

LITERATURE (HINDUISM)

The Vedic literature

The Vedic literature marks the beginning of literary traditions in the north as the oldest part of the Sanskrit literature associated with Hinduism. It consists of four Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upnishadas. The word ‘Veda’ means ‘knowledge’. The four vedas, also called ‘Samhitas’ are considered to be revealed books. They represent the divine knowledge and wisdom ,and so, also called ‘ Apaurusheya’ (not made by man) and ‘Nitya’ (eternal). Since they were learnt by heart and were orally transmitted from one generation to another they are called ‘Shruti’ (‘that which has been heard’) as well.

A. Rig Veda

1. Rig Veda is the oldest part of the Vedic literature.
2. It is a collection of hymns and prayers dedicated to different deities .
3. These hymns and prayers were meant for recital while offering prayers by a priest called ‘horti’.
4. It bears resemblance with the ‘Zend Avesta’, the oldest Iranian text.
5. It is divided into ten ‘Mandalas’ (Sections/chapter).
6. II, III and VII Mandalas are supposed to be the oldest ones whereas I, IX and X are supposed to be the latest ones.
7. III Mandala contains the famous Gayatri mantra composed by the sage Vishvamitra, which is dedicated to the goddess Savitri.
8. Xth Mandala contains the first reference to a four fold division of Vedic Society based on the Varna System. This is found in the Purush- sukhta (the creation hymn).
9. VIith mandala refers to the famous ‘battle of ten kings’.

B. Sam Veda

1. ‘Book of chants ‘
2. It is largely a reproduction of the hyms and prayers of Rigveda with musical notes.
3. It was sung by a priest called ‘Udgatir’.

4. The origin of Indian music is , at times, traced back to the the Sam Veda.

C.Yajur Veda

1. 'The book of sacrificial prayers '
2. It contains rituals for the first time which in suggestive of the increasing influence of the priestly classes.
3. It is in both forms - prose and verse.
4. It is found in two recensions/schools known as Shweta or Shukla (White) and Shyam or Krishna (Black)
5. The White contains only hymns (mantras).
6. The black contains commentary in prose in addition to the mantras.

D. Atharva Veda

1. The last Veda.
2. It throws light on the beliefs and practices of even non-aryan social groups.
3. It contains magic, charms and spells for the first time.
4. It also contains references to many herbs and plants and their medicinal properties and so at times the origin of Indian medicine system called Ayurveda is also traced back to Atharva Veda.

E. Brahmanas

1. Each Brahmana is connected with one of the Samhitas (Vedas)
2. Aitareya Brahman and the Kaushitaki Brahman belong to the Rig Veda.
3. Tandya- Maha- Brahman, Sadnivasa Brahman and the Jaiminiya Brahman belong to the Sam Veda.
4. Satpath Brahman, the most extensive and important, belongs to the Yajur Veda (white)
5. Gopatha Brahman belongs to the Atharva Veda
6. The Brahmanas (not to be confused with the Brahman varna or caste) are explanatory texts
7. They are ritualistic texts in which origin and significance of rituals are explained.
8. They represent brahmanical perspectives towards religion and society.

F.Aranyakas

1. Like the Brahmanas, they too are explanatory texts attached with the Vedas.
2. They generally do not subscribe to the brahmanical perspectives.
3. They are also known as 'forest books' as they are supposed to have been composed by 'Rishis' and 'Munis' (Ascetics and Hermits) living inside forests).
4. They mark the beginning of mystical and metaphysical trends in the Vedic age.
5. They seem to be anti-ritualistic texts in the sense that they are critical of brahmanical domination of socio-religious life on the basis of complex rituals and sacrifices.
6. In some of them sacrifices (Yajnas) have been termed as 'broken boats'. They display egalitarian attitude and are seemingly against emergency of social hierarchy.

G.Upanishads

1. Philosophical texts , marking the beginning of the Indian philosophical traditions.
2. Mainly in question-answer form.
3. Composed towards the end of the Vedic age , and so, also known as the Vedanta.
4. The term 'Upnishad' means 'a session'.
5. Similar to the Aranyakas in their approaches
6. Mark the culmination of the metaphysical trends of the time which started with the Aranyakas.
7. The philosophy enshrined in them is known as the philosophy of Vedanta.
8. The famous expression 'Stayamev Jayate' is taken from the 'Mundkopanishad'.
9. The 'Kathopanishad' is known for containing the famous conversation between Yama and Nachiketa.

The Post Vedic Sanskrit literature

(Religious)

Vedangas

To facilitate proper recitation, use, and understanding of the Vedas a number of supplementary texts known as Vedangas (limbs of a Veda) are also seen. Their chronology is not very certain but they can be placed in the late Vedic age or the post Vedic age .They dealt with subjects such as ‘Shikshaa (phonetics/ pronunciation), ‘Chhanda ’(meter), ‘Kalpa’ (ritual), ‘Vyakaran’ (grammar), ‘Nirukta’(etymology), and ‘Jyotisha’ (astronomy).

Upvedas

In addition to the Vedangas we have texts given the status of Upvedas (subsidiary Vedas) such as ‘Ayurveda’ which deals with medicine, ‘Dhanurveda’ which deals with the art of warfare, ‘Gandharva Veda’ which deals with music, and ‘Shilpa Veda ’ which deals with architecture. Like the Vedangas, they too, can not be given exact chronology yet the most convenient seems to be the late Vedic age or the post Vedic age.

Sutras

Out of the six Vedangas ‘Kalpa’, dealing with rituals, came to acquire more prominence in the literary discourse of the post Vedic age and emerged as a matter of general concern. Rest of the subjects became matters of specific studies/ works , for example , ‘Nirukta’ of Yask on etymology and Ashtadhyayi

of Panini on grammar. The increasing importance of ‘kalpa’ was possibly due to increasing importance of rituals as a part of so called Brahmanism which had been dominating the socio- cultural life since the later Vedic age with its insistence on the Varnashrama dharma. These developments created specific context for the rise of the sutra literature.

In the post Vedic age we find composition of sutras (threads) in which ideas came to be expressed in very short condensed statements . These sutras were mainly on the subject of rituals (Kalpa) and came to be known as the ‘Kalpsutras’ (aphorisms on rituals). They are broadly categorised into the following:

1. Shrutasutras —dealing with the Vedic sacrifices,
2. Grihyasutras —dealing with the simpler domestic sacrifices ,
3. Sulvasutras —dealing with the measurement and the building of places of sacrifice and fire altars , and
4. Dharmasutras —dealing with ‘dharma’ (righteous conduct)

The last one indicates that by this time the concept of righteous conduct(Dharma) had come to acquire prominence as one of the four life goals —along with Artha, Kama and Moksha—which were called ‘Purusharthas’. Out of these four the Dharmasutras came to constitute an important component of the Dharmashastra literature associated with Hinduism.

The Dharmashastra

The Dharmashastra literature broadly includes everything that was written on the specific issue of Dharma as conceptualised as a part of the four Purusharthas (life goals of life). The oldest or the first part of the Dharmashastra literature is constituted by the above mentioned Dharmasutras (c. 600-300 BC.) composed as a part of the sutra(kalpsutra) literature. The second important component of the Dharmashastra genre is formed by the 'Smritis' which came to be composed mainly during c. 200BC- 900AD. As third important component we include all the commentaries (Tikas and Bhasyas) , collections , comments and conclusions (Nibandhas) written by different scholars from different perspectives on the issue and also on the Dharmashutras and Smiritis between the 9th and the 19th century.

Some important Dharmasutras are: Gautama(the oldest), Apastamba(the second oldest) , Baudhyana, and Vashishtha etc. Some important Smritis are: Manu(also called Manav Dharmashastra) which is the oldest, Yajnavalkya, Narad, Vishnu, and Brihaspati.

The Dharmashastras deal with the issue such as norms of social behaviour as ordained by the Varnashrama system, gotra system and Purusharthas; personal , civil, and criminal law. These texts are normative and prescriptive. We don't find direct descriptions of the society of their time but certain inferences about social practices can be made on their basis. They help us in understanding different opinions among experts, differences in customs and practices of different areas, and changes in social norms over time.

The Sanskrit Epics: The Ramayana and Mahabharata

The epics seem to have almost same cultural context which resembles the context of the later Vedic age and the post Vedic age. But it seems that both have had an evolutionary histories and the present forms of the both developed much later.

The Ramayana

The Indian tradition makes Valmiki the author of the Ramayana which is essentially a poetic creation. The work now contains seven books (kandas). The story is that of Prince Rama of Ayodhya who was banished from his kingdom for fourteen years because of the jealousy of his step mother Kaikeyi. He went to the forest accompanied by his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana. There, Sita was abducted by Ravana, king of Lanka, and after a bitter struggle she was rescued.

This is also seen as a victory of the Aryans over the non- Aryans. The Ramayana has many versions such as a Jaina version in Prakrit language by Vimalsuri called' the 'Paumachariyam', a Buddhist version in Pali called the 'Dashratha

'Jatka', a twelfth century Tamil version by Kamban called the 'Iramavataram', and 'Ramcharitmanas' by Tulsidas in the sixteenth century.

The Mahabharata

Unlike the Ramayana, which is described as a conflict between the Aryans and the non Aryans, the Mahabharata describes a conflict among the Aryans themselves.

It is divided into 18 books (parvas) and there is a supplement called the 'Harivamsa'. The 'Bhagvat Gita' having sermons and didactic portions belongs to the Bhismaparvan.

The central theme of the epic is the great battle of Kurukshetra fought between the Kauravas and the Pandyas in which almost all contemporary kings of India joined one side or the other. This resulted in a total annihilation of the Kuaravas by the Pandavas who represented the righteous conduct and enjoyed even the blessings of the lord Krishna.

The stories told in the epics may be magnified echoes of some historical events and processes. Thus, both the epics throw light on some stages of socio-political evolution—such as social differentiation and state formation—mainly in the North India. The Varna system had been well consolidated and the Aryans had developed by that

time a large number of small kingdoms in the Gangetic basins. They also throw light on the growing cultural contacts among different parts of the subcontinent particularly between north India and the South India. In this context the process of the Aryanisation of the subcontinent is well reflected. They also throw light on the contemporary social and familial norms and values.

The puranas

The Puranas, traditionally attributed to Vyasa, constitute the basis for the so called Puranic Hinduism. The Puranic traditions of Hinduism are differentiated from the Vedic religion on the basis of the Puranic acceptance of polytheism, idolatry, temples, priestly domination and complex rituals etc. which were absent or relatively lacking during the Vedic age. The puranas, thus contain the popular aspects of modern Hinduism.

There are 18 Mahapuranas (great puranas), and many more Uppuranas. They possibly acquired their present forms mainly in the Gupta age. All Puranas are not equally important for historical purposes. For historical reconstruction particularly helpful have been the puranas like Vishnu, Vayu, Matsya, Brahma, Bhavishya etc.

The Puranas deal mainly with the following subjects which are also called five characteristics (pancha-lakshanam):

1. Sarga—the creation of the world
2. Prati- sarga — re- creation
3. Manvantras— the periods of the various Manus
4. Vamsa— the genealogies of gods and Rishis
5. Vanshanucharita— an account of royal dynasties.

Because of their subject matters the puranas are seen as semi- historical text or part of ‘itihasa’ (traditional history). They are usually cited to respond to the colonial critique that Indian society had no sense of history. In this context the concept of time discussed in the puranas based on four Yugas and the notion of periodic destruction of the world are particularly noticeable.

Even the aspects of political history are also quite conspicuous as the puranic genealogies given as parts of Vanshnucharita do provide useful information on historical dynasties such as Haryankas, Shishunagas, Nandas, Mauryas, Shungas, Kanvas, Andhras (Satavahanas), and Guptas.

The Puranas also help us in reconstructing the

historical geography. We find accounts of mountains, rivers, places, towns and cities . They also reflect the emergence of religious cults based on devotion, especially towards the gods Vishnu and Shiva and the goddess shakti. We also come to know about temples, idols, pilgrimages(tirtha) and vows (varta).

Puranic myths and stories of encounters and interactions between demons and gods reflect interaction among people belonging to different cultures. Syncretic tendencies of the time, particularly, the interactions of Brahmanical and non Brahamanical cultural traditions and emergence and development of Hindu religious practices are well constructed on the basis of the Puranas.

As sources for historical reconstruction the Puranas do have some serious weaknesses. The earliest parts of the Puranic genealogies are either entirely or partly mythical. History is mixed up with fables and folklore. The legends in the Puranas are religious and not historical. Many things are based on hearsay and are not corroborated from other reliable sources. At some places the various Puranas give conflicting accounts. The account is given in the future tense in the form of prophecy which creates serious problems related to chronology.