

# Early Religious Scriptures

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## Introduction

Hinduism is one of the most ancient religions in the world. It has a long and uninterrupted history. It takes its origin in the Indus Valley Civilization which is considered by many ancient Indologists to be proto-Dravidian and pre-Aryan. However, scriptures belonging to this civilization are not available at present. The findings that are discovered during excavation furnish sufficient materials to understand the beliefs and religious practices of the people inhabited in the Indus Valley. After the advent of the Aryans who first settled in the area irrigated by the river Sindhu, we get a continuous record of the religious scriptures which reveal the speculative thoughts and priestly supremacy prevalent in the dim past.

For the purpose of our study, rich materials are available from Sanskrit and Tamil classics. However, this article only surveys the Vedas and the Upanisads of the Sanskrit literary works.

## The Four Vedas

Scholars are of the opinion that the Aryans after mingling with the aboriginals, who were Dravidians imbibed some of the habits and thoughts of them. The earliest scriptures on Hinduism or the Vedas are the ancient documents of the human mind (Macdonell 1951 :x:). The Vedas have been classified into four, viz., *Rg Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. Normally it is held that these Vedas are revelations by God. But, according to the exponents of the *Mimamsa* the Vedas were uncreated and thus existing forever without beginning. However, the names of the seers of Vedic hymns are mentioned in the *Brahmanas* and hence human authorship is not ruled out. For a very long period, the Vedas had been transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition. For this reason they are called as *chutak kilavi* in the Tamil texts. Since they were heard by the disciples from the preceptors, they are also known as *sruti* (Hermon 1976:25).

Each of the Vedas contains four parts known as *Samhitas* or *Mantras*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanisads*. Before directly proceeding to deal with the four-fold parts of each Veda, it is better to understand the semantic significance of the word Veda. The root of the word Veda is *vid* and it means knowledge. In the extension of its meaning the word Veda connotes the knowledge concerned with the nature, i.e., world, souls and God. Thus the basic requirements of philosophical thought which blossomed in a later period are noticed in the Vedic scriptures.

With regard to the period of the Vedas, scholars differ in their opinion. It is an expected fact that the main corpus of the Vedic literature belonged to a period of several centuries before the origin of Buddhism (Muller 1859:27). Some of the Indian scholars assigned the Vedic hymns to 3000 B.C., while others pushed them forth to 6000 B.C.

The great scholar Bal Gangadhar Tilak fixed the Vedas at 4500 B.C. The ancient German Indologist Jacobi placed them at 4500 B.C. The writers on Indian philosophy like Dr. S. Radhakrishnan assigned them to the 1500 B.C. (1923:67). It is quite reasonable to suggest that the lower limit of the Vedic period comes to this period, i.e., 1500 B.C.

### **Samhitas**

*Samhitas* literally mean collections. In the Vedic context, the term denotes the collections of hymns, prayers, incantations, benedictions, sacrificial formulae and litanies. Since these aspects of the *Samhitas* are mainly *mantras*, this first part of the Veda came to be known as *Mantras*.

### **Brahmanas**

This section of Vedas consists of voluminous prose texts. They deal with the religious matter, observations on sacrifice and the potency of the individual sacrificial ceremonies.

The aforesaid two parts, i.e. *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas*, form the earlier parts of the Vedas. They are mainly meant for sacrificial rituals. Speculative thoughts and philosophical contemplations are rarely found in these scriptures.

### **Aranyakas**

*Aranya* means forest. Since these texts were delivered by the seers who lived in the forest to their disciples they are so named. Part of these *Aranyakas* are included in the later portion of the *Brahmanas*. Parts of them are counted as separate works. They consist of the meditations of ascetics living in the forest. They have preserved their thoughts on God, man and the world. They discuss some of the philosophical problems.

### **Upanisads**

The *Upanisads* are so called because they were heard from the preceptors by the disciples sitting beneath their sacred feet at the forest. There are many *Upanisads*. Eighteen of them are considered to be the principle *Upanisads* which contain the cream of thought and which dominated each and every branch of Indian Philosophy that developed into a full pledged form in the onward march of human history. Since the *Upanisads* are included at the end of each Veda, they are collectively called Vedanta, which means the end of the Vedas.

In the development of the Vedic religions their phases are identified by the specialists in Indian Philosophy. In the hymns of the Vedas the religion of nature is dominant. In the *Brahmanas* which consist of the religious precepts, the religion of law is conspicuously found. In the *Upanisads* the religion of *atman* is predominantly noticed. These three aspects of Vedic religion are more or less similar to the three great divisions of religious development as conceived by Hegel.



### The Rg Veda

Chiefly this Veda contains the songs of praise directed towards the forces of nature which are deified by the Vedic seers. The *Rg Veda-Samhita* which is simply called as Rg Veda contains about 1028 hymns. These hymns are called *suktas* and cover a total of 10,600 stanzas. It is generally divided into 10 books which are called *mandalas* or circles. According to some Rg Veda is divided into 8 *astakas*, each of which consists 8 *adhyayas* or chapters. Each chapter is again sub-divided into various *vargas* or groups. However, the classification of Rg Veda into *mandalas* remains to be the popular division. The language of the hymns reveals that they belong to a very high antiquity and different from the classical Sanskrit. The hymns are supposed to have been composed at various intervals of time and then were collected in the present form. They are ascribed to the earliest ancestors of the families who were the custodians of the particular collections. The very ancient hymns of Rg Veda are found in Books II to VII.

The first *mandala* consists of 191 hymns. The seers like Gautama Kanva and others are said to be the authors of them. The devotional poems addressed to *Agni* are classified initially. Next come the poems addressed to *Indra*, then the poems to other Gods like *Varuna*, *Soma*, etc. It is essential to note that many of the hymns of the eighth and ninth books or *mandalas* are repeated in the Sama Veda. The tenth book has been considered to be a later edition to Rg Veda. Actually this last portion contains the developed views existing among the seers at the end of the Rg Vedic period. Speculative thoughts with regard to the origin of creation are found in this portion. The exorcising and superstitious magic spells are also found in the later portion which are dragged down to the period of Atharva Veda. It is the opinion of the specialists that the speculative parts of Rg Veda indicated the maturity of the mind originally revealed in the lyrical hymns, while the magic spells exhibited the fact that the Vedic Aryans have acquainted with the principles and practices of the native Indians.

It is interesting to note that the songs of the Rg Veda originally addressed to the different manifestations of nature such as Sun, Moon, Fire, Sky, Storms, Wind, waters, Dawn and Earth which were subsequently transformed into mythological Gods and Goddesses. Thus the Rg Vedic hymns portray the super power of *Surya* (Sun), *Soma* (Moon), *Agni* (Fire), *Dyaus* (Sky), *Maruts* (Storms), *Vayu* (Wind), *Apas* (Waters), *Usas* (Dawn) and *Prthivi* (Earth). Thus the Rg Vedic songs indicate the fact that the personification of the prominent natural phenomena led to the formation of the main figures of mythology.

Some more Gods like *Indra*, *Varuna*, *Mitra*, *Aditi*, *Visnu*, *Pusan*, the two *Asvins*, *Rudra* and *Parjanya* were also extolled by the Vedic seers. According to Winternitz, these Gods' names originally indicated natural phenomena and natural beings (1972:76). *Mitra*, *Visnu* and *Pusan* are depicted as sun-gods with various degrees of power. *Indra* has been hailed as the god of the Storm while *Varuna* as a god of heavens. *Rudra* is usually considered to be the father of the storm-gods. Nevertheless, Oldenberg treated Him to be a mountain and forest god whereas Hillebrandt considered Him to be the god of Horrors of the tropical climate. *Aditi* is the god of Sky. *Asvins* are interpreted to be a pair

of gods influencing both Heaven and Earth. They were also considered to be the gods of day and night. Some scholars considered *Asvins* to be the constellation of Gemini. However, *Indra* wielded supremacy among the Vedic gods. He was honoured to be the actual national god of the Vedic Aryans. In course of time, some development in the Vedic theology has taken place. The concept of a creator of the universe was in the fore thought of the seers. The creation of the universe was variously known as *Prajapati*, *Brahmanaspati*, *Brhaspati* and *Visvakarman*. One of the songs of Rg Veda conveys the great idea of universal unity through designating the different gods in reality to mean the One and only Supreme God and all plurality was only imaginative and figurative (Rg Veda I, 164, 46).

However, there is no evidence in their entire body of the Rg Vedic songs for the existence of the theory of *karma*. The spiritual sections of the Rg Veda are mingled with secular songs also. A good example is *Danastuti*, which is a praise song of generosity. Some riddle poems are also found but their meaning is not clear.

### **Yajur Veda**

The *Yajur Veda* is mainly concerned with liturgical purpose. The domains of a ceremonial religion are well set by this Veda. The root of the word Yajur is *yaja* which means to sacrifice. Hence it is quite obvious that the whole Yajur Veda, which is partly in prose and partly in verse arranged in such a way has to be made use of sacrificial ceremony.

Yajur Veda is divided into two parts. The first part is called the Black Yajur Veda and the second the White Yajur Veda. Under the first division the *Kathaka-Samhita*, the *Kapisthala-Katha-Samhita*, the *Maitrayani-Samhita* and the *Taittiriya-Samhita* are included. They are the inter-related portions of the Black Yajur Veda. The White Yajur Veda contains only the *Vajasaneyi-Samhita*. This *Samhita* is named after Yajnavalkya Vajasaneyya, the popular teacher of this Veda.

The main difference between these two divisions of Yajur Veda exists in the fact that the latter contains only the *mantras* whereas the former included in addition to the *mantras* a detailed presentation of the rituals and also discussions on the subject.

The sacrificial rites and the different types of priests intending to perform the separate sacrificial acts and the muttering of prayers and prescriptions constituted the part of the commitments. Hence the Black Yajur Veda is considered to be more ancient than the White Yajur Veda.

The White Yajur Veda contains 40 sections out of which the last 15 are later additions. Important sacrifices are elaborately mentioned in the 25 sections of this Veda. Some of the sacrifices are *Vajapeya* and *Rajasuya*, *Agnihotra* i.e. the fire sacrifices to be offered every morning and evening, and the sacrifices of the seasons *Caturmasya*, *Soma* sacrifice etc. are also described in detail.

In this Veda, a development in the concept of god has been significantly noticed. The Rg Vedic *Prajapati* has been identified with *Purusa* and the *Brahman*. The first six verses of Section 34 are reckoned amongst the Upanisads with the caption *Sivasamkalpa* Upanisad.



The formula of dedicating a sacrificial gift to various gods is graphically drawn in the Yajur Veda. Actually most of the sacrificial ceremonies are not meant merely for worshipping the gods. They are employed to invoke and influence them to fulfil the demands of the sacrificer — *Yajamana*. It is pertinent to note that these sacrifices were performed mainly for material benefits.

In the sixteenth section of the White Yajur Veda and in the *Taittiriya Samhita* prayers in the form of enumerating the many-fold names of *Rudra* are found.

### **Sama Veda**

Like the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda also contains the songs, verses and benedictions classified in accordance with their practical purpose in connection with the sacrificial acts. Sama Veda has some unique features to be reckoned. The various ceremonies connected with domestic level are explained in detail.

The Sama Veda is made up of two parts. The first one is known as *Arcika* which means the verse collection. The second part is called *Uttaracika* meaning the later verse collection. Some of the songs as we have already noted were also found in Rg Veda. The melody of Sama Veda is proverbial. The gods are very much pleased by the chanting of *mantras* in an enchantic and melodic voice and are condescended to answer the calls of this sacrificer to his full satisfaction. Nammavalvar extols God Tirumal to be very much pleased by this Sama Veda.

Sama Veda is important not only to trace the history of ancient religion and magic spells but also for exploring the evolution of Indian music.

The above three Vedas, viz., Rg, Yajur and Sama commanded high respect among the ancient Hindus. During the passage of time the Atharva Veda was counted as the fourth Veda. Originally the concept of *Vedatraiya* was prevalent. After the advent of Atharva Veda, the concept of *Catur Veda* was admitted gradually.

### **Atharva Veda**

In the initial stage the word Atharva denoted a fire-priest. The fire cult played an important role in the life of the ancient Indians. In course of time, the name Atharvan denoted the incantations of the wizard priest and the spells and magic formulas themselves. The original name for this Veda is *Atharvangirasah* which means the Atharvans and the Angiras. The Angiras is also a group of fire priests. Though both Atharvans and Angiras denoted the same meaning, there is a noteworthy difference. The former indicates the holy or sacred magic resulting with happiness whereas the latter denotes the black magic aimed at the enemies. The first one is aimed for the healing of diseases. The second one is aimed to create troubles to the rivals and enemies.

The Atharva Veda is an anthology of 731 hymns with 6000 verses. The whole Veda is divided into 20 books. It is essential to note that the last book contains hymns literally lifted from the Rg Veda. About one-seventh of Atharva Veda is taken from Rg Veda.

The first seven books contain numerous short poems addressed to gods. Books VIII to XIV, XVII and XVIII contain very long poems. Only at the beginning of these books

some short hymns are found. Prose writings are found in books XV and XVI. Scholars are of the opinion that Atharva Veda are essentials influenced by Rg Veda. Some later forms found in the text go to prove its later origin. For the first time the four-fold caste system is found in this Veda. Though *Purusasukta* in Rg Veda deals with the caste system it has been considered to be a later interpolation and hence it goes without saying that the concept of Varanasrama was not formulated during the early Vedic period.

Since the Atharva Veda contains magic and sorcery materials, its hymns are not usually chanted in any Hindu temple even at present.

### The Upanisads

The word Upanisad is a compound of three words: *upa* (near), *ni* (down) and *shad* (to sit). Thus the word collectively means sitting beneath the feet of the preceptor. It was the custom of olden days that groups of students used to serve the Guru and learn from him the sacred doctrine. The usual classes took place in the pleasant forest dwellings of the Upanisad thinkers.

Upanisad also means mystery, a secret which is synonymous with *rahasyam* instructed only to the chosen few. The esoteric meaning of the mystic syllable AUM and elucidation of mystic words are understood only by the initiated. Thus the word Upanisad appropriately stood for mysterious matters which were explained to the fittest person who stood the test of the teacher.

Samkara, the official interpreter of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy interpreted the word Upanishad as substantive form from the root *sad* "to loosen", "to reach" or "to destroy" with *upa* and *ni* being the prefixes and *kvip* as termination. Thus the word Upanishad denoted the *Brahma-Vidya* by which one can destroy his ignorance. Since the treatises discuss in detail the *Brahma-Vidya* (knowledge about Brahma) they are called Upanisads.

With regard to the number, date and authors of the Upanisads, scholars have divergent views. According to the Indian tradition there were 108 Upanisads. The prince Mohammed Dara Shakh was instrumental for translating about 50 Upanisads into Persian language in the middle of the 17th century. From Persian they were translated into Latin by Duperron in the beginning of the 18th century. However, the principle Upanisads are ten in number. Samkara has written elaborate commentary on eleven Upanisads. They are the following: *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya*, *Bhṛhad-aranyaka* and *Svetasvatara* (Radhakrishnan 1953:21). To this list of Upanisads *Maitri* Upanisad has been added. Ramanuja, the exponent of the Vistadvaita philosophy included *Subala* and the *Culika* to those main Upanisads. Sivajnana Swamigal, the able exponent of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy quoted from the *Svetasvatara* and *Atharvasiras* Upanisads in his elaborate commentary on Sivajnana Bodham to elucidate some of the cardinal tenets of the system.

With regard to the authorship of the Upanisads, some of the ancient seers suggested divine origin. Some others considered that the individual exertion coupled with the grace of god held responsible for the germination of the Upanisads. In this case, the subjective and objective character of the theory of revelation becomes evident.



Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has selected eighteen Upanisads which according to him formed the principle Upanisads (1953:21). Some of them belong to Rg Veda whereas some others to Black and White Yajur Veda. Similarly, some Upanisads are connected with Sama Veda and others with Atharva Veda.

The earliest Upanisads like *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya* Upanisads, etc. belong to a period between 1000 B.C. to 700 B.C. Most of the Upanisads were either contemporaneous with the period of Buddha or came after him (Radhakrishnan 1953:22).

A comparative analysis of the contents of Vedas and Upanisads exhibit the fact that in the later texts considerable and remarkable growth in the sphere of philosophical thought is significantly noticed. Interesting dialogues occur between the student and preceptor, son and father, wife and husband associating themselves with the empirical and transcendental questions with unquenching thirst to pursue the ultimate truth.

The concept of Atman and Brahman unknown to the Vedas predominantly occupies a central position in the system of Upanisadic thoughts (Mahadevan 1974:23). Brahman denotes the universal and absolute self (Deussen 1919:39). *Atman* denotes the individual self. The realisation that *Atman* is nothing but *Brahman* as understood from the Upanisadic passages, "*tat tvam asi*" (that art thou) and "*Ahambrahmasmi*" (*I am Brahman*), the realisation leads one to merge with the universal self (Herman 1976:116-124). The impediments to this realisation are due to *avidya* (ignorance) which could be extirpated only by knowledge obtained from the preceptor through a close study of the Upanisads and contemplation.

The next striking feature of the Upanisads is found in the theory of karma which is again unknown to the Vedic literature. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upanisads the doctrine of karma and the theory of transmigration of souls is vividly portrayed (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upanisad IV, 3-4). This rare insight and fresh thought governing the doctrine of karma has been expounded not by a Brahmin but by a king. Hence, Winternitz considers that the said doctrine should have originated in non-Brahmanical circles (Winternitz 1972:231).

Truthfulness was given a respectable place in the educated society as evidenced by the story of Satyakama Jabala. The priests became disciples to either kings or other persons other than Brahmins in many Upanisads. This kind of social condition tempts the indologists to conclude that the Upanisads did not accept the *Varanasrama* Dharma introduced by the Aryans. Dr. Karmarkar and A. L. Basham after a careful study came to the conclusion that such fresh and original thoughts which were absent in the Vedas and present in the Upanisads are non-Aryan thoughts which should have been derived from the Dravidian thinkers.

There are some non-Vedic Upanisads. Some of them glorify Lord Siva as the Supreme divinity. Some others praise the supremacy of Sakti. Vishnu has been glorified in some of them. In some other non-Vedic Upanisads, the yogic practices and ascetic life are adumbrated. The *Vajrasucika* Upanisad criticises strongly the caste system.

Thus there are various layers of philosophical thoughts peculiarly found in the concerned Upanisads. In one way or other, the various systems of Indian philosophy are

indebted to the Upanisads which formed the fountain-head for the rapid growth of the metaphysical thoughts during the subsequent periods. The *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* are considered to be the *Karma Kanda* while the Upanisads are highly regarded as the *Jnana Kanda* of the Vedic scriptures.

### Conclusion

The scriptures of Hinduism available from the Sanskrit sources spread over a vast period commencing at least from 1500 B.C. to 200 A.D. Apart from the Vedas and the Upanisads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sastras too have rich philosophical ideas. These texts would definitely provide materials for the proper understanding of the Indian philosophy.

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