





Hindu Scriptures

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HINDU SCRIPTURES

Sanskrit Literature

Sanskrit literature can be classified under six orthodox heads and four secular heads. The six orthodox sections form the authoritative scriptures of the Hindus. The four secular sections embody the later developments in classical Sanskrit literature.

The six scriptures are: (i) *Śruti*s, (ii) *Smṛiti*s, (iii) *Itihasas*, (iv) *Puranas*, (v) *Agamas* and (vi) *Darsanas*.

The four secular writings are: (i) *Subhashitas*, (ii) *Kavyas*, (iii) *Natakas* and (iv) *Alankaras*.

The Scriptures

The *Śruti*s

The *Śruti*s are called the *Vedas*, or the *Amṇaya*. The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the *Vedas*. These are direct intuitional revelations and are to be *Apauruṣheya* or entirely superhuman, without any author in particular. The *Veda* is the glorious pride of the Hindus, nay, of the whole world!

The term *Veda* comes from the root *Vid*, to know. The word *Veda* means knowledge. When it is applied to scripture, it signifies a book of knowledge. The *Vedas* are the foundational scriptures of the Hindus. The *Veda* is the source of the other five sets of scriptures, why, even of the secular and the materialistic. The *Veda* is the storehouse of Indian wisdom and is a memorable glory which man can never forget till eternity.

Revealed Truths Without Beginning or End

The Vedas are the eternal truths revealed by God to the great ancient Rishis of India. The word *Rishi* means a seer from *dris*, to see. He is the *Mantra-Drashta*, a seer Mantra or thought. The thought was not his own. The Rishis saw the truths or heard them. Therefore, the Vedas are what are heard (Sruti). The Rishi did not write. He not create it out of his mind. He was the seer of thought which existed already. He was only the spiritual discoverer of the thought. He is not the inventor of the Veda.

The Vedas represent the spiritual experiences of the Rishis of yore. The Rishi is only a medium or an agent to transmit to people the intuitional experiences which he received. The truths of the Vedas are revelations. All the other religions of the world claim their authority as being delivered by special messengers of God to certain persons, but the Vedas do not owe their authority to any one. They are themselves the authority as they are eternal, as they are the Knowledge of the Lord.

Lord Brahma, the Creator, imparted the divine knowledge to the Rishis or seers. The Rishis disseminated the knowledge. The Vedic Rishis were great realised persons: had direct intuitive perception of Brahman or the Truth. They were inspired writers. They built a simple, grand and perfect system of religion and philosophy from which founders and teachers of all other religions have drawn their inspiration.

The Vedas are the oldest books in the library of man. The truths contained in all religions are derived from the Vedas and are ultimately traceable to the Vedas. The Vedas are the fountain-head of religion. The Vedas are the ultimate source to which all religious knowledge can be traced. Religion is of divine origin. It was revealed by God to man in the earliest times. It is embodied in the Vedas.

The Vedas are eternal. They are without beginning and end. An ignorant man may say how a book can be without

beginning or end. By the Vedas, no books are meant. Vedas came out of the breath of the Lord. They are the words of God. The Vedas are not the utterances of persons. They are not the composition of any human mind. They were never written, never created. They are eternal and impersonal. The date of the Vedas has never been fixed. Vedas are eternal spiritual truths. Vedas are an embodiment of divine knowledge. The books may be destroyed, but the knowledge cannot be destroyed. Knowledge is eternal. In that sense, the Vedas are eternal.

The Four Vedas and Their Sub Divisions

The Veda is divided into four great books: the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda and the Atharva-Veda. The Yajur-Veda is again divided into two parts, the Sukla and the Krishna. The Krishna or the Taittiriya is the older book and the Sukla or the Vajasaneya is a later revelation to sage Yajnavalkya from the resplendent Sun-God.

The Rig-Veda is divided into twenty-one sections, the Yajur-Veda into one hundred and nine sections, the Sama-Veda into one thousand sections and the Atharva-Veda into fifty sections. In all, the whole Veda is thus divided into one thousand one hundred and eighty recensions.

Each Veda consists of four parts: the Mantra-Samhitas or hymns, the Brahmanas or explanations of Mantras or rituals, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads. The division of the Vedas into four parts is to suit the four stages in a man's life.

The Mantra-Samhitas are hymns in praise of the Vedic God for attaining material prosperity here and happiness hereafter. They are metrical poems comprising prayer hymns and incantations addressed to various deities, both subjective and objective. The Mantra portion of the Vedas is useful for the Brahmacharins.

The Brahmana portions guide people to perform sacrificial rites. They are prose explanations of the method of using the Mantras in the Yajna or the sacrifice. The Brahmana portion is suitable for the householders.

The Aranyakas are the forest books, the mystical sylvan texts which give philosophical interpretations of the rituals. The Aranyakas are intended for the Vanaprasthas, hermits who prepare themselves for taking Sannyasa.

The Upanishads are the most important portion of the Vedas. The Upanishads contain the essence or the knowledge portion of the Vedas. The philosophy of the Upanishads is sublime, profound, lofty and soul-stirring. The Upanishads speak of the identity of the individual soul and the Supreme Soul. They reveal the most subtle deep spiritual truths. The Upanishads are useful for the Sannyasins.

The subject matter of the whole Veda is divided into *Karma-Kanda*, *Upasana-Kanda* and *Jnana-Kanda*. The Karma-Kanda or Ritualistic Section deals with various sacrifices and rituals. The Upasana-Kanda or Worship-Section deals with various kinds of worship or meditation. The Jnana-Kanda or Knowledge-Section deals with the highest knowledge of Nirguna Brahman. The Mantras and the Brahmanas constitute Karma-Kanda; the Aranyakas Upasana-Kanda; and the Upanishads Jnana-Kanda.

The Mantra-Samhitas

The Rig-Veda Samhita is the grandest book of the Hindus, the oldest and the best. It is the Great Indian Bible, which no Hindu would forget to adore from the core of his heart. Its style, the language and the tone are most beautiful and mysterious. Its immortal Mantras embody the greatest truths of existence, and it is perhaps the greatest treasure in all the scriptural literature of the world. Its priest is called the Hotri.

The Yajur-Veda Samhita is mostly in prose and is meant to be used by the Adhvaryu, the Yajur-Vedic priest, for superfluous explanations of the rites in sacrifices, supplementing the Rig-Vedic Mantras.

The Sama-Veda Samhita is mostly borrowed from the Rig-Vedic Samhita and is meant to be sung by the Udgatri, the Sama-Vedic priest, in sacrifices.

The Atharva-Veda Samhita is meant to be used by the Brahmana, the Atharva-Vedic priest, to correct the mispronunciations and wrong performances that may accidentally be committed by the other three priests of the sacrifice.

The Brahmanas and the Aranyakas

There are two Brahmanas to the Rig-Veda—the Aitareya and the Sankhayana. “The Rig-Veda,” says Max Muller, “is the most ancient book of the world. The sacred hymns of the Brahmanas stand unparalleled in the literature of the whole world; and their preservation might well be called miraculous.” (HISTORY OF ANCIENT SANSKRIT LITERATURE)

The Satapatha Brahmana belongs to the Sukla Yajur-Veda. The Krishna-Yajur-Veda has the Taittiriya and the Maitrayana Brahmanas. The Tandya or Panchavimsa, the Shadvimsa, the Chhandogya, the Adbhuta, the Arsheya and the Upanishad Brahmanas belong to the Sama-Veda. The Brahmana of the Atharva-Veda is called the Gopatha. Each of the Brahmanas has got an Aranyaka.

The Upanishads

The Upanishads are the concluding portions of the Vedas or the end of the Vedas. The teaching based on them is called Vedanta. The Upanishads are the gist and the essence of the Vedas. They form the very foundation of Hinduism.

There are as many Upanishads to each Veda as there are Sakhas, branches or recensions, i.e., 21, 109, 1000 and 50 respectively to the four Vedas, the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda and the Atharva-Veda.

The different philosophers of India belonging to different schools, such as Monism, Qualified Monism, Dualism, Pure Monism, Difference-cum-non-difference, etc., have acknowledged the supreme authority of the Upanishads. They have given their own interpretations, but they have obeyed the authority. They have built their philosophies on the foundation of the Upanishads.

Even the Western scholars have paid their tribute to the seers of the Upanishads. At a time when the Westerners were clad in barks and were sunk in deep ignorance, Upanishadic seers were enjoying the eternal bliss of the Absolute, and had the highest culture and civilisation.

The most important Upanishads are Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chhandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Kaushitaki and Svetasvatara and Maitrayani. These are supremely authoritative.

May the fundamental truths of the Vedas be revealed unto you all, like the Amalaka fruit in the palm of your hand. May Gayatri, the blessed Mother of the Vedas, impart to you the milk of Knowledge, the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads.

The Upa-Vedas

There are four *Upa-Vedas* or subsidiary Vedas, viz., the Ayurveda, the Dhanurveda, the Gandharva Veda and the Arthashastra, forming auxiliaries to the four Vedas, which mean, respectively, the science of health, the science of war, the science of music and the science of polity.

The Vedangas

There are six *Angas* or explanatory limbs, to the Vedas: the *Siksha* and *Vyakarana* of Panini, the *Chhandas* of Pingalacharya, the *Nirukta* of Yaska, the *Jyotisha* of Gargya and the *Kalp*s (Srauta, Grihya, Dharma and Sulba) belonging to the authorship of various Rishis.

Siksha is a knowledge of phonetics. Siksha deals with pronunciation and accent. The text of the Vedas is arranged in various forms or *Pathas*. The Pada-patha gives each word its separate form. The Krama-patha connects the word in pairs.

Vyakarana is Sanskrit grammar. Panini's books are most famous. Without knowledge of Vyakarana, you cannot understand the Vedas.

Chhandas is metre dealing with prosody.

Nirukta is philology or etymology.

Jyotisha is astronomy and astrology. It deals with the movements of the heavenly bodies, planets, etc., and their influence in human affairs.

Kalpa is the method of ritual. The Srauta Sutras which explain the ritual of sacrifices belong to Kalpa. The sulba Sutras, which treat of the measurements which are necessary for laying out the sacrificial areas, also belong to Kalpa. The Grihya Sutras which concern domestic life, and the Dharma Sutras which deal with ethics, customs and laws, also belong to Kalpa.

The Pratishakhyas, Padapathas, Kramapathas, Upalekhas, Anukramanis, Daivatsamhitas, Parishishtas, Prayogas, Paddhatis, Karikas, Khilas and Vyuhās are further elaborations in the rituals of the Kalpa Sutras.

Among the Kalpa Sutras, the Asvalayana, Sankhyana and the Sambhavya belong to the Rig-Veda. The Mashaka, Latyayana, Drahyayana, Gobhila and Khadira belong to the Sama-Veda. The Katyayana and Paraskara belong to the Sukla Yajur-Veda. The Apastamba, Hiranyakesi, Bodhayana, Bharadvaja, Manava, Vaikhanasa and the Kathaka belong to the Krishna Yajur-Veda. The Vaitana and the Kaushika belong to the Atharva-Veda.

The Smritis

Next in importance to the Sruti are the Smritis or secondary scriptures. These are the ancient sacred law-codes of the Hindus dealing with the Sanatana-Varnasrama-Dharma. They supplement and explain the ritualistic injunctions called *Vidhis* in the Vedas. The Smriti Sastra is founded on the Sruti. The Smritis are based on the teachings of the Vedas. The Smriti stands next in authority to the Sruti. It explains and develops Dharma. It lays down the laws which regulate Hindu national, social, family and individual obligations.

The works which are expressly called Smritis are the law books, Dharma Sastras. Smriti, in a broader sense, covers all Hindu Sastras save the Vedas.

The laws for regulating Hindu society from time to time are codified in the Smritis. The Smritis have laid down definite rules and laws to guide the individuals and communities in their daily conduct and to regulate their manners and customs. The Smritis have given detailed instructions, according to the conditions of the time, to the different classes of men regarding their duties in life.

The Hindu learns how he has to spend his whole life from these Smritis. The duties of Varnasrama and all ceremonies are clearly given in these books. The Smritis prescribe certain acts and prohibit some others for a Hindu, according to his birth and stage of life. The object of the Smritis is to purify the heart of man and take him gradually to the supreme abode of immortality and make him perfect and free.

These Smritis have varied from time to time. The injunctions and prohibitions of the Smritis are related to the particular social surroundings. As these surroundings and essential conditions of the Hindu society changed from time to time, new Smritis had to be compiled by the sages of different ages and different parts of India.

The Celebrated Hindu Law-Givers

From time to time, a great law-giver would take his birth. He would codify the existing laws and remove those which had become obsolete. He would make some alterations, adaptations, readjustments, additions and subtractions, to suit the needs of the time and see that the way of living of the people would be in accordance with the teachings of the Veda. Of such law-givers, Manu, Yajnavalkya and Parasara are the most celebrated persons. Hindu society is founded on, and governed by, the laws made by these three great sages. The Smritis are named after them. We have Manu Smriti or Manava Dharma-Sastra (the Laws of Manu or the Institutes of Manu), Yajnavalkya Smriti and Parasara Smriti. Manu is the greatest law-giver of the race. He is the oldest law-giver as well. The Yajnavalkya Smriti follows the same general scheme as the Manu Smriti and is next in importance to it. Manu Smriti and Yajnavalkya Smriti are universally accepted at the present time as authoritative works all over India. Yajnavalkya Smriti is chiefly consulted in all matters of Hindu Law. Even the Government of India are applying some of these laws.

There are eighteen main Smritis or Dharma Sastras. The most important are those of Manu, Yajnavalkya and Parasara. The other fifteen are those of Vishnu, Daksha, Samvarta, Vyasa, Harita, Satatapa, Vasishtha, Yama, Apastamba, Gautama, Devala, Sankha-Likhita, Usana, Atri and Saunaka.

The laws of Manu are intended for the Satya Yuga, those of Yajnavalkya are for the Treta Yuga; those of Sankha and Likhita are for the Dvapara Yuga; and those of Parasara are for the Kali Yuga.

The laws and rules which are based entirely upon our social positions, time and clime, must change with the changes in society and changing conditions of time and circumstance. Then only the progress of the Hindu society can be ensured.

Need for a New Law-Code

It is not possible to follow some of the laws of Manu at the present time. We can follow their spirit and not the letter. Society is advancing. When it advances, it outgrows certain laws which were valid and helpful at a particular stage of its growth. Many new things which were not thought out by the old law-givers have come into existence now. It is no use insisting people to follow now those old laws which have become obsolete.

Our present society has considerably changed. A new Smriti to suit the requirements of this age is very necessary. Another sage will place before the Hindus of our day a new suitable code of laws. Time is ripe for a new Smriti. Cordial greetings to this age.

The Inner Voice of Dharma

He who is endowed with a pure heart through protracted Tapas, Japa, Kirtana, meditation and service of Guru and who has a very clear conscience, can be guided by inner voice in matters of Dharma or duty or moral action. The inner voice that proceeds from a clean heart filled with Sattva is, indeed, the voice of God or Soul or Antaryamin or Inner Ruler. This voice is more than Smriti. It is Smriti of Smritis. Purify your heart and train yourself to hear this inner voice. Keep your ear in tune with the 'voice'.

The Sruti and the Smriti

The Sruti and the Smriti are the two authoritative sources of Hinduism. *Sruti* literally means what is heard, and *Smriti* means what is remembered. Sruti is revelation and Smriti is tradition. Upanishad is a Sruti. Bhagavad-Gita is a Smriti.

Sruti is direct experience. Great Rishis heard the eternal truths of religion and left a record of them for the benefit of posterity. These records constitute the Vedas. Hence Sruti is primary authority. Smriti is a recollection of that experience. Hence, it is secondary authority. The Smritis or Dharma Sastras also are books written by sages, but they are not the final authority. If there is anything in a Smriti which contradicts the Sruti, the Smriti is to be rejected.

The Itihasas

The Friendly Treatises and the Commanding Treatises

There are four books under this heading: The Valmiki-Ramayana, the Yogavasishtha, The Mahabharata and the Harivamsa. These embody all that is in the Vedas, but in a simpler manner. These are called the Suhrit-Samhitas or the Friendly Treatises, while the Vedas are called the Prabhu-Samhitas or the Commanding Treatises with great authority. These works explain the great universal truths in the form of historical narratives, stories and dialogues. These are very interesting volumes and are like all, from the inquisitive child to the intellectual scholar.

The Itihasas give us beautiful stories of absorbing interest and importance, through which all the fundamental teachings of Hinduism are indelibly impressed on one's mind. The laws of Smritis and the principles of the Vedas are stamped firmly on the minds of the Hindus through the noble and marvellous deeds of their great national heroes. We get a clear idea of Hinduism from these sublime stories.

The common man cannot comprehend the high abstract philosophy of the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras. Hence, the compassionate sages Valmiki and Vyasa wrote the Itihasas for the benefit of common people. The same philosophy is presented with analogies and parables in a tasteful form to the common run of mankind.

The two well-known Itihasas (histories) are the epics (Mahakavyas), *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. They are two very popular and useful Sastras of the Hindus. The Ramayana was written by the sage Valmiki, and the Mahabharata by Vyasa.

The Ramayana

The Ramayana, the Adi-Kavya or the first epic poem, relates the story of Sri Rama, the ideal man. It is the history of the family of the solar race descended from Ikshvaku in which was born Sri Ramachandra, the Avatara of Lord Vishnu, and his three brothers. The ideal characters like Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata and Sri Hanuman we find in Ramayana firmly establish Hindu Dharma in our minds. The story of the birth of Rama and his brothers, their education and marriages, the exile of Sri Rama, carrying off and recovery of Sita, his wife, the destruction of Ravana, the Rakshasa King of Lanka, and the reign of Sri Rama, are described in detail in Ramayana. How man should behave towards his superiors, equals and inferiors, how a king ought to rule his kingdom, how a man should lead his life in this world, how he can obtain happiness, release, freedom and perfection, may be learnt from this excellent epic. The Ramayana gives a vivid picture of Indian life. Even today our domestic, social and national ideals are copied from the noble characters in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The great national heroes stand even today as beacon-lights to guide and inspire the people of the whole world. The lives of Rama, Bharata and Lakshmana provide a model of fraternal affection and mutual service. Sri Hanuman stands as an ideal unique Karma Yogi. The life of Sita is regarded as the most perfect example of womanly fidelity, chastity and sweetness. The Ramayana is written in twenty-four thousand verses by Sri Valmiki.

The Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is the history of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It gives a description of the great war, the Battle of Kurukshetra, which broke out between the Kauravas and the Pandavas who were cousins and descendants of the lunar race. The Mahabharata is an encyclopaedia of Hindu Dharma. It is rightly called the fifth Veda. The really no theme in religion, philosophy, mysticism and polity which this great epic does not touch and expound. It contains very noble moral teachings, useful lessons of all kinds, many beautiful stories and episodes, discourses, sermons, parables and dialogues which set forth the principles of morals and metaphysics. The Pandavas obtained victory through the grace of Lord Krishna. The Mahabharata is written in one hundred thousand verses by Sri Krishnadvaipayana Vyasa.

The Bhagavad-Gita

The most important part of the Mahabharata is the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It is a marvellous dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battle-field, before the commencement of the great war. Bhagavan Sri Krishna became the charioteer of Arjuna. Sri Krishna explained the essentials of Hindu religion to Arjuna. Just as the Upanishads contain the cream of the Vedas, so does the Gita contain the cream of the Upanishads. The Upanishads are the cows. Lord Krishna is the cowherd. Arjuna is the calf. The Gita is the milk. The wise men are those who drink the milk of the Gita.

The Gita is the most precious jewel of Hindu literature. It is a universal gospel. The Gita teaches the Yoga of Synthesis. It ranks high in the religious literature of the world.

Arjuna saw before him his dear relatives and teachers in the battle-field. He fainted and refused to fight against them. Then Lord Krishna imparted knowledge of the Self to Arjuna and convinced him that it was his duty to fight regardless of consequences. Afterwards Arjuna gave up his *Moha*, or delusion. All his doubts were cleared. He fought against the Kauravas and achieved victory.

Knowledge of Ancient Indian History and Culture

The Mahabharata contains also the immortal discourse of Bhishma on Dharma, which he gave to Yudhishtira, when he was lying on the bed of arrows. The whole Mahabharata forms an encyclopaedia of history, morals and religion unsurpassed by any other epic in the world.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata speak to us clearly about the ancient India, about her people, her customs, her ways of living, her arts, her civilisation and cultural manufactures, etc. If you read these two books, you will come to know how great India once was, and you will be inspired to make her great once more. No other country has produced so many great men, great teachers, great Yogins, great Rishis, great prophets, great Acharyas, great kings, great heroes, great statesmen, great patriots, great benefactors, as India. The more you know of India and Hinduism, the more you will honour and love it and the more thankful to the Lord you will be that you were born in India as a Hindu. Glory to India! Glory to Hinduism! Glory to the seers of the Upanishads! Glory, glory to Lord Krishna, the author of the Song Divine!

The Puranas

The Puranas are of the same class as the Itihasas. They have five characteristics (*Pancha-Lakshana*) viz., history, cosmology (with various symbolical illustrations of philosophical principles), secondary creation, genealogy of kings and of Manvantaras. All the Puranas belong to the class of Suhrit-Samhitas.

Vyasa is the compiler of the Puranas from age to age; and for this age, he is Krishnadvaipayana, the son of Parasara.

The Puranas were written to popularise the religion of the Vedas. They contain the essence of the Vedas. The aim of the Puranas is to impress on the minds of the masses the teachings of the Vedas and to generate in them devotion to God, through concrete examples, myths, stories, legends, lives of saints, kings and great men, allegories and chronicles of great historical events. The sages made use of these things to illustrate the eternal principles of religion. The Puranas were meant, not for the scholars but for the ordinary people who could not understand high philosophy and who could not study the Vedas.

The Darsanas are very stiff. They are meant only for the learned few. The Puranas are meant for the masses with inferior intellect. Religion is taught in a very easy and interesting way through these Puranas. Even to this day, the Puranas are popular. The Puranas contain the history of remote times. They also give a description of the regions of the universe not visible to the ordinary physical eye. They are very interesting to read and are full of information of all kinds. Children hear the stories from their grandmothers. Pundits and Purohitas hold Kathas in temples, on banks of rivers and in other important places. Agriculturists, labourers and bazaar people hear the stories

The Eighteen Puranas

There are eighteen main Puranas and an equal number of subsidiary Puranas or Upa-Puranas. The main Puranas are: Vishnu Purana, Naradiya Purana, Srimad Bhagavata Purana, Garuda (Suparna) Purana, Padma Purana, Varaha Purana, Brahma Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Markandeya Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Vamana Purana, Matsya Purana, Kurma Purana, Linga Purana, Siva Purana, Skanda Purana and Agni Purana. Of these, six are Sattvic Puranas : glorify Vishnu; six are Rajasic and glorify Brahma; six are Tamasic and they glorify Siva.

Neophytes or beginners in the spiritual Path are puzzled when they go through Siva Purana and Vishnu Purana. In Siva Purana, Lord Siva is highly eulogised and an inferior position is given to Lord Vishnu. Sometimes Vishnu is belittled. In Vishnu Purana, Lord Hari is highly eulogised and an inferior status is given to Lord Siva. Sometimes Lord Siva is belittled. This is only to increase the faith of the devotees in their particular Ishta-Devata. Lord Siva and Lord Vishnu are one.

The best among the Puranas are the Srimad Bhagavata and the Vishnu Purana. The most popular is the Srimad Bhagavata Purana. Next comes Vishnu Purana. A portion of the Markandeya Purana is well known to all Hindus as *Chandi*, or Devimahatmya. Worship of God as the Divine Mother is its theme. Chandi is read widely by the Hindus on sacred days and Navaratri (Durga Puja) days.

The Srimad Bhagavata Purana and the Ten Avatars

The Srimad Bhagavata Purana is a chronicle of the various Avatars of Lord Vishnu. There are ten Avatars of Vishnu. The aim of every Avatar is to save the world from some great danger, to destroy the wicked and protect the virtuous. The ten Avatars are: Matsya (The Fish), Kurma (The Tortoise), Varaha (The Boar), Narasimha (The Man-Lion), Vamana (The Dwarf), Parasurama (Rama with the axe, the destroyer of the Kshatriya race), Ramachandra (The hero of Ramayana—the son of Dasaratha), who destroyed Ravana, Sri Krishna, The teacher of the Gita, Buddha (The prince-ascetic, founder of Buddhism) and Kalki (The hero riding on a white horse, who is to appear at the end of the Kali-Yuga).

The object of the Matsya Avatar was to save Vaivasvata Manu from destruction by a deluge. The object of Kurma Avatar was to enable the world to recover some precious things which were lost in the deluge. The Kurma gave its back for keeping the churning rod when the Gods and the Asuras churned the ocean of milk. The purpose of Varaha Avatar was to rescue, from the waters, the earth which had been dragged down by a demon named Hiranyaksha. The purpose of Narasimha Avatar half-lion and half-man, was to free the world from the oppression of Hiranyakasipu, a demon, the father of Bhakta Prahlada. The object of Vamana Avatar was to rest the power of the gods which had been eclipsed by the penance and devotion of King Bali. The object of Parasurama Avatar was to deliver the country from the oppression of the Kshatriya rulers. Parasurama destroyed the Kshatriya race twenty-one times. The object of Rama was to destroy the wicked Ravana. The object of Sri Krishna Avatar was to destroy Kamsa and other demons, to deliver His wonderful message of the Gita in the Mahabharata war, and to become the centre of the Bhakti school in India. The object of Buddha Avatar was to prohibit animal sacrifices and teach piety. The object of the Kalki Avatar is the destruction of the wicked and the re-establishment of virtue.

The Tamil Puranas

Lord Siva incarnated himself in the form of Dakshinamurti to impart knowledge to the four Kumaras. He took human form to initiate Sambandhar, Manikkavasagar, Pattinathar. He appeared in flesh and blood to help his devotees and relieve their sufferings. The divine Lilas of Lord Siva are recorded in the Tamil Puranas like Siva Purana, Periya Purana, Siva Parakramam and Tiruvilayadal Purana.

The Upa-Puranas

The eighteen Upa-Puranas are: Sanatkumara, Narasimha, Brihannaradiya, Sivarahasya, Durvasa, Kapila, Vamana, Bhargava, Varuna, Kalika, Samba, Nandi, Surya, Parasara, Vasishtha, Devi-Bhagavata, Ganesa and Hamsa.

Utility of the Puranas

Study of the Puranas, listening to sacred recitals of scriptures, describing and expounding of the transcendent Lilas of the Blessed Lord—these form an important part Sadhana of the Lord's devotees. It is most pleasing to the Lord. *Shravana* is a part of *Navavidha-Bhakti*. *Kathas* and *Upanyakas* open the springs of devotion in the hearers and develop *Prema-Bhakti* which confers immortality on the *Jiva*.

The language of the Vedas is archaic, and the subtle philosophy of Vedanta and the Upanishads is extremely difficult to grasp and assimilate. Hence, the Puranas are special value as they present philosophical truths and precious teachings in an easier manner. They give ready access to the mysteries of life and the key to bliss. Imb their teachings. Start a new life of Dharma-Nishtha and Adhyatmic Sadhana from this very day.

The Agamas

Another class of popular scriptures are the Agamas. The Agamas are theological treatises and practical manuals of divine worship. The Agamas include the Tantras, Mantras and Yantras. These are treatises explaining the external worship of God, in idols, temples, etc. All the Agamas treat of (i) *Jnana* or Knowledge, (ii) *Yoga* or Concentration, (iii) *Kriya* or Esoteric Ritual and (iv) *Charya* or Exoteric Worship. They also give elaborate details about ontology and cosmology, liberation, devotion, meditation, philosophy of *Mantras*, mystic diagrams, charms and spells, temple-building, image-making, domestic observances, social rules, public festivals, etc.

The Agamas are divided into three sections: The *Vaishnava*, the *Saiva* and the *Sakta*. The three chief sects of Hinduism, viz., Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism, base doctrines and dogmas on their respective Agamas. The Vaishnava Agamas or Pancharatra Agamas glorify God as Vishnu. The Saiva Agamas glorify God as Siva and have given rise to an important school of philosophy known as Saiva-Siddhanta, which prevails in South India, particularly in the districts of Tirunelveli and Madurai. The Sakta Agamas or Tantras glorify God as the Mother of the Universe, under one of the many names of *Devi*.

The Agamas do not derive their authority from the Vedas, but are not antagonistic to them. They are all Vedic in spirit and character. That is the reason why they are regarded as authoritative.

The Vaishnava Agamas

The Vaishnava Agamas are of four kinds: the Vaikhanasa, Pancharatra, Pratishthasara and Vijnanalalita. The Brahma, Saiva Kaumara, Vasishtha, Kapila, Gautamiya and the Naradiya are the seven groups of the Pancharatras. The Naradiya section of the Santi-Parva of the Mahabharata is the earliest source of information about the Pancharatras.

Vishnu is the Supreme Lord in the Pancharatra Agamas. The Vaishnavas regard the Pancharatra Agamas to be the most authoritative. They believe that these Agamas were revealed by Lord Vishnu Himself. Narada-Pancharatra says: "Everything from Brahma to a blade of grass is Lord Krishna." This corresponds to the Upanishadic declaration: "All this is, verily, Brahman—*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma*."

There are two hundred and fifteen of these Vaishnava texts. Isvara, Ahirbudhnya, Paushkara, Parama, Sattvata, Brihad-Brahma and Jnanamritasara Samhitas are the important ones.

The Saiva Agamas

The Saivas recognise twenty-eight Agamas, of which the chief is Kamika. The Agamas are also the basis of Kashmir Saivism which is called the Pratyabhijna system. The latter works of Pratyabhijna system show a distinct leaning to Advaitism. The Southern Saivism, i.e., Saiva Siddhanta and the Kashmir Saivism, regard these Agamas as their authority, besides the Vedas. Each Agama has Upa-Agamas. Of these, only fragmentary texts of twenty are extant. Lord Siva is the central God in the Saiva Agamas. They are suitable to this age, Kali Yoga. They are open to all castes and both the sexes.

The Sakta Agamas

There is another group of scriptures known as the *Tantras*. They belong to the Sakta cult. They glorify Sakti as the World-Mother. They dwell on the Sakti (energy) aspect of God and prescribe numerous courses of ritualistic worship of the Divine Mother in various forms. There are seventy-seven Agamas. These are very much like the Puranas in some respects. The texts are usually in the form of dialogues between Siva and Parvati. In some of these, Siva answers the questions put by Parvati, and in others, Parvati answers, Siva questioning. Mahanirvana, Kularnava, Kulasara, Prapanchasara, Tantraraja, Rudra-Yamala, Brahma-Yamala, Vishnu-Yamala and Todala Tantra are the important works. The Agamas teach several occult practices some of which confer powers, while the others bestow knowledge and freedom. Sakti is the creative power of Lord Siva. Saktism is really a supplement to Saivism.

Among the existing books on the Agamas, the most famous are the Isvara-Samhita, Ahirbudhnya-Samhita, Sanatkumara-Samhita, Narada-Pancharatra, Spanda-Pradipika and the Mahanirvana-Tantra.

The Six Darsanas

These are the intellectual section of the Hindu writings, while the first four are intuitional, and the fifth inspirational and emotional. Darsanas are schools of philosophy based on the Vedas. The Agamas are theological. The Darsana literature is philosophical. The Darsanas are meant for the erudite scholars who are endowed with acute and good understanding, power of reasoning and subtle intellect. The Itihasas, Puranas and Agamas are meant for the masses. The Darsanas appeal to the intellect, while the Itihasas, Puranas, etc., appeal to the heart.

Philosophy has six divisions—*Shad-darsana*—the six Darsanas or ways of seeing things, usually called the six systems or six different schools of thought. The six schools of philosophy are the six instruments of true teaching or the six demonstrations of Truth. Each school has developed, systematised and correlated the various parts of Veda in its own way. Each system has its *Sutrakara*, i.e., the one great Rishi who systematised the doctrines of the school and put them in short aphorisms or Sutras.

The Sutras are terse and laconic. The Rishis have condensed their thoughts in the aphorisms. It is very difficult to understand them without the help of commentaries by great sages or Rishis. Hence, there arose many commentators or *Bhashyakaras*. There are glosses, notes and, later, commentaries on the original commentaries.

The Shad-Darsanas (the six schools of philosophy) or the Shat-Sastras are: the NYAYA, founded by Gautama Rishi, the VAISESHIKA by Kanada Rishi, the SANKHYA Kapila Muni, the YOGA by Patanjali Maharshi, the PURVA MIMAMSA by Jaimini, and the UTTARA MIMAMSA or VEDANTA by Badarayana or Vyasa. The Darsanas are divided into three pairs of aphoristic compositions which explain the philosophy of the Vedas in a rationalistic method of approach. They are: the Nyaya and the Vaishesika, the Sankhya and the Yoga, and the Mimamsa and the Vedanta. Each set of Sutras has got its *Bhashya*, *Vritti*, *Varttika*, *Vyakhyana* or *Tika* and *Tippani*.

Sutra

Svalpaksharam-asandigdham
Saravad-visvatomukham
Astobham-anavadyam cha
Sutram sutravido viduh

A Sutra or an aphorism is a short formula with the least possible number of letters, without any ambiguity or doubtful assertion, containing the very essence, embracing meanings, without any stop or obstruction and absolutely faultless in nature.

The Sutrakara or the composer of the aphorisms is said to be as happy as one would be while getting the first male child, if he is but able to reduce one letter in his abstruse Sutra of far-fetched words and ideas. The best example of the greatest, the tersest and the most perfect of Sutra literature is the series of aphorisms called the *Ashtadhyayi* composed by Panini. Panini is the father of all Sutrakaras from whom all others seem to have borrowed the method of composition. The Sutras are meant to explain a big volume of knowledge in short assertions suitable to be kept in memory at all times. The six Vedangas and the six systems of Hindu philosophy form the two sets of Sutra literature of the world. In addition to these, there are later compositions like the Narada-Bhakti Sutras, the Sandilya-Bhakti Sutras, etc., which also wish to assume an equal form with the famous Sutras mentioned above.

Bhashya

Sutrartho varnyate yatra
Padaih sutranusaribhih
Svapadani cha varnyante
Bhashyam bhashyavido viduh

A Bhashya is an elaborate exposition, a commentary on the Sutras, with word by word meaning of the aphoristic precepts, their running translation, together with the individual views of the commentator or the Bhashyakara. The best and the exemplary Bhashya in Sanskrit literature is the one written by Patanjali on the Vyakarana Sutra of Panini. This Bhashya is so very famous and important that it is called the MAHABHASHYA and its celebrated author is specially called the BHASHYAKARA. Patanjali is the father of Bhashyakaras. The next important Bhashya is the one on the Mimamsa Sutras written by Sabara-Swamin who learnt the art from Patanjali's commentary. The third important Bhashya was written by Sankara on the Brahma Sutras, in close following with the Sabara-Bhashya. The Bhashyas on the six sets of aphorisms dealing with Indian philosophy were written by Vatsyayana, Prasastapada, Vijñānabhikṣu, Vyasa, Sabara and Sankara. On the Vedanta or Brahma Sutras, there are about sixteen Bhashyas, like those of Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Nimbarka, etc.

Vritti

Sadvrittih sannibandhana

A Vritti is a short gloss explaining the aphorisms in a more elaborate way, but not as extensively as a Bhashya. An example is Bodhayana's Vritti on the Brahma Sutras.

Varttika

Uktanuktaduruktanam
Chinta yatra pravartate
Tam grantham varttikam prahuh
Varttikajnavichakshanah

A Varttika is a work where a critical study is made of that which is said and left unsaid or imperfectly said in a Bhashya, and the ways of making it perfect by supplying omissions therein, are given. Examples are the Varttikas of Katyayana on Panini's Sutras, of Suresvara on Sankara's Upanishad-Bhashyas, and of Kumarila Bhatta on Sabara-Bhashya on the Karma-Mimamsa.

Vyakhyana or Tika

A Vyakhyana is a running explanation in an easier language of what is said in the original, with little elucidations here and there. A Vyakhyana, particularly of a Kavya, with eight different modes of dissection of the Sloka, like Pada-Chheda, Vighraha, Sandhi, Alankara, Anuvada, etc. This forms an important aspect in the study of Sanskrit Sahitya Sastra. An Anu-Vyakhyana—like the one written by Sri Madhva—is a repetition of what is already written, but in greater detail. An Anuvada is merely a running translation or statement of an abstruse text of the original. Tika is only another name for Vyakhyana. The best Vyakhyanas are of Vachaspati Misra on the Darsanas, especially on Sankara's Brahmasutra-Bhashya.

Tippani

Tippani is just like a Vritti, but is less orthodox than the Vritti. It is an explanation of difficult words or phrases occurring in the original. Examples are Kaiyata's gloss on Mahabhashya of Patanjali, Nagojibhatta's gloss on Kaiyata's gloss, or Appayya's gloss on Amalananda's gloss on the Bhamati of Vachaspati Misra.

Other Scriptures

The Tevaram and the Tiruvachakam which are the hymns of the Saiva saints of South India, the Divya-Prabandham of the Alvar saints of South India, the songs of Kalidasa the Abhangas of Tukaram and the Ramayana of Tulasi Das—all of which are the outpourings of great realised souls—are wonderful scriptures. They contain the essences of the Vedas.

The Secular Writings

The Subhashitas

The Subhashitas are wise sayings, instructions and stories, either in poetry or in prose. Examples are Bhartrihari's three centuries of verses, the Subhashita-Ratna-Bhandagara and Somadeva Bhatta's Katha-Sarit-Sagara or Kshemendra's Brihat-Katha-Manjari. The Panchatantra and the Hitopadesa also belong to this category.

The Kavyas

These are highly scholarly compositions in poetry, prose or both. The greatest of poetical Kavyas are those of Kalidasa (*The Raghuvamsa* and *Kumarasambhava*), Bhaṭṭa (*The Kiratarjuniya*), Magha (*The Sisupalavadha*), Sri Harsha (*The Naishadha*). The best prose Kavyas in the whole of Sanskrit literature were written by Bhattabana (*The Kadambari* and *Harshacharita*), the great genius in classical Sanskrit. Among those containing both poetry and prose, the Champu-Ramayana and the Champu-Bhara are most famous. These are all wonderful masterpieces which will ever remain to glorify India's literary calibre.

The Natakas

These are marvellously scholastic dramas embodying the *Rasas* of Sringara, Vira, Karuna, Adbhuta, Hasya, Bhayanaka, Bibhatsa and Raudra. It is told that none can on the ninth Rasa, viz., Santi. It is attainable only on final Liberation. The best dramas are written by Kalidasa (*Sakuntala*), Bhavabhuti (*Uttara-Rama-Charita*), and Visakhadatta (*Mudrarakshasa*).

The Alankaras

These are grand rhetorical texts, treating of the science of perfection and beauty of ornamental language and of effective composition with elegance and force, both in poetry and in prose. These are the fundamentals of Sanskrit Sahitya, even superior to the Kavyas and the Natakas. The best Alankara-Granthas are those of Mammata (*Kavyaprakasa*) and Jagannatha (*Rasagangadhara*).

Conclusion

These constitute the entirety of Sanskrit literature—sacred and secular. The Sruti is the root; the Smritis, Itihasas and Puranas are the trunk; the Agamas and Darsanas are the branches; and the Subhashitas, Kavyas, Natakas and Alankaras are the flowers of the tree of India's Culture.

The Smritis, the Itihasas, the Puranas, the Agamas and the Darsanas are only developments of the Veda. Their ultimate source is the Veda. Their one common aim is enable man to annihilate his ignorance and attain perfection, freedom, immortality and eternal bliss through knowledge of God or the Eternal. Their purpose is to make like God and one with Him.

