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Vedic literature- A significant literature of ancient India: An introduction

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Abstract

One of the ancient and rich literatures of India is the Vedic literature which possesses immense religious and historical importance. Vedic literature not only outlines the numerous Hindu rituals and ceremonies which have been observed by the people from the Vedic Age but also the different philosophy which forms the basis of Hinduism. Through Vedic literature, we come to know about the social, political and economic organization of the Aryan Civilization and it is the main source of understanding ancient Indian literature. In this paper, a study has been made to know about the rich literary works of Vedic literature without which our knowledge about the Aryans and their philosophy and its importance in Indian history would have been incomplete.

Keywords: Vedic literature, Vedas, Shastras

1. Introduction

The Vedic Age can be traced back between 1500 B.C. to 600 B.C. Vedic Age can be divided into two parts- (i) between 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. when the Aryans composed hymns of the Rig Veda only which is regarded as early Vedic Age and (ii) between 1000 B.C. to 600 B.C. when the Aryans prepared large part of their religious texts which is regarded as later Vedic Age. The Vedic Age can be called an Epic Age in the Indian history. The authors of this Age (culture and civilization) were the Indo Aryans or simply called the Aryans.

The archeological sources of the Vedic Age are practically non-existent and therefore the only source of its culture and civilization is the Vedic literature. The principles of knowledge, worship and Karma are the basis of Vedic literature. These represent the intellectual height of the Aryan philosophy. The literature of the Aryans includes diverse forms of expression like poetry, drama, romance, science etc. which is a wonderful legacy to the Indian literature. Different literary works like Vedas (Rigveda, Samveda, Atharvaveda and Yajurveda), Brahmanas, Samhitas, Aranyakas, Ramayana, Mahabharata etc. make us think how eager they were to achieve perfection in various spheres of life. The Sutra literature and grammar of Panini also holds a special attention of the lovers of grammar and literature.

2. Methodology and Objective of the Study

The paper has been written mainly by using secondary sources which consists of textbooks, reference books, websites etc. The study is mainly based on analytical study only. The objective of the study of this paper is mainly to know about one of our rich Indian cultures i.e. Aryan Civilization and their significant literature i.e. the Vedic Literature. Without knowing or studying Vedic literature, it is not possible to come to know about the other different literature which came in later periods. Vedic literature is the basis or foundation of other Indian literature.

3. Discussion

According to Kautilya, "The three Vedas (Sama, Rig and Yajur) constitute the triple Vedas. These together with Atharvaveda and the Itihasa Veda are known as the Vedas." The word 'Veda' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Vid' (to know) and thus the word 'Veda' means 'Knowledge'. The Hindus consider these Vedas as sacred books as they were learnt by heart

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and thus given the names like Nitya (eternal) and Apaurusheya (not made by man). It is believed that Vedic hymns were composed by ancient Rishis, they wrote under the inspiration of God and they were handed over by them from generation to generation.

The earliest literary source of Indian history is the Rigveda which dates back about 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. The hymns are mainly mythological and are addressed to various gods. On the basis of period of composition, the whole Vedic literature is divided into two broad categories. They are:

- a) Early Vedic literature (Stuti) consisting four Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.
- b) Later Vedic literature (Smriti) consisting Sutras, Vedangas, Upavedas, Puranas, Epics, Dharam Shastras etc.

3.1 Early Vedic literature (Stuti)

According to Hindu belief, Stuti literature of Vedic literature was not composed by any living being. It was revealed by God to certain sages and they passed their knowledge orally from one generation to another. This kind of literature is considered to be sacred in Hindu society and they are held high in respect.

3.1.1 Vedas

The four Vedas are the most important creation of Vedic literature. Without them, ancient Indian literature would have been incomplete. Some scholars regard the hymns as revelation to the risks. The hymns are regarded as invocations to the gods to bestow favors on the worshippers. There are mainly four (4) Vedas- Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samveda and Atharvaveda. One of the ancient and earliest works of Vedas is the Rigveda. It is a collection of 1017 hymns supplemented by 11 others which is called 'Valakhilyas'. It is arranged into 10 mandalas of books. Yajurveda relates to the details of performing Yajanas which are performed by the priests. It is present in both poetry and prose and has 40 chapters and 200 mantras. It gives a picture of religious and social life of the Rigveda Aryans. Samveda have been mostly taken from Rigveda and these are sung at the time of performing Yajanas. It contains 1540 'Richayen'. Atharvaveda is present partly in prose and partly in poem. Most of the mantras deal with warding of diseases and with chains magic and spells by which one could overcome enemies and demons. It contains 5839 mantras, 20 mandalas and 731 richayen.

3.1.2 Brahmanas

The Brahmanas are the first specimen of praise in the world. They explain the meaning of sacrifice and also the methods of performing them. They mark the transition from the Vedic to the later Brahmanical society. They are the commentaries on the various hymns in the Vedas to which they are appended. They are called liturgies. For example, Rigveda has two Brahmanas- Aitareya and knishitaki.

3.1.3 Aranyakas

Aranyakas are generally called the 'forest books' as they were studied in forests away from the villages and towns. They mainly deal with the spiritual life. They were meant for the elderly people as they had passed out of Grihastha Ashram. They are the concluding portions of the Brahmanas. The Aranyakas deals with the philosophy and mysticism and not with the rituals. The philosophical

portions of the Brahmanas have been separated in order to guide and use for the hermits living in the jungles or forests.

3.1.4 Upanishads

According to German scholar Schopenhauer, "In the whole world, there is no study so beautiful and as elevating as that of Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life- it will be the solace of my death." Upanishads are the concluding parts of Brahmanas. They occupy a very high place in the ancient Aryan literature as they mainly deals with spiritual subjects and the ultimate secrets of creation of the universe. They are storehouse of spiritual knowledge as they throw light on certain difficult philosophical questions such as the true nature of god (Brahma) and the soul (Atma) and the exact relation that exists between the two. The doctrines of Mukti, Kama, Maya and transmigration of soul have been discussed in detail and elaborated in various Upanishads.

Upanishads mainly means 'sitting near'. Therefore, its original meaning refers to sitting down of initiated pupil near the teacher or guru for the purpose of a confidential communication of the secret doctrine (rahasya) concerning the relation between the creator and the created individuals. There are about 300 Upanishads which were written by various saints from 800 to 500 B.C. Some ancient Upanishads are- Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Chandogya Upanishad, Taittiriya Upanishad, Aitareya Upanishad, Kena Upanishad Kaushitaki Upanishad, Brihad Upanishad and Jaittiriya Upanishad.

3.2 Later Vedic literature (Smriti)

Later Vedic literature which is also called the Smriti literature deals with the laws and usage of customs of various classes. They also throw light on the status of women. Smriti literature consists of Sutras, Vedangas and Upavedas, Puranas, Epics and Dharam Shastras.

3.2.1 Sutras

As the time passed, many new social customs were developed and these were collected in new books. This new type of literature came to be known as the Sutras. It is believed that the period of the Sutras can be traced from the 6th or 7th Century B.C. to about 2nd Century B.C. One of the characteristics of Sutras was that they were written by using the fewest possible words. The Sutras have been divided into 3(three) different classes- Strauta Sutra which deals with the religious and sacrifice matters, Griha Sutra which deals with the various duties that a family man has to perform and Dharma Sutra which deals with the society rather than the family.

3.2.2 Vedangas and Upavedas

Vedangas were known as the part of Vedic texts and were mainly concerned with the preservation of the Vedic texts. They are mainly divided into 6(six) categories- Kalpa (religious practices), Siksha (pronunciation), Vyakaran (grammar), Nirukta (etymology), Channdas (meter) and Jyotish (astronomy). Out of 6(six) Vedangas, Siksha and Kalpa are considered to be very important.

Each Veda has its Upaveda. They are mainly divided into 4(four) categories- Ayurveda (medicine), Dhanurveda (art and war), Gandharvveda (art of music) and Shilpveda (architecture).

3.2.3 Darshanas

Darshanas explain certain difficult philosophical questions concerning god, social life and death. They are the six schools of Indian philosophy which form an important part of Vedic literature. They are supposed to have been written at the time of King Asoka the 6th Century B.C. These Darshanas are short, definite and free from any doubt and are given in the form of Sutras or aphorisms. There are 6(six) kinds of Darshanas. The Nyaya Darshana was written by Gautama rishi. It is the science of sciences known to be acquired by four methods which are Pratyaksh or intuition, Anumana or inference, Upma or comparison and Sabda or verbal testimony. This Darshana believes in god who is full of bliss and knowledge and accepts the theory of rebirth. The Vaisesika Darshana was written by Kannada rishi. It is concerned with 6 padarthas consisting Dravya (substance), Guna (quality), Karma (activity), Samanya (generality), Visesha (particularity) and Samavaya (inference) and nine Dravyas consisting earth, water, air, light, time, space, soul, Manas and Akasha. The Sankhya Darshana was written by Kapila which believes in the existence of god. It deals with the dual principle of Purusha who are eternal and are bound by the bondage of rebirth and Prakriti which is developed by 3(three) kinds of Gunas; Sattva Guna (source of goodness and happiness), Rajas Guna (source of activity and pain) and Tamas Guna (source of ignorance, sloth and apathy). The Yoga Darshana was written by Patanjali. It describes through the practice of Yoga, a person can develop both spiritual and physical strengths of life. 8(eight) methods have been suggested to achieve the physical and spiritual strength which are- Yama(abstention), Niyama (observation), Asana(posture), Pranayama(regulation of breath), Pratyahara(withdrawal of senses), Dhyana(fixed attention), Samadhi(concentration) and Hathayoga (controlling of body). Jamini was the author of the Purva-Mimansa Darshana. It is mainly concerned with the rituals, performance of sacrifices, purely mechanical ethics and does not attack the problems of ultimately reality. There are 2(two) kinds of Dharma for right living- Nitya Dharma which is done every day and Kamya Dharma which is done to achieve some special object. There is no necessity of a benevolent or active god. The Uttar-Mimansa Darshana was written by Badarayana. He wrote 555 Sutras which are divided into 4(four) chapters. The first chapter deals with the nature of Brahmana and his relation with the world and individual souls. Second chapter deals with the objections. Third chapter deals with the wages and means of attaining Brahma Vidya and the fourth chapter discusses the fruits of Brahma Vidya and the future of soul after death.

3.2.4 Puranas

Puranas are ancient Hindu texts eulogizing various deities, primarily the divine Trimurti god (Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar) in Hinduism through divine stories. Vyasa, the narrator of Mahabharata is considered to be the compiler of Puranas. Puranas have been described as genre of important Hindu religious texts which consists of narratives of description of Hindu cosmology; philosophy and geography, history of the universe from creation to destruction and genealogies of Kings, heroes, sages and demigods. Puranas are mainly 18(eighteen) in nos. which are- Agri Puran, Bhagwat Puran, Bhavishya Puran, Brahma Puran, Brahmmand Puran, Garuda Puran, Kurma Puran, Ling Puran, Markandya Puran, Matsya Puran, Narad Puran, Padma

Puran, Shiv Puran, Skand Puran, Brahmvaivatray Puran, Vaman Puran, Varah Puran and Vishnu Puran.

3.2.5 Dharam Shastras

It mainly deals with the status of women in society and throws light on the laws of inheritance. Among all the Dharam Shastras, Manu Smriti is the most important. Dharam Shastra divides the society into 4(four) Varnas dividing each Varna with its specific duties and privileges. A man's life has also been divided into 4(four) stages (ashram) and the duties he has to perform in each ashram. In Dharam Shastra, laws of justice and punishment, about property, partnership loans, duties of the King and the subjects etc. have been discussed vividly.

4. Conclusion

From the discussion on Vedic Literature, we have found that up to some level Vedic Literature can be called the foundation stone of Hindu religion in India. Without it, Hindu religion could not have established with its rituals and laws. So, the early and later Vedic literature gives us a vivid knowledge about the societal settings, rituals, laws, different kinds of books and learning process of our ancient India. Vedic Literature is the best and scientific work of Hindu literature and a good source of knowledge about India.

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