

## **Literary Sources (Source : A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India by UPINDER SINGH)**

### **THE VEDAS**

In the Hindu tradition, the Vedas have the status of shruti (literally, 'that which has been heard'). They are thought to embody an eternal, self-existent truth realized by the rishis (seers) in a state of meditation or revealed to them by the gods. The category of smriti (literally, 'remembered') texts includes the Vedanga, Puranas, epics, Dharmashastra, and Nitishastra.

The word Veda comes from the root vid (literally, 'to know') and means 'knowledge'. There are four Vedas—Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva.

The Rig Veda contains the world's oldest surviving poetry, some of it of extraordinary beauty and philosophical depth. Each Veda has four parts, the last three of which sometimes blend into each other—the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishad. The Rig Veda Samhita is a collection of 1,028 hymns (suktas) arranged in 10 books (Mandalas).

The Sama Veda consists of 1,810 verses, mostly borrowed from the Rig Veda, arranged according to the needs of musical notation. The original melodies are, however, lost.

The Yajur Veda deals with the details of the performance of rituals.

The Atharva Veda is the latest Veda and contains hymns (some from the Rig Veda), but also spells and charms which reflect aspects of popular beliefs and practices.

The Brahmanas (this term should not be confused with the Brahmana varna or caste) are prose explanations of the Samhita portions and give details and explanations of sacrificial rituals and their outcome.

The Aranyakas (forest books) interpret sacrificial rituals in a symbolic and philosophical way. There are 108 Upanishads, among which 13 are considered the principal ones.

The Upanishads contain a great variety of philosophical ideas about sacrifice, the body, and the universe, but are most closely associated with the concepts of atman and brahman.

Within the Vedic corpus as a whole, Books 2–7 (known as the family books) of the Rig Veda Samhita are considered the oldest; the later portions of this Samhita, along with all the other Vedic texts, comprise later Vedic literature. There are several recensions (shakhas) of the Vedas, associated with different schools (charanas) of Vedic study and interpretation. (The terms shakha and charana are often used interchangeably.) The Shakala shakha is the only surviving recension of the Rig Veda. The texts of the Yajur Veda are divided into those

of the Shukla (White) school and Krishna (Black) school. The recensions of the Shukla (also known as Vajasaneya) Yajur Veda are the Madhyandina and Kanva. The Black school is represented by the Kathaka, Kapishtala, Maitrayani, and Taittiriya recensions. The main difference between the texts of the two schools is that the Samhitas of the White school contain only the mantras (prayers and sacrificial formulae), while in the texts of the Black school the mantras are accompanied by a commentary describing and discussing various aspects of the sacrificial rituals. The Kauthuma, Ranayaniya, and Jaiminiya (or Talavakara) are recensions of the Sama Veda, and the Shaunaka and Paippalada of the Atharva Veda.

A number of supplementary texts known as Vedanga (literally, 'limbs of a Veda') aimed at helping the proper recitation, use, and understanding of the Vedas. These include works on phonetics (shiksha), metre (chhanda), grammar (vyakarana), etymology (nirukta), ritual (kalpa), and astronomy (jyotisha).

### **THE TWO SANSKRIT EPICS: THE RAMAYANA AND MAHABHARATA**

The two Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, fall within the category of smriti as well as itihasa (traditional history), although the Ramayana is sometimes classified as kavya (poetry). Similarities in language and style suggest that they emerged from a common cultural milieu.

The Mahabharata refers to Valmiki and the Ramayana, and outlines the Rama story in a section called the Ramopakhyana. The Ramayana in turn mentions the Kurus, Hastinapura, and Janamejaya, although it does not mention the Mahabharata war. The two epics were clearly aware of each other, at least in their later stages of development.

The epics are magnificent texts with powerful stories that have captured the imagination of millions of people over the centuries. To use them as historical sources, it is necessary to identify their internal chronological layers, which is not an easy task.

According to tradition, Rama lived in the treta yuga (age) and the Mahabharata war happened later, in the dvapara yuga. However, some historians argue that the events and characters associated with the Mahabharata reflect a slightly earlier period than those of the Ramayana. This is because the setting of the Mahabharata is the Indo-Gangetic divide and the upper Ganga valley, while in the Ramayana, the centre of political gravity had clearly shifted eastwards, to the middle Ganga valley.

The strong women characters of the Mahabharata suggest an earlier stage of social development, when women were less subordinated to men compared to later times.

The practice of niyoga (levirate; i.e., when a husband deposes his conjugal rights over his wife to another man in order to produce an heir) in the Mahabharata also suggests a social

stage that is prior to that of the Ramayana, which reflects much stricter controls over women.

The Mahabharata consists of 18 Parvas (books) and has two main recensions—a northern and southern. The core story concerns a conflict between two sets of cousins—the Kauravas and the Pandavas—and a great war that was fought between them at Kurukshetra. But the text also contains a huge amount of material that has little or no connection with the main story. According to tradition, it was composed by Vyasa, but in its present form, it is clearly not the work of a single individual. The Mahabharata is truly an encyclopaedic work, and it boasts of this fact.

. The Ramayana epic consists of seven Kandas (books), of which the first (Bala Kanda) and last (Uttara Kanda) are later interpolations. The basic story is about Rama, prince of Kosala; his banishment to the forest due to the intrigues of his wicked stepmother; the abduction of his wife Sita by Ravana, the king of Lanka; Sita's rescue; and Rama's return to the capital, Ayodhya, to become king. The compact vocabulary and style indicate that the core of the text was the work of a single individual, traditionally identified as Valmiki. Valmiki appears in the Balakanda, where he is inspired to compose the epic, and in the Uttarakanda, where he gives refuge to Sita who has been disowned by Rama.

The popularity and dynamism of the Rama story is indicated by the fact that apart from the Valmiki Ramayana (which seems to be the oldest version) there are numerous other tellings of the Rama story— a Jaina version (the Paumachariu of Vimalasuri, in Prakrit), a Buddhist version (the Dasharatha Jataka in Pali), a 12th century Tamil version by Kamban (the Iramavataram), and the Ramcharitmanas (16th century) by Tulsidas, to name only a few.

## THE PURANAS

The word 'Purana' means 'old'. According to tradition, the Puranas were composed by Vyasa, but it is clear that in the form in which they have come down to us, they were not the work of one person nor of one age. There are 18 Mahapuranas (great Puranas), and many more Upapuranas (secondary Puranas). The standard list of the 18 Mahapuranas includes the Vishnu, Narada, Bhagavata, Garuda, Padma, Varaha, Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Shiva, Skanda, Agni, Brahmanda, Brahmavaivarta, Markandeya, Bhavishya, Vamana, and Brahma. The origins of the Puranas may have overlapped to some extent with the Vedas, but their composition stretched forward into the 4th– 5th centuries CE, and in some cases, even later.

The Puranas are supposed to have five characteristics (pancha-lakshanas), i.e., they are supposed to discuss five topics—the creation of the world (sarga); re-creation (pratisarga); the periods of the various Manus (manvantaras); the genealogies of gods and rishis (vamsha); and an account of royal dynasties (vamshanucharita), including the Suryavamshi and Chandravamshi kings, whose origin is traced to the sun and the moon.

## THE DHARMASHASTRA

The Sanskrit word dharma (from the root dhri, meaning ‘to maintain, support, or sustain’) is very rich in meaning and difficult to translate. The concept of dharma is based on the idea that the universe is governed by a certain natural law and that the moral laws guiding people’s lives should be in consonance with that natural law. Dharma refers to the proper, ideal conduct of a person living in society, a course of action which leads to the fulfilment of the goals of human life. These goals, known as purusharthas, are dharma (righteous conduct), artha (material well-being), kama (sensual pleasure), and moksha (deliverance from the cycle of rebirth).

A special group of Sanskrit texts dealing specifically with dharma are collectively known as the Dharmashastra

## BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Early Buddhist literature is generally divided into canonical and non-canonical texts. Canonical texts are the books which lay down the basic tenets and principles of a religion or sect.

### 3 Pitakas

. The Tipitaka consists of three books—the Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma. In the Buddhist context, sutta (from the Sanskrit sutra) refers to texts that are supposed to contain what the Buddha himself said.

The Sutta Pitaka contains the Buddha’s discourses on various doctrinal issues in dialogue form. With the exception of a few suttas, the authority of this work was accepted by all Buddhist schools.

The Vinaya Pitaka has rules for monks and nuns of the sangha (monastic order). It includes the Patimokkha—a list of transgressions against monastic discipline and atonements for these.

The Abhidhamma Pitaka is a later work, and contains a thorough study and systemization of the teachings of the Sutta Pitaka through lists, summaries, and questions and answers.

The three Pitakas are divided into books known as the Nikayas (analogous but not identical to the Agamas of the Buddhist Sanskrit tradition). For instance, the Sutta Pitaka consists of five Nikayas—the Digha, Majjhima, Samyutta, Anguttara, and Khuddaka Nikayas.

The Jatakas—stories of the previous births of the Buddha—are one of the 15 books of the Khuddaka Nikaya.

Non-canonical Buddhist literature in Pali includes the Milindapanha (1st century BCE–1st century CE) which consists of a dialogue on various philosophical issues between king Milinda—no doubt the Indo-Greek Menander—and the monk Nagasena.

The Nettigandha or Nettipakarana (The Book of Guidance) belongs to the same period and gives a connected account of the teaching of the Buddha. Commentaries on the Tipitaka include a 5th century work by Buddhaghosha. The first connected life story of the Buddha occurs in the Nidanakatha (1st century).

The Pali or Sri Lankan chronicles—the Dipavamsa (4th–5th centuries) and the Mahavamsa (5th century)—contain a historical-cum-mythical account of the Buddha's life, the Buddhist councils, the Maurya emperor Ashoka, the kings of Sri Lanka, and the arrival of Buddhism on that island. Apart from texts in Pali, there are several Buddhist works in Sanskrit, and in a mixture of Prakrit and Sanskrit that is often referred to as Buddhist Sanskrit or Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit.

The trend towards the use of Sanskrit intensified in the Mahayana schools, but some non-Mahayana texts were also composed in Sanskrit or mixed Prakrit-Sanskrit. For instance, the canon of the Sarvastivada school is in Sanskrit. The Mahavastu, which has some Mahayana elements, gives a hagiography (sacred biography) of the Buddha and describes the emergence of the monastic order in mixed Sanskrit-Prakrit. The Lalitavistara (1st–2nd centuries), a hagiography of the Buddha associated with the Sarvastivada school but strongly tinged with Mahayana elements, is in Sanskrit and mixed Prakrit-Sanskrit.

Sanskrit Buddhist texts include Ashvaghosha's Buddhacharita (1st/2nd century) and the Avadana texts. The latter contain stories of noteworthy deeds with a moral; they include the Avadanashataka (2nd century) and the Divyavadana (4th century) which have stories connected with the Buddha and the Maurya emperor Ashoka. The 1st century Ashtasahasrika-prajnaparamita and Saddharma-pundarika offer accounts of the various Buddhas, bodhisattvas (future Buddhas), and Mahayana doctrines. Later works of Mahayana thinkers such as Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Asanga, Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, and Dignaga are all in Sanskrit.

## JAINA LITERATURE

The sacred books of the Jainas are collectively known as the Siddhanta or Agama. The language of the earliest texts is an eastern dialect of Prakrit known as Ardha-Magadhi. The Jaina monastic order came to be divided into the Shvetambara and Digambara schools, perhaps in about the 3rd century ce. The Shvetambara canon includes the 12 Angas, 12 Uvargas (Upangas), 10 Painnas (Prakirnas), 6 Cheya Suttas (Cheda Sutras), 4 Mula Suttas (Mula Sutras), and a number of individual texts such as the Nandi Sutta (Nandi Sutra) and Anugodara (Anuyogadvara).

The Jaina Puranas (the Shvetambaras call them Charitas) are hagiographies of the Jaina saints known as tirthankaras (literally 'ford makers'), but they contain other material as well. The Adi Purana (9th century) narrates the life of the first tirthankara Rishabha, also known as Adinatha. The 8th century Harivamsha Purana gives a Jaina version of the stories of the Kauravas, Pandavas, Krishna, Balarama, and others. The Trishashtilakshana Mahapurana by Jinasena and Gunabhadra (9th century) has life stories of various Jaina saints, kings, and heroes. It also has sections on topics such as life-cycle rituals, the interpretation of dreams, town planning, the duties of a warrior, and how a king should rule. The Parishishtaparvan (12th century) by Hemachandra gives a history of the earliest Jaina teachers and also mentions certain details of political history.

### **SANGAM LITERATURE AND LATER TAMIL WORKS**

The Sangam corpus includes six of the eight anthologies of poems included in the Ettutokai (The Eight Collections), and nine of the ten pattus (songs) of the Pattuppattu (The Ten Songs). The style and certain historical references in the poems suggest that they were composed between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE. They were compiled into anthologies in about the mid-8th century. A few centuries later, these anthologies were collected into the super-anthologies (i.e., anthologies of anthologies) called the Ettutokai and the Pattuppattu. The earliest parts of the first two books of the Tolkappiyam can also be included in Sangam literature. The Tolkappiyam is essentially a work on grammar, but it also includes a discussion of phonology, semantics, syntax, and literary conventions. There are two kinds of Sangam poems—akam and puram. Akam poems had love as their theme, while puram poems were mostly about war

A number of Tamil didactic works were written in the post-5th century period. The most famous of these is Tiruvalluvar's Tirukkural, a work on ethics, polity, and love (5th– 6th centuries). Of the several Tamil epics, two of the best known are the Silappadikaram and Manimekalai.

Early medieval Tamil literature includes the inspired and intense devotional poetry of the Vaishnava saints (Alvars) and Shaiva saints (Nayanars or Nayanmars) and their

hagiographies. Vaishnava poetry took off with the compositions of Peyalvar, Puttalvar, and Poikaialvar. In the 10th century, Nathamuni collected the Alvar hymns into the canon known as the Nalayira Divya Prabandham. The Alvarvaipavam is a sacred biography of the Vaishnava saints. Shaiva devotional literature began with the compositions of Tirumular and Karaikal Ammaiyar. The hymns of the Nayanmar saints were compiled in the 10th century by Nambi Andar Nambi and this compilation formed the core of the Shaiva canon, the Tirumurai. Nambi also wrote a work called the Tirutondar Tiruvantati about the saints. In the 12th century, the accounts of the Shaiva saints were collected in a text called the Periyapuramam.

### EARLY KANNADA AND TELUGU LITERATURE

The earliest Kannada inscriptions date from the 5th/6th century onwards, but the oldest surviving piece of literature in this language is the Kavirajamarga (The Royal Road of the Poets), a 9th century work on poetics. A well-developed tradition of prose and poetry must have existed for some time, as this work mentions many earlier writers and their works which have not survived. Karnataka was a stronghold of Jainism and a significant part of early medieval Kannada literature had Jaina themes. The best known poets of the 10th century were Pampa, Ponna, and Ranna, all of whom wrote Jaina Puranas. Pampa, author of the Adi Purana (an account of the life of the first tirthankara Rishabha or Adinatha), also wrote the Vikramarjunavijaya, based on the Mahabharata story. Ponna wrote both in Sanskrit and in Kannada, and was given the title of Ubhaya-kavichakravarti (imperial poet in both languages). Chavunda Raya, a general and minister under the Ganga kings, wrote the Trishashtilakshana Mahapurana, an account of the 24 Jaina saints, in continuous prose. In the 12th century, Nagachandra or Abhinava Pampa wrote the Ramachandracharitra Purana, one of many Jaina versions of the Rama story. The interesting Kannada works of the 12th century include Neminatha's Lilavati, in mixed verse and prose, which tells the love story of a Kadamba prince and a beautiful princess.

### OTHER ANCIENT TEXTS, BIOGRAPHIES, AND HISTORIES

Ashvaghosha was the author of the Buddhacharita (which he describes as a mahakavya), Sariputraprakarana, and Saundarananda. Bhasa wrote several dramas including the Pancharatra, Dutavakya, Balacharita, and Svapna-Vasavadatta. One of the most celebrated names among Sanskrit writers of the 1st millennium is that of Kalidasa (4th– 5th centuries), author of the dramas Abhijnana-Shakuntala, Malavikagnimitra, Vikramorvashiya, and poetic works such as the Raghuvamsha, Kumarasambhava, and Meghaduta. The major early medieval poets and writers include Bharavi, Rajashekhara, and



the poetess Vijayanka. Ancient dramas on historical themes are of special interest to historians, although it is necessary to remember that they were plays and not historical accounts. Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa* (7th/8th century) revolves around the manoeuvres of Chanakya to win over Rakshasa, a minister of the Nandas, to Chandragupta's side. His *Devichandragupta* centres on an incident set in the reign of the Gupta king Ramagupta. Narrative literature such as the *Panchatantra* (5th–6th centuries) and the *Kathasaritsagara* (Ocean of Streams of Stories, 11th century) are collections of popular folk tales that ordinary people may have known, listened to, and enjoyed. There is a vast body of ancient and early medieval technical literature on varied subjects such as grammar, mathematics, statecraft, astronomy, medicine, architecture, poetics, dramaturgy, and philosophy. Reference has already been made to grammatical texts such as Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* and Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a major work on statecraft. Aryabhata's *Aryabhatiya* and Varahamihira's *Brihatsamhita* are important astronomical texts. Other technical treatises include the *Kamasutra* (on sensual pleasure), the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* (on medicine), the *Natyashastra* (on theatre and the performing arts), and the *Shilpashastras* (on architecture and sculpture).

The *Prithviraj Raso* by Chand Bardai is an epic poem in the early Braj-bhasha dialect, woven around the Rajput king Prithviraj Chauhan.

### DELHI SULTANATE Literature

- Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* contains the history of Tughlaq dynasty. Minhaj-us-Siraj wrote *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, a general history of Muslim dynasties upto 1260.
- Amir Khusrau (1252-1325) was the famous Persian writer of this period created a new style of Persian poetry called *Sabaq-i-Hind* or the Indian style. He also wrote some Hindi verses. Amir Khusrau's *Khazain-ul-Futuh* speaks about Alauddin's conquests. His famous work *Tughlaq Nama* deals with the rise of Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq. Zia Nakshabi was the first to translate Sanskrit stories into Persian.
- The book *Tutu Nama* or *Book of the Parrot* became popular and translated into Turkish and later into many European languages.
- The famous *Rajatarangini* written by Kalhana belonged to the period of Zain-ul-Abidin, the ruler of Kashmir.
- In Arabic, Alberuni's *Kitab-ul-Hind* is the most famous work. Bengali literature had also developed and Nusrat Shah patronized the translation of *Mahabharata* into Bengali.



## MUGHALS

Persian language became widespread in the Mughal Empire by the time of Akbar's reign.

Abul Fazl was a great scholar and historian of his period. Many historical works were written during this period. They include Ain-i-Akbari and Akbar Nama authored by Abul Fazl.

The leading poet of that period was his brother Abul Faizi. The translation of Mahabharata into the Persian language was done under his supervision.

Uthbi and Naziri were the two other leading Persian poets.

Jahangir's autobiography, Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri was famous for its style. He also patronized many scholars like Ghiyas Beg, Naqib Khan and Niamatullah.

Shah Jahan also patronized many writers and historians like Abdul Hamid Lahori, author of Padshah Nama and Inayat Khan who wrote Shah Jahan Nama.

His son Dara Shikoh translated the Bhagavat Gita and Upanishads into the Persian language.

The most influential Hindi poet was Tulsidas, who wrote the Hindi version of the Ramayana, the Ramcharitmanas.