

CHAPTER-5

SANATANA DHARMA



After studying this chapter you learn :

- Learn about meaning and importance of sanatana dharma.
- The aspects of Indian cultural heritage.
- Causes for diversity in Indian culture.
- Develops unity in diversity.

om sarvebhavantu sukhinah
sarve santu nirāmayāḥ
sarve bhadrāni paśyantu
mākashchit duḥkhabhāg bhavet
om sāntih, sāntih, sāntih

We all would have heard this shloka, the meaning of which goes: May everybody be happy; May Everybody be free from disease; May everybody have good fortune; May none fall on evil days. Such a universal thought is itself the foundation of sanatana dharma. Sanatana means very old also means eternally new. Sanatana dharma was born in this country which is now called Hindu dharma.

The meaning of Veda

Bhadrampashyema - may we hear only good; maa vidvishavahai - may we not hate anyone, etc. are called the Shanti Mantras. These are found in the Upanishads which are a part of Vedic literature. Now, let us see what the word Veda means. The word has its root in the dhatu 'vid' which means knowledge. Vidya, vidvamsa, vidyarthi, etc. take form the same root sound.

Vedas are apaurusheya - that, not written by someone, but are the mantras that dawned upon the rishis (ascetics) through their tapas; fruits of their parallel and extraordinary knowledge experiences. Hence, they are the repository of an entire sect's deep knowledge and

extraordinary experiences. The way how one cannot limit the gain of knowledge over several thousands of years of mankind to one person, we can also not limit the Vedic knowledge to a few individuals' efforts – it is one entire community's knowledge bank.

Classification of Vedic knowledge

Vedas have laid the basic foundation for sanatana dharma. Also called Shruti, Vedas are the world's oldest available literature. Vedas which indicate the dawn of India's religious literature, are around 5000 years old. They themselves are a result of thousands of years of several hermits' vision. The mantras formulated by the Rishis in praise of their deities are called Rikku-s. The group of rikku-s is called a Sukta. The collection of sukta-s created by a Rishi's disciples and progenies is called a Mandala. The aggregation of several mandala-s created by several groups of Rishi-s is called a Samhita.

The enormous corpus of Vedas existed during those times was so huge that it was practically impossible to study and teach all of it in one human lifetime. Hence, Krishna-dvaipayanamaharshi classified and divided the corpus and came to be called as Vedavyasa. This classification resulted in the shaping of four Vedas – Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. These were taught by Vedavyasa to his disciples Paila, Vaishampayana, Jaimini and Sumanta, respectively. Over the times, these grew to become independent Vedas despite which there is an interdependency between the four Vedas but no contradictions. Exponents belonging to all four Vedas take part in the yajnyas conducted by singing hymns of deities.

Nature of Vedas

A Veda is classified as Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. Each of the four Vedas has its own set of Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.

Samhita: Consists of hymns in praise of deities. These are hymns of praying the deities and fulfilling the aspirations through yajnya rituals.

Brahmana: That part of a Veda which describes system and order of conducting yajnya-s.

Aranyaka: That part which describes the interdisciplinary meaning of hymns and rituals.

Upanishad: That part of Vedas which are philosophical writings that describe the ways of realising the ultimate supreme spirit.

Rig-Veda samhita has 1,028 sukta-s, 10,552 mantra-s. All these mantra-s are written to literary meters of gayatri, ushnik, puraushnik, kakup, anushthup, bruhati, and others. Sukta-s are further classified into 85 anuvaka-s and 10 mandala-s. Those who study Rig-Veda in traditional ways classify it into 8 ashtaka-s, 64 prapathaka-s, 2,024 varga-s and 10,552 mantra-s.

Theist and Atheist sects

The entire religious literature of sanatana dharma can be bifurcated into vaidika and avaidika. The literature born out of Vedas is vaidika, everything else is avaidika. Further, there are theist and atheist paths. All of vaidika literature is theist. However, the avaidika literature has both theist and atheist paths. Contrary to the popular belief, atheism in sanatana dharma does not mean not believing in the existence of God.

Smriti literature

Vaidika literature's primary branch is shruti. The four Vedas are together called shruti. The other branch of vaidika literature is smriti. All of vaidika literature that supplements shruti is smriti. The one which is heard is shruti and the one which is remembered/memorised is smriti.

Smriti literature can be divided into three parts. The first one is vedanga-s dharma shastra-s, etc. Vedanga is the group of texts that describe the subjects and rules to be followed to understand the meaning of Vedas. The key parts of vedanga are shiksha, vyakarana, chandass, nirukta, jyotisha and kalpa, without the knowledge and background of which if one delves into studying Vedas, then there is a danger of improper understanding of mantra-s. On the other hand, dharmashastra-s are texts that lay out the rules required to be followed for an individual's religious and well-cultured society's existence and sustenance. Manu-smriti, Yajnyavalkya-smriti, Parashara-smriti and

other treatises instruct how a society must progress in the path of dharma.

Smriti literature's second part is itihasa (history) works of Ramayana, Mahabharata, the eighteen Purana-s and equal number of upa-puranas. Also included here are upanishad-s and poems related to purana-s.

Smriti literature's third part constitutes the pillars of Indian philosophical system – the six darshana-s: nyaya, vaisheshika, sankhya, yoga, purva-meemamsa and Uttara-meemamsa.

Religions and their Heads

The three key branches of vedanga are advaita, vishishta-advaita and dvaita. These were established by Shri Shankaracharya, Shri Ramanujacharya and Shri Madhvacharya respectively. Following these three religious streams, other principles like shuddha-advaita, bheda-abheda, achintyabheda-abheda and others were formulated. Among these, shakti vishista-advaita is pro-Shiva. Kashmirshaiva darshana, shaivasiddhanta, veerashaiva are some of the important sects of Shaiva darshana. The other sects here are pashupata, kalamukha, kapalika, maheshvara, etc.

Jaina and Baudhha religions

The general understanding of those who believe in Gods are theists and those who do not, atheists is an incorrect proposition. The very idea of 'belief' in Gods is alien to sanatana dharma. The idea was seeded when semitic religions entered India. The sanatana dharma's understanding has been that everything is God and there is nothing that is not God. The sanatana dharma's definition of theist and atheist are quite different. Those who believe in Vedas, the theory of karma and rebirth are essentially theists; all the literature that believes in these is theist literature. Hence, the darshana-s of sankhya and purva-meemamsa which believe in the above but do not recognise the necessity of gods, are still theist philosophies. However, since Jaina and Baudhha religions believe in fruit of karma and rebirth but do not in Veda-s, they are considered atheist. Even though Jaina and Baudhha religions do not deny the vedic concepts of papa, punya and

moksha, since they deny Vedas, vedic rituals and Brahma, they are atheist religions. Bauddha belief denies eternal atma concept while Jainism believes in the same. Sanatana dharma's foundation itself is viewing atma as house of pure happiness.

Beginning of idol worship

Vedas consider Brahma as saguna and nirguna. Having name and form is saguna and transcending them is nirguna. Worshipping of saguna deities can be seen in Vedas itself. The Agama literature that grew as a theist literature by believing in Veda-s provides a large space for idol worship. Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta are three important Agama branches. Since these three incorporate beliefs in Veda-s, karma and rebirth, they are considered as theist sects. Shaiva and Vaishnava agama-s further enabled the formulation and growth of ritualistic procedures, iconography, temple architecture and designs, etc. Similarly, Shakta agama further gave birth to a vast area of philosophy called tantra. These three agama-s are largely responsible for the way how temples are created, worshipping rituals, celebration of festivals and many such traditions in sanatana dharma.

Diversity despite unity

Sanatana dharma has evolved and grown over the last 3-4 millennia due to the broad foundation of diversity despite unity. Based on the features described in this chapter, the differences between sanatanadharma and Western religions can be clearly understood. The followers of Semitic religions have to believe in one prophet, one God and one religious text and have to follow the commandments issued by the god through a messenger. However, in sanatana dharma, there is no concept of one God, one prophet, one text and one set of commandments. Multiple deities worshipped in sanatana dharma are only forms of the creator of the universe – the supreme Brahma. Sanatana dharma has space for both vedic and a-vedic literature and traditions. Sanatana dharma has space for both theist and atheist religions. The intent of sanatana dharma has been ‘aanobhadrahkrtavoyantuvishvatah’ – let noble thoughts come to me from all directions of this world.

Let us hear and speak good; let us inculcate good behaviour; let us live happily with good health; let us give up hatred and jealousy; let us not commit violence and treachery; let us respect guru-s and elders; have devotion in deities; let us earn knowledge by walking in the right path to our fullest strength and character – this, is the essential message of sanatana dharma.

Veda-s have both prose and poetry. Rig-Veda's mantra-s are in poetry form while Yajur-Veda is mostly in prose. Several treatises (vedanga-s) that were written to explain Vedas are in the form of sutra-s and hence known as sutra literature. Sutra-s are unambiguous, made of minimum words, formed to give complete meaning and are universal statements. Sutra-s can be compared to modern world's equations and formulae. Pantanjali Maharshi's yoga-sutra, Goutama rishi's nyaya-sutra etc., are all sutra literature. The smallest sutra, 'anushcha', is made of just three letters; can be found in brahma-sutra.

In India, much of worldly literature also has grown as a part of sanatana dharma. Ayurveda, vrukshayurveda, music, dance, architecture, mathematics, chemistry, law, etc., have flourished on this soil. All of these in one way or the other are grateful to Veda-s for their growth. For instance, the scholars must be aware of astronomy if they have to study Veda-s. Similarly, those who conduct vedic rituals must have the knowledge of the formation of sacrificial altars. Since these are tied to mathematics, mathematics also grew along with the spread of Veda-s. This is how the worldly knowledge systems and sanatana dharma are linked inseparably with each other.

EXERCISES

I Complete the below sentences with suitable answers :

1. The other name of sanatana dharma is
2. Upanishad is a part of
3. The word Veda is derived from root sound.

4. The meaning of 'vid' is
5. The one that is heard is called and the one that is memorised is
6. India's two main history works are and
7. The Indian philosophical pillars are
8. The vast area of philosophy that derives origin from Shakta-agama is

II Answer the following questions in brief :

9. What is the meaning of Veda?
10. How many mantra-s are there in Rig-Veda? How are the grouped?
11. Name any two poetic meters used in Rig-Veda.
12. Name the four skanda-s of Veda-s.
13. Who classified the Veda-s? Why?
14. Name the four key sects of shakti vishista-advaita.
15. What is theist literature? Name two theist texts.
16. What is a Sutra? Give examples of sutra literature.
17. What is the difference between sanatana dharma and semitic religions?
18. What is the key message of sanatana dharma?

III Activities :

19. Listen to the traditional recital of vedic hymns. Know which language the Veda-s are created in.
20. Gather at least five shanti-mantras and their meaning.
21. Understand the messages that Veda-s give out and note them down.

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