famous *Gayatri mantra* (*Savitri*) is in *Rg-Veda*. There are five divisions of *Rg-Veda* namely, *Sakala*, *Baskala*, *Asvalayana*, *Sankhayana* and *Mandukya*. The total mantras in *Rg-Veda* are 10,600.

The *Samaveda* derived from the root *saman* i.e. 'melody', is a 'collection of melodies'. *Samaveda* consists of 1603 (excepting 75) verses that have been borrowed for the *Rg-Veda*. These were meant to be sung at the time of *Soma* sacrifice. The *Jha Samaveda* is important in tracing the history of Indian music.

The *Yajurveda* is the book of the *Adhvaryu* priests. The *Yajurveda* prescribes the procedures to be adopted at the time of performing different sacrifices. There are two main texts of the *Yajurveda*: *Sukla Yajurveda* or *Vajasaneyi* (*Madhyandin* and *Kanva*) and *Krsna-Yajurveda* (*Taittiriya*, *Kathaka*, *Maitrayani* and *Kapisthal*). It is a collection of short magic spells used by a certain class of priests at the time of sacrifices. Patanjali, the grammarian, refers to 101 schools of *Yajurveda*.

The *Atharaveda* is entirely different from the other three Vedas in content and style. It is the latest of the four. However, it is equally important and interesting as it describes the popular beliefs and superstitions of the humble folk. For a very long time it was not included into the category of the Veda. It is divided into 20 kandas and has 711 hymns and a collection of 5987 mantras - most of these hymns are used to ward off the evil spirits. The *Atharvaveda* has two different divisions - *Paippalada* and *Saunakiya*. Each Veda has its own *Samhita* and commentary.

The Brahmanas

The *Brahmanas* explain the hymns of the Vedas. They are written in prose and they elaborately describe the various sacrifices and rituals, along with their mystic meanings. Each Veda has several *Brahmanas*. The two *Brahmanas* attached to the Rg-Veda are *Aitareya Brahmana* and *Kausitaki Brahmana*. These were composed by *Hotri*-priests or invoker (the priest who recites mantras of the Rg-veda at the sacrifices). The *Sukla Yajurveda* is appended with *Satapatha Brahmana* which recommends 'one hundred sacred paths' (*Satapatha*). It is the most exhaustive and important of all the *Brahmanas*. The *Gopatha Brahmana* is appended to the Atharvaveda. These *Brahmanas*, in fact, are the elaborate commentaries on the various hymns in *Samhitas*.

The Aranyaka

The word *Aranyaka* means 'the forest' and these are called 'forest books' written mainly for the hermits and students living in the jungles. These are the concluding portions of the *Brahmanas* or their appendices. A strict code of secrecy was maintained over the *Aranyakas* as it was believed that the contents would spell danger if taught to the uninitiated. And hence they were to be studied in the forest. They deal with mysticism and symbolism. They form the natural transition of the *Upanishads*. They offer the bridge between *Karma marga* (way of deeds) which was the sole concern of the *Brahmanas* and the *jnana marga* (way of knowledge) which the *Upanishads* advocated.

The Upanishads

The word *Upanishad* has been derived from the root *Upani-sad* that means 'to sit down near someone'. It denotes a student sitting under the feet of his guru to learn. Eventually the word began to be used for the secret knowledge imparted by the guru to his selected pupils. Today the word began to be used for the secret knowledge imparted by the guru to his selected pupils. Today the word is associated with philosophical knowledge and spiritual learning. *Upanishads* are also called *Vedanta* (the end of the Veda) firstly, because they denote the last phase of the Vedic period and secondly, because they reveal the final aim of the Veda. Our nation's motto *Satyameva jayate* is taken from the *Mundakopanishad*.



Taittiriya, Brhadaranyaka, Chhandogya and Kena

In fact, the *Upanishads* are the culmination of ancient Indian philosophical ideas. The whole of later philosophy of India is rooted in the *Upanishads*. The philosophical principles of Sankara, Ramanuja, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Aurobindo and others are derived from *Upanishads* and, by and large, all the philosophical doctrines of subsequent days have borrowed something or the other from them. There are 108 *Upanishads* classified according to the Vedas, and were composed by several learned saints between 800 BC and 500 BC. Some of the most renowned *Upanishads* are *Aitareya*, *Kausitaki*, *Taittiriya*, *Brhadaranyaka*, *Chhandogya* and *Kena*.

All these are older than Buddha and Panini. Among the later *Upanishads* mention may be made of *Katha*, *Svetashvatara*, *Isa*, *Maitrayaniya* etc., which lay stress on *Samkhya* and *Yoga* doctrines. The language of these *Upanishads* is classical Sanskrit and not the Vedic Sanskrit.

Like *Aranyakas*, the *Upanishads* also give less importance to ceremonies and sacrifices. They discuss various theories on the creation of the Universe and define the doctrine of *Karma* (action). *Brahman* (God) and *atman* (soul) are treated as identical. They profess the goal of life to be to attain *moksha* (salvation) which is possible through meditation and self-control.

All the works referred to above are also called *Sruti* which means '*revelation*'. Literally speaking *Sruti* means 'heard'. The Vedas are not the outcome of logical interpretation, not a historical anecdote, but they are Divine revelations. The Vedic literature enjoys the status of the foremost authority in all religious matters for the Hindus.

Smritis

Smritis are the auxiliary treatises of the Vedas and are the law books of Indian society. Literally '*Smrti*' means 'to remember' and these are regarded, as a part of the revelation though not included in the Vedic literature proper.

Vedangas

There are six *Vedangas* (limbs of Veda). They are: *Siksha*, *Kalpa*, *vyakarana*, *niruktas*, *chhandas* and *jyotisa*. *Siksha* deals with pronunciation, *Kalpa* with rituals, *Vyakarana* with grammar, *Nirukta* with etymology, *Chhanda* with meter and *Jyotisa* with astrosciences.

Darshana

Similarly, there are six schools of Indian philosophy known as *Shad-Darshana*. These are: *Nyaya*, *Vaishesika*, *Sankhya*, *Yoga*, *Purva* and *Uttara Mimansas*. These are written in *Sutra* (aphorism) style, which are short, to the point and without doubts. They all propagate the virtues of life. The *Nyaya Darshana* was written by Gautama, *Vaishesika Darshana* by Kanada, *Purvamimansa Darshana* by Jaimini, *Sankhya* by Kapila, *Yoga* by Patanjali and the *Uttaramimansa Darshana* by Bhadarayana.

Upavedas

Both the *Vedangas* and the *Darshanas* claim to have derived inspiration from the Vedas to explain the Vedic *Philosophy*. Still they are not included in the umbrella of core *Vedic* literature. In the same manner, four *Upavedas* namely *Dhanurveda* (deals with the art of warfare), the *Gandharvaveda* (deals with the music), *Silpaveda* (deals with art and architecture) and *Ayurveda* (deals with medicine) also do not form part of the Vedic literature though they enjoy great sanctity.

The *Vedic* texts have been nourished, simplified and continued from one generation to the next through the *Sruti parampara* by the great saint scholars and sages, to name a few Sri Sankaracarya, Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Madhvacharya and Ramanuja. The *Vedas* are the treasure house of knowledge not merely spiritual, but scientific, cultural and material. A fresh look at them, overcoming the hitherto laden emphasis on their religiosity would render that wisdom to us.