

Hindu Hermeneutics

Pandit Ub Ve. Sri Rama Ramanuja Achari

1. Introduction

In the complexity of our daily lives here are two paths of possible pursuit: *Preyas* or *Shreyas*.

Preyas is that which is ‘pleasant’, and *Shreyas* is that which is ‘good’.

Preyas is our default biological instinct of personal survival and self-propagation which we share with all lower life forms. It is the materialistic path of self-referent action. We are naturally inclined to that which affords us maximum pleasure in the fulfilment of our basic appetites for food, sex, security and comfort. It is a seeking of happiness which is primarily personal, and only incidentally concerns the others of our extended sphere of care — spouse, children, relatives, family etc. It is the path that leads to *samsara* — rebirth and suffering.

Preyas is the universal good. It is the spiritual path which leads to liberation — *moksha* and non-rebirth — *nirvana*. It is sometimes pleasant but usually not. It is that which ultimately benefits the many, sometimes at the expense of a few individuals. It is that which is good for all people collectively and includes the welfare of all other sentient beings and the environment in which we are sustained. It is that which is termed *loka-sangraha* in the Gita.

loka saṅgraham-evāpi saṁpaśyan kartum arhasi || 3:20 ||

“You should act with the welfare of the entire universe in view”.

We often find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma. What *is* good? What should I do now? How should I act? What would be the right course of action in this particular circumstance? These questions are called *Dharma Sankata* — Dilemmas of Dharma.

According to Manu there are four sources of Dharma:

The Veda, tradition, the conduct of virtuous people and one's own conscience, these are declared to be the distinct four-fold sources of Dharma. (Manu 2:12)

The primary source of Dharma is the Veda and when we seek spiritual guidance from the Veda we are totally confused by the immensity, obscurity and complexity of the teachings!! How do we deal this vast resource of material? What is significant and what is not? What do I accept and what do I reject? It is in this context that one has recourse to the study of *Mīmāṃsā* or hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is the study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts, particularly Sacred texts. A *hermeneutic* is defined as a specific system or methodology for interpretation.

Exegesis involves an extensive and critical *interpretation* of a sacred text using an hermeneutic. The word *exegesis* means "to draw the meaning out of" a given text. *Exegesis* may be contrasted with *eisegesis* which means to read one's own interpretation *into* a given text. In general, *exegesis* presumes an attempt to view the text objectively, while *eisegesis* implies more subjectivity.

One may encounter the terms **exegesis** and **hermeneutic** used interchangeably; however, there remains a distinction. Exegesis is the practical application of hermeneutics, which is the interpretation and understanding of a text on the basis of the text itself.

Traditional exegesis requires the following:

- analysis of significant words in the text in regard to translation;
- examination of the general historical and cultural context,
- confirmation of the limits of the passage,
- examination of the context within the text.

Hindu hermeneutics is based on the methodology propounded by Mīmāṃsā.

The term *Mīmāṃsā* is derived from the Sanskrit root "*man*" – "to think, consider, examine, or investigate." Here the term, etymologically means:— "desire to cogitate" and is used to signify a thorough consideration, examination, or investigation of the meaning of Vedic Texts. *Mīmāṃsā* is "rational enquiry" which "attempts at rational conclusions".

Kumarila called it "a conglomeration of arguments" (*yukti-kalapa*), very closely connected to the Veda.

2. Origin of Mimāṃsā

In the Vedic period 3000- 6000 years ago, the yajña or sacrifice was the central motif of the Vedic religious experience, this being so, two major issues arose:—

1. The Vedas are considered to be the utterances of individual perfected sages (Rishis), they are not at all narrative or systematic, so there are many apparently conflicting statements in them. In relation to the sacrificial injunctions many controversies arose amongst the theologians as to the correct method of celebrating the sacrifices.
2. The need arose for the systematic arrangement of the entire sacrificial paradigm and the allocation of specific functions to the various priests and other

individuals involved.

These two forces gave rise to the creation of the body of literature known as the 'Brāhmaṇas' which aimed at systematizing the ritual and interpreting it in a cogent manner.

When the sacrificial paradigm had degenerated and the circumstances of time and place had changed further — people had become more urban and societies had become more complex, the need arose for a clearer and more comprehensive explanation of the Vedic texts and the ritual and also the need to contemporise it in order to give it relevance. The focus shifted from **Yajña** to **Dharma**. This gave rise to the compilation of the 'Smṛti' literature — with all its rules and regulations regarding the daily life of the people — including social and criminal laws. This brought about the necessity also of regular study of these matters as bearing upon '**Dharma**' or the duty of the people. It was at this junction that the Mīmāṃsa literature appeared with its 1000 odd rules of Hermeneutics for the interpretation and correct understanding of what is stated in the Vedas as regards **Dharma**.

These rules were first formulated in a systematic manner by the sage Jaimini in what is known as the **Jaimini Sūtras** [Mīmāṃsa Sūtras]. Jaimini did not invent the teachings, but for the first time reduced to writing the traditional interpretations that had for centuries been handed down orally through disciplic successions. Very little is known of his life aside from the tradition that he was a pupil of Bādarāyaṇa, founder of the Vedānta System. His actual date is quite unknown; however, the style of his writings assigns him to the Sūtra period which extended from 600-200 CE.

Once the Vedic yajñas had fallen into disuse and had become increasingly irrelevant in the lives of the people, the Vedas gave way to the study of the Tantras. But the principles of exegesis evolved by the Mīmāṃsa continued to influence all of the vast body of Tantric literature. Whenever any dispute arose regarding the interpretation of a certain text, the Mīmāṃsa principles were always applied.

3. The Scope of Mīmāṃsa

Mīmāṃsa simply takes for granted the philosophical concepts of the other systems; it does not enter into any analysis or debate on the nature Ultimate Reality, Self, and the Universe, or their mutual relationship. Its entire methodology is dependent upon their acknowledged existence. Its basic premise of Right Action (**Dharma**) can be established and validated by the means of knowledge taught by the **Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika** school. All the effects of Dharma would be meaningless without the analysis of the evolution of consciousness taught by the **Sāṃkhya-Yoga**.

However, it makes specific use only of those factors that are needed for its special problems. For example, it affirms that Verbal testimony (**śabda**) is the only means

of Right Knowledge that can be used to know the nature of the invisible effects of action, and that all other means of Right Knowledge are necessary only to refute opponents.

Mīmāṃsa suggests that Liberation cannot be achieved by Right Knowledge alone, for the Self must first exhaust its potentialities through action (Karma), as a seed fulfils itself through growth. No amount of contemplation will enable one to arrive at the ultimate goal of human destiny; therefore, the emphasis is on the ethical aspect of life rather than on the rational. All arguments to support this thesis are based on the premise that the Self by definition is eternal. The actions to be done and the rewards that follow are enjoined in the Veda and interpreted by Mīmāṃsa.

The importance of Mīmāṃsa is testified by its present-day effect, for no part of the daily life of the Hindu is without the influence of the teachings of Mīmāṃsa. All rituals and ceremonies depend upon it; all moral conduct is guided by it; all Canon Law is founded upon it. Mīmāṃsa is the life of the super-structure of Indian Civilisation.

4. The Two Divisions of Mīmāṃsa

Mīmāṃsa is divided into two systems based on the twofold division of the Vedas (**karma-khāṇḍa** dealing with sacrifices and **jñāna-khāṇḍa** dealing with spiritual knowledge); both use the same logical method of handling their problems; both use the same literary form; but each has its own limited sphere of interpretation.

1. *The Pūrva-Mīmāṃsa* [Karma Mīmāṃsa] — **pūrva** means "earlier"; because it deals with the earlier part of the Vedas. Its scope is to interpret *the actions* enjoined in the Vedas, leading to Liberation.
2. *The Uttara-Mīmāṃsa*. [Jñāna Mīmāṃsa] — **uttara** means "latter"; because it deals with the latter part of the Vedas. Its scope is to interpret *the knowledge* revealed in the Vedas, leading to Liberation.

These two systems are generally referred to as simply **Mīmāṃsa** and **Vedānta** respectively.

5. The Vedas [Nigama]

Vedic literature is divided into four sections Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishads. The Samhitas are the core texts which consist of the revelations of the great sages (Rishis). They are presented in the form of hymns and poems.

The Brahmanas and Aranyakas are ritual texts based upon the practical application and usage of the Samhita portion in rituals (yajnas) and the Upanishads are the philosophical texts which concern us the most.

Definition of what constitutes Veda

There is a variety of opinions among preceptors as to what exactly constitute Veda;

- (i) That by which the means of obtaining the transcendental goal of life is known.
- (ii) The Veda is that which makes known the transcendental means of obtaining the desirable and avoiding the undesirable.
- (iii) The Vedas are the truly authoritative and valid texts which have no author and which propound **Dharma** and **Brahman**.

Dharma

Dharma is derived from the root **dhṛ**, “to hold, maintain, preserve.” It has reference therefore, to anything that holds, supports, or preserves.

When used in the metaphysical sense, it means those universal laws of Nature that sustain the functioning of the universe and the manifestation of all things - without which nothing could be. When applied to the individual, it has reference to that code of conduct by which one sustains oneself and which enables one to fulfil one’s spiritual destiny. It encompasses all the actions, practices, and duties that will benefit all beings - sentient and insentient; therefore, it is that which produces merit leading to spiritual evolution and Liberation.

Dharma in short is “right living” defined by the practice of universal ethics and personal morals.

“Dharma” cannot be known through empirical means such as cognition. It can be known only either through intuition or through an impersonal source of knowledge.

The problem with relying on reason or intuition is that individuals will come to differing conclusions about what the ultimate nature of the “Good” is. There are endless controversies on most if not all ethical issues by “experts” who take one side or the other. The best and most universal source of Dharma therefore, would be an “impersonal” source such as the Vedas.

Brahman

Brahman, derived from **brh** “the expansive” (*brhatvam* = greatness) can be defined as the Absolute, whence all existence arises, by which everything is sustained and into which everything ultimately dissolves.

Brahman or the Absolute is by definition super-sensuous, it is beyond comprehension or cognition. It cannot even be understood inferentially, for every inferential dynamic depends upon a repeatedly perceived concomitance (connection) between that which is to be proved and its characteristic (eg., between fire and smoke). But we do not have any such knowledge in the case of Brahman. So, the Vedantin maintains that the Upanishad portion of the Veda — which is also

eternal and infallible — is the unique source of knowledge regarding Brahman.

The Veda does not contain history or science. The Veda is claimed to be eternal in that the truths propounded in it have a perennial validity for all time. They can thus by definition neither deal with temporal evanescent events, nor can they provide empirical facts or scientific generalizations based on those events. The ethics taught in the Veda are the factors by which we advance spiritually, they are **injunctions** only, which can neither be proved nor disproved by logic.

If one finds passages in the Veda which appear to deal with history or any aspect of empirical science, they are not intrinsic to its purpose. Likewise if there appear to be passages in it, which clearly contradict experience or science, they too are irrelevant. As Shankaracarya said, even a hundred Vedic texts cannot establish that fire is cold or does not give light; for no one can cognise what is opposed to what is seen.'

The Veda on itself:—

We find at least three sorts of statements in the Vedas referring to its own origin:—

- It is the eternal word heard by sages in deep meditation. (R.V.8:75-6)
- It was knowledge born out of sacrifices. (R.V.10:90-9)
- The self-existent God manifested it for the welfare of all. (AV.10:7:70)
- The Vedas are the breath of the Great Being. (Br.Up2:4:10)
- God manifested it through Agni, Vayu and Surya, and Brahma (S.Br.11:4.2.3)

6. The Mīmāṃsā

The primary purpose of Mīmāṃsā is to establish the nature of Right Action (**Dharma**).

The basic premise of Mīmāṃsā is that action is fundamental to the human condition. Without application, knowledge is vain; without action, happiness is impossible; without action human destiny cannot be fulfilled; therefore, Right Action (**Dharma**) is the *sine-qua-non* of a meaningful life on earth.

Jaimini defines Dharma as:

codanā-lakṣaṇaḥ arthaḥ dharmah

Dharma is that which leads to the highest common good (*shreyas*)
[and is distinguished by Vedic injunctions].

The primary focus of Mīmāṃsā pragmatism, and the essence of Vedic prescription, is the **vidhi** or “injunction” defined as follows:—

vidhis are [Vedic] texts containing verbs or expressions that communicate [ritual] instructions.

In the Vedic context the only VIDHIs of importance were ritual directions.

In the Vedānta the VIDHI are also those statements regarding the Ultimate Reality — Brahman, the Ātman and purpose of life (*puruṣārtha*) —all matters which cannot be comprehended by the either perception or reason.

In the Smṛti context these VIDHIS related to Dharma in any given situation as well as jurisprudence.

In the Tantric context the VIDHIS relate to Dharma, Absolute Truth as well as methods of **sādhana** (spiritual practice)

7. Mīmāṃsā Methodology

The exegetical format is called an **Adhikaraṇa** which comprises of a fivefold process.

- **viṣaya vākya** — the Scriptural sentence under discussion
- **samśaya** — the doubt as to the correct and relevant meaning of the sentence.
- **pūrva-pakṣa** — the unsound interpretation
- **uttara-pakṣa** — the refutation of the former position and presentation of the reasoned interpretation
- **nirṇaya** — arguments for the conclusion reached

8. Mīmāṃsā Principles

The central theme of Mīmāṃsā is stated in the opening verse of the sutras:-

"Now the investigation of duty [dharma]"

The term Dharma is derived from the root **dhṛ**, "to hold, maintain, preserve." It has reference therefore, to anything that holds, supports, or preserves. When used in the metaphysical sense, it means those universal laws of Nature that sustain the functioning of the universe and the manifestation of all things — without which nothing could be.

When applied to the individual, it has reference to that code of conduct that sustains the Self and enables one to fulfil one's spiritual destiny. It encompasses all the actions, practices, and duties that will benefit all beings — sentient and insentient; therefore, it is that which produces merit leading to spiritual evolution and final Liberation.

All rituals and ceremonies enjoined in the Veda, no matter how meaningless they appear on the surface are said to lead ultimately to spiritual evolution and enlightenment.

Mīmāṃsā endeavours to show how they are all based on Dharma and lead to the spiritual welfare of all beings.

Mīmāṃsā interprets the Veda on the basis that eternal beatitude is attainable by the correct performance of rituals founded on Dharma, thereby storing up merit which will fructify in the next life.

9. Acquisition of Knowledge.

There are 3 principle ways in which knowledge and information are acquired:—

- Direct perception (**pratyakṣa**)
- Inference/reason (**anumāna**)
- Valid testimony/teaching (**śabda**)

According to Jaimini, Knowledge of Dharma can be obtained only by Verbal Testimony (śabda /āgama = Veda) in other words through the medium of language.

The other means of knowing are fallible when dealing with the unseen effects of action. In support of his position he lays down five propositions;-

1. Every Word (*Śabda*) has an inherent and eternal power to convey its meaning. Jaimini holds that the meaning of Sanskrit words is independent of human agency and belong to the words by their very nature.
2. *Śabda* [the teaching of the Vedas] is substantive and does not depend upon any other source for its meaning; otherwise, it would become involved in the fallacy of *regressus ad infinitum*.
3. In matters dealing with the invisible realm (niṣkala), *Śabda* — teaching of the Veda — is the only infallible guide.
4. The knowledge derived from *Śabda* is called *Upadeśa* (teachings).
5. In the opinion of Bādarayana also, *Śabda* is authoritative

10. Śabda

Śabda is the valid teaching or testimony is based upon language. There it is important to understand some of the concepts regarding language and its use.

Semantics (giving signs, significant, symptomatic, from *sema*, sign) refers to the

aspects of meaning that are expressed in a language. Semantics is contrasted with two other aspects of meaningful expression, namely, *syntax* — the construction of complex sentences from simple words, and *pragmatics* — the practical use of words by agents or communities of interpretation in particular circumstances and contexts.

Questions about how words and other symbols mean anything, and what it means for something to be meaningful, are pivotal to an understanding of language. Since humans are in part characterized by their sophisticated ability to use language to convey ideas, it is an essential subject to explore in order to understand the human experience.

“**Meaning**” (*artha*) is the content carried by the words exchanged by people when communicating through language. In other words the communication of meaning is the purpose and function of language.

A sentence therefore should convey an idea from one person to another. Meanings may take many forms, such as evoking a certain abstract idea, conveying an emotion, or denoting a certain real-world entity.

According to Mīmāṃsā the meaning of Sanskrit words is intrinsic to them by their very nature and not dependant upon human agency — ie. Not dependant upon the collective decision of people. If this were not so, we would have an “Alice in wonderland” situation where words mean whatever the speaker wants then to mean — in which case communication becomes impossible. Even if we accept this as given — there is still the compounding problem of *interpretation* in translation — every translator also acts wittingly or unwittingly as an interpreter of the message, and because every Sanskrit word has at least 10 different meanings every translator has interpreted the text according to their own agenda based upon:—

1. *svabhāva* — nature
2. *bhūmika* — level of attainment or expertise
3. *adhikāra* — authority to interpret or to explain the subject matter.

For example the Upaniṣads declare the Ultimate Reality to be:— *raso vai saḥ*

Saḥ — “he” refers to the subject being described. *Rasa* is the variable term in this sentence with many different meanings. So we could translate the sentence as:—

1. The Ultimate truth is indeed enjoyment.
2. The Ultimate truth is indeed interest.
3. The Ultimate truth is indeed juice.
4. The Ultimate truth is indeed essence.

Now which definition a translator would choose depends upon his/her intention and conditioning.

- A Christian translator who wanted to show how puerile the Hindu Scriptures were would prefer number 3.

- An hedonist who wanted to justify pleasure seeking would prefer number 1.
- A psychologist who wanted to introduce a psychological aspect would prefer number 2.
- A spiritual practitioner would prefer number 4.

11. Learning of Language

According to Mīmāṃsā we learn the meaning of words only by watching the usage and activity of the speakers. When a string of words are spoken without reference to action an observer understands nothing. But when one person speaks to another, the latter acts in a certain way, the observer, by watching the action can infer the meaning of the words uttered. So even when teaching foreigners to speak English we would say “I” and then point to ourselves, then “you” and point to the other — through the gesture the foreigner would infer the meaning.

Learning of words thus takes place *primarily* through the means of *commands*. Other words used in the sentence denote things related to the central command such as time, place, person, name, activity etc. This leads to the assumption that the whole directive meaning of the Veda must lie in the enjoining of something to *be done*.

This attitude contradicts the view of the theologians that all the important Vedic Texts describe self-evident realities such as the Godhead (**Brahman**) or Self (**ātman**). The Mīmāṃsā denies the self-validity of either God or the Self, but teaches that those texts which mention Brahman or Ātman must be associated with some practical purpose — such as something to be “known” or to be “meditated” upon in order to gain self-realisation and be liberated from the cycle of rebirth.

The Nature of Scripture

Today, with our knowledge of the structure and development of language and of the origin and nature of the universe and species, it would be impossible for any intelligent person to accept that any text — whether it be the Veda, Tantra, Bible or the Quran— is either eternal or was composed and delivered by “God”.

We can accept that there are certain values and concepts which are eternal truths and have perennial meaning, and which have been realised by sages and prophets throughout the ages, and which are embodied in different Scriptures belonging to different peoples. Some may argue that these have been revealed by God, and others may claim that they have been discovered by enlightened and empowered men & women. Whatever one’s attitude, a Scripture is valuable only insofar as it reveals truths unknowable through an empirical source of knowledge (*ajñāta-jñāpanam śāstram*) and which remain un-contradicted by personal experience and science.

There are profound truths found in all the world’s Scriptures; Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Muslim as well as in secular poems, as well as the works of Shakespeare and in Moby Dick. No Scripture therefore is either unique or complete, because whether it is declared to be a revelation from God or a discovery by Sages, *it is formulated by the human intellect and expressed in a particular language conditioned by a specific socio-political milieu*. The said “Scripture” therefore is confined by the finiteness of the human mind and accepted knowledge of the age, as well as informed by the particular culture and time in which the “author” functions.

All Scriptures contain some elements of history and science mixed up with myth and legends, alongside empirical observations as well as valid generalisations based on them, spiced with superstitions and a fair amount of erroneous generalisations. But these do not form the **core** of Scriptures. The historical and scientific facts they contain provide useful material for reconstructing the socio-political systems in which the people functioned. The insights they reveal regarding human nature, the mind and the universe may serve as useful hypotheses in scientific investigations. However, it is the ethical teachings, metaphysical truths and spiritual techniques in them which constitute the core, the essence of Scriptures.

The Contents of Sacred Texts

The Purpose of Writing

When an author composes a piece of literature the general intent is to communicate a message. The specific reasons could be:

- (1) To convey some information or knowledge.
- (2) To issue some instructions or directions

- (3) To describe an event or thing.
- (4) To entertain and delight
- (5) To register or record something.
- (6) To praise or glorify someone or something.

All these categories are found in the Vedic, Pauranic and Tantric literature. Mimāmsa classifies all the subject matter of this vast body of literature under five different headings:

- (1) injunctions (*vidhi*)
- (2) hymns or sonic formulae (*mantra*),
- (3) categories or descriptions (*nāmadheya*),
- (4) prohibitions (*niṣedha*)
- (5) corroborative passages (*arthavāda*).

It then explains the method of interpreting every grammatical rule and literary device employed and of analysing all Vedic ritual and ceremonies into their two fundamental types, principle and subordinate.

This same classification and methodology can be applied to all the Tantric texts as well.

1. Vidhi *precepts or injunctions*

A **vidhi** is a statement that urges one to act. All actions are said to have two effects, one external, manifest and gross; (**dr̥ṣṭārtha**) and the other internal, potential and subtle (**adr̥ṣṭārtha**). The internal aspect is regarded as being eternal, while the external effect is transitory.

Actions create **samskāras** (mental impressions or “subliminal activators”) through their results, they are, therefore, the planting the seeds of future activity and resulting effects both good and bad.

How a Vidhi operates

That objective urge consists of three parts — What? Through what? & How?

Example:—

“One who desires a meal of curry & rice should cook!”

"What?" — the meal of curry and rice is the thing to be realised

“Through what?” — “Through the process of acquiring the ingredients and then cooking them.

“How?” — through going to the supermarket – purchasing the ingredients, preparing them and then cooking them. Once prepared the meal would be served.

The *What* constitutes the primary injunction.

The *How* constitutes the subsidiaries.

Through what constitutes the link between them.

So the comprehensive understanding of the sentence is:—

“One should prepare a meal of curry & rice by going shopping, buying the ingredients, preparing, cooking and serving.”

Sometimes there is no need to supply the “Through what” and the “how” they’re implied because either they are common knowledge or have been mentioned elsewhere in the instructions.

These three aspects of the **Vidhi** are technically known as:—

- (1) *Utpatti* — Primary Injunction to perform a action. A precept with a certain objective, which creates a desire to act.
 - a. eg. "One desirous of attaining heaven should perform the agnihotra".
(a fire sacrifice)
- (2) *Viniyoga* — Injunction of Application — establishes a particular relation between the principle activity and the subsidiary actions.
- (3) *Prayoga* — Injunction of Employment — the injunction(s) that lay down the order of performance of all the subsidiary or minor parts of the activity, it determines the process and order of all the actions.

The variable is the:—

- (4) *Adhikāra-vidhi* — Injunction of Qualification — an injunction which determines which person has a right to undertake the activity or be involved in some stage of the process.

There are another 3 sub-vidhis:—

- *Apurva-vidhi* — Original injunction — enjoins something not otherwise known;

eg. "the grains should be washed"
- *Niyama-vidhi* — Restrictive injunction — the text lays down one mode of doing a thing that could be done in several ways.

eg. "pound the corn to remove the husk"

- *Parisankhya-vidhi* — Preclusive injunction — an implied prohibition.
eg. “Only five animals with five toes may be eaten”. Implies that humans may not be eaten.

In both Vedānta (*Jñāna-khāṇḍa*) and Tantra; Vidhi has been broadened to include statements about the Supreme Truth and the nature of the Self and not just those that refer to action.

Precepts regarding Dharma

All these positive ethical precepts are authoritative and binding, though not equally so and they are conditioned by three objective factors:

- *Deśa* — place
- *Kāla* — time
- *Pātra* — circumstance

And three subjective factors

- *Svabhāva* — one’s disposition
- *Bhūmika* — one’s level of spiritual/intellectual/physical development
- *Adhikāra* — capacity to understand, to integrate and practice the precept.

The discerning student is required to distinguish between grades of *vidhi* or to compare their levels of authority. The primary distinction is derived from their motivation and goals thus producing the concepts of *puruṣārtha* and *kratvārtha*.

Puruṣārtha — a primary ethical precept (Dharma) which is conducive to personal as well as universal welfare.

Eg. “Non-injury is the highest for of Dharma”

Kratvārtha — a secondary precept concerned with aiding or facilitating the primary *puruṣārtha*.

Eg. “Take refuge in wisdom”. (Gita)

Precepts regarding Brahman & Ātman

These appear in the form of declaring the characteristics of Brahman. eg. — *Satyam jñānam anantam brahmā* Brahman is Truth, Wisdom and Infinity. (Taittiriya Upaniṣad)

These declarations are of three types;

- **Abheda śruti** — those affirming identity between Atman and Brahman.
- **Bheda śruti** — those affirming difference between them
- **Ghaṭaka śruti** — those which reconcile the two extremes

Another way of categorising them would be according to: —

Affirmation — *sarvam khalvidam brahmā* — all this is Brahman

Denial — *nāsti kincana* — nothing exists.

2. Mantra *Ritual Formulae*

These usually take the form of prayers or hymns of praise to various deities. Some of them, in Tantra, are sonic formulae with no grammatical meaning but generate a certain spiritual vibration in the consciousness.

Classification	Examples
Benedictory	<i>āyurasi tat te prayacchāmi</i> — long life I bestow upon you (V.S. 3-7)
Eulogistic	None is there, Indra, God or man, to hinder thy munificence, The wealth which, lauded, thou wilt give. (Rik Veda 8:14:4)
Incoherent	<i>Om aiṃ hrīṃ klīṃ cāmuṇḍāya vicche</i>
Plaintive	<i>ambe ambike</i> — O mother! (V.S. 23;18)
Injunctive	Come to us, Indra, come thou highly lauded to the devotions of the singer Mana. (R.V.1.177.5)
Didactic	If all speech could be divided into four equal parts, the wise will replace three parts with silence. (R.V.1.164:45)
Inquisitive	Who are you? How many are you? (V.S. 7;290)
Interrogatory	I ask thee of the earth's furtherest limit, where is the centre of the world, I ask thee. (R.V. 1;164;34)
Descriptive	This altar is the earth's furtherest limit; this sacrifice of ours is the world's centre. (R.V. 1;164;35)
Cryptic	What thing I truly am I know not clearly: mysterious, fettered in my mind I wander. (R.V.1.164.37)
Indicative	<i>devasya tvā ... nirvapāmi</i> which is indicative of putting corn into the winnowing basket.

3. Nāmadheya *Categorisation*

This includes the lists of names given to the various sacrifices as well as naming ritual activities, the giving of lists of various things, itemizing paraphernalia etc.

Know, Dearest One! that the first element is fire, the second is air, the third is water, the fourth is the earth, and, O Beauteous Face! as to the fifth element, know it to be ether, the support of the Universe. (MNT 7:109—110).

Manu Smṛti 8:4-7. Of those (titles) the first is the non-payment of debts, (then follow), (2) deposit and pledge, (3) sale without ownership, (4) concerns among partners, and (5) resumption of gifts, (6) Non-payment of wages, (7) non-performance of agreements, (8) rescission of sale and purchase, (9) disputes between the owner (of cattle) and his servants, (10) Disputes regarding boundaries, (11) assault and (12) defamation, (13) theft, (14) robbery and violence, (15) adultery, (16) Duties of man and wife, (17) partition (of inheritance), (18) gambling and betting; these are in this world the eighteen topics which give rise to lawsuits.

4. Niṣedha *Prohibition*

The opposite of an injunction or Vidhi. A prohibition or negative precept which proscribes doing a thing which is either injurious or disadvantageous. These are of two types:—

- *Paryudāsa* — a prohibition that applies to the person who is undertaking to perform a yajña.
(eg. “The yajamāna must refrain from sexual activity and not eat any cooked food”.)
- *Pratiṣedha*— a prohibition of general applicability.
(eg. “During the Agama temple festival any form of untouchability must not be practised”.)

5. Arthavāda *Corroborative Statements*

Arthavāda is passage which extols or encourages the performance of a positive injunction (*Vidhi*) or censures and discourages the performance of a prohibition (*Niṣedha*). *Arthavādas* are classified differently by various authorities but generally fall under the following categories:—

Classification	Example
1. Anecdotal	<i>Varuṇam pītarām upasasāra</i> (Varuna approached his father)
2. Ratiocinative	It moves and It moves not; It is far and It is near; It is within all this and It is also outside all this. Isa Up.5
3. Deprecatory	Therefore, O Devi! the worship of one who heeds not My precepts is fruitless, and, moreover, such an one goes to hell 2:12.
4. Eulogistic	Then first listen, O Devi! to the <i>Mantroddhara</i> of the Mantra, the mere hearing of which liberates one from future births while yet living. 5:9
5. Descriptive of deeds done	He, the Lord, also created the class of the gods, who are endowed with life, and whose nature is action; and the subtle class of the Sadhyas, and the eternal sacrifice. Manu 1:22
7. Indicative of a deity	Over the lines from West to East worship Mukunda, Isha, and Purandara: over the lines from South to North, Brahma, Vaivasvata, and Indu. 6:123.
8. Indicative of material	Then, drawing a figure (in front of the Yantra), according to the rules of ordinary worship, place the plate with food thereon. 6:89.
9. Indicative of action	The most excellent practitioner should for the attainment of wealth and all his desires make Japa of each or all of the first three Bijas 5:14.
10. Indicative of agent	Then, reciting the Mula-Mantra, let the practitioner offer five handfuls of flowers to the head, heart, Muladhara Lotus, the feet, and all parts of the body of the Devi. 6:95
11. Indicative of time	In the second half of the last quarter of the night the disciple should rise from sleep.5:26
12. Indicative of place	The wise practitioner should place the articles necessary for worship on his right , and scented water and other Kula articles on his left . 5:89.
13. Figurative - indicative of similarity	The massaging of the feet of a weary wayfarer, nursing a sick person, worship of god, washing the feet of brahmins, and scrubbing the place where brahmins have taken food — all these are on a par with the gift of a cow. (Yajnavalkya 6:11.)

The broad categories are of four kinds:—

- condemnation
- eulogy
- heroic performance
- past incident.

Condemnatory Arthavadas

“He who bestows silver, which is produced from tears, in the sacrifice called *Barhis*, has lamentation in his home before the lapse of a year” (Tai. 5. L V.i.2).

(The story is this: Once the gods went out to fight the jealous gods, depositing their valuables with the Agni. Agni took a fancy to the treasures and fled with them. The victorious gods, on their return, saw his treachery, hunted him down and forced him to return their deposits. Agni thereupon burst into tears, and these became silver.)

Condemnatory corroborative statement devotes itself to praising the thing enjoined by condemning things other than that. Since the condemnation of silver in the passage, "He who bestows silver," etc. is intended to praise what is enjoined, viz., not making a gift of silver, there is no contradiction.

One who purchases a girl, becomes a demon in the forest; who steals a gem, becomes a base-born; who steals vegetables, becomes a peacock; thief of pearl-necklace becomes a strew; of grains, a rat; of fruit, a monkey; of animals, a goat; of water, a crow; of meat, an eagle; of cloth, a leper; and of salt, a ragged one. (Yajnavalkya 12: 5-6)

O Kuleshani (Uma), a wife should not be burnt with her dead husband. Every woman is your image – you reside concealed in the forms of all women in this world. That woman who, in delusion ascends her husband’s funeral pyre shall go to hell. M.N.T. 10:79-80

Eulogistic Arthavadas

“The Wind is indeed a very swift deity; if a person approaches (ie., worships) him only with the special offering of the deity, the latter certainly makes him attain prosperity”

The corroborative statement, “The Wind is indeed,” etc. suggests that the Wind, being swift in movement, is an exceedingly laudable deity, and therefore a rite with that as its deity is praiseworthy. It thus forms a unitary passage with the injunction by demonstrating the praiseworthiness of the deity that is enjoined.

[It will be of no good to anybody merely to know, for instance, that the Wind is a very swift deity; for this will not impel him either to do anything or to desist from any action. This quotation is preceded by the injunction, "One who desires prosperity should touch the white animal (a goat) relating to the deity Wind."]
(Tai. S.II.1.i.I.)'

Let him never eat any dainty food which he does not offer to the guest; the hospitable reception of guests procures wealth, fame, long-life, and heavenly bliss. (Manu 3;106)

O Adya! the person who builds a bridge or causeway shall not see the region of Yama, but will happily reach the abode of the Gods, and will there have enjoyment in their company. One who dedicates trees and gardens goes to the region of the Devas, and lives in celestial houses surrounded by Kalpa trees in the enjoyment of all desired and agreeable enjoyments. Those who give away ponds and the like for the comfort of all beings are absolved of all sins, and, having attained the blissful region of Brahma, reside there a hundred years for each drop of water which they contain. (MNT 13:26 – 28)

Heroic performance

That corroborative statement which demonstrates that a particular work was done by a great personage in order to act as an incentive;

"Fire desired, 'Let me be a voracious eater among the gods.' He offered this cake baked on eight thin tiles to the deity Agni and the Pleiades. As a result, verily, he became a voracious eater among the gods."

(The commentator Sayana explains the first word "Fire" as a man who in the next cycle became the deity Fire by performing the requisite rite." (Tai. By. III. I. iv)

The passage, "Fire desired," etc. suggests that the sacrifice of which the deity is Fire was performed in ancient times by Fire and is therefore praiseworthy, and because of its superiority should certainly be performed by other sacrificers, even to-day. So it forms a unitary passage with the injunction through its praise of the rite that is enjoined. The same is to be understood in the other cases also.

Manu 2:151 -153. Young Kavi, the son of Angiras, taught his (relatives who were old enough to be) fathers, and, as he excelled them in (sacred) knowledge, he called them 'Little sons.' They, moved with resentment, asked the gods concerning that matter, and the gods, having assembled, answered, 'The child has addressed you properly.' 'For (a man) destitute of (sacred) knowledge is indeed a child, and he who teaches him the Veda is his father; for (the sages) have always said "child" to an ignorant man, and "father" to a teacher of the Veda.'

Manu 5:22 - 23. Beasts and birds recommended (for consumption) may be slain by Brahmanas for sacrifices, and in order to feed those whom they are bound to maintain; for Agastya did this of old. For in ancient (times) the sacrificial cakes were (made of the flesh) of edible beasts and birds at the sacrifices offered by Brahmanas and Kshatriyas.

Manu 10: 106. -108 Vamadeva, who well knew right and wrong, did not sully himself when, tormented (by hunger), he desired to eat the flesh of a dog in order to save his life. Bharadvaja, a performer of great austerities, accepted many cows from the carpenter Bribu, when he was starving together with his

sons in a lonely forest. Visvamitra, who well knew what is right or wrong, approached, when he was tormented by hunger, (to eat) the haunch of a dog, receiving it the hands of a Chandala.

Past incident corroborative statement

— that which demonstrates something that has been narrated by another;

Manu 5:1-2. The sages, having heard the duties of a Snātaka thus declared, spoke to great-minded Bhrigu, who sprang from fire: 'How can Death have power over Brahmanas who know the sacred science, the Veda, (and) who fulfil their duties as they have been explained (by thee), O Lord? '

"He cursed it, saying, 'May people kill you whenever they have a mind to (or, by various devices) (Tai. S. II. vi. vi. I) -

Agni decided not to carry any more offerings to the gods, lest he, too, should die of exhaustion like his three elder brothers. He fled and hid himself in water. The gods started in search of him, and when they happened to come to that water, a fish betrayed the deity. Agni thereupon cursed the whole species. Then he agreed to resume his service to the gods on their acceptance of his term that whatever offerings fell outside the boundary of the sacred fire would go to his departed brothers. This explains the injunction, "One should put a boundary" (round the fire with three sticks — *paridhis*), [which follows the Arthavāda.]

Sometimes *Arthavādas* do other functions, too. For example, in the injunction, "One should spread soaked gravel (on the altar)," the word "soaked" suggests the use of a liquid substance in general. When a doubt arises as to what that substance may be whether it be water, or milk, oil, or ghee, we conclude from the corroborative statement — "Ghee verily is light" (Tai. S. II IL ix. 4), that it is ghee. So this corroborative statement is authoritative as deciding a doubtful meaning as well.

Sanskrit Literature

Styles used in Sanskrit Literature

There are 3 principle styles found in Sanskrit literature.

Sūtra — is a very terse form of writing in which there is no embellishment. The sentence consists of few words and no narrative, explanation or dilation. They were meant for easy memorisation by students and depended upon the commentary given by learned scholars.

Example:— *athātho'brahmā jīñāsah* — Now, therefore, the investigation of the ultimate Truth.

The sūtras require extensive commentaries and because of their ambivalence can be interpreted in a number of different ways. To this category belong all the texts of the various schools of philosophy, Mīmāṃsā sūtras, Yoga sūtras, Vaiśeṣika sutras, Dharma sūtras, Gṛhya sūtras etc.

Sūkta — sūktas are the hymns of the Vedas, these are poetic compositions set to various different metres, some are comprehensible while others are cryptic and need interpretation.

Śāstra — these are the Dharma śāstras which although in different metres usually the one known as *anuṣṭup*, they are in the form of narratives in which the subject matter is discussed at great length. To this group also belong the Itihāsas and the Pūrāṇas with their prolix and often tediously long descriptions.

The Four Required Criteria

Every Tantric or Yogic text must include four criteria:—

Prayojanam — A statement of its purpose or objective.

Adhikāri — the qualifications of the individuals to whom the text is addressed

Abhidheya — the subject matter of the text

Sambandha— the connection between the title (*abhidhānam*) and the subject matter.

Literary Tools

It should be remembered that writing is an art-form and that authors use various tools in displaying their skill.

- *Prayojanam* — **Purpose**. Whenever an author composes a work he/she has a purpose in mind. A particular message which the author wants to convey to others. Sometimes it is a well thought out concept and sometimes vague. When reading a passage try to discover what the general purpose of the author is and do not be distracted by the rhetoric which may be used in it's articulation.
- *Alaṅkāra* — **Rhetoric**. Rhetoric is the art or technique of persuasion through speech or writing. Rhetoric in literature is called *alaṅkāra* or “decoration” because of the use of many symbolic and colorful forms of speech, none of which need to be taken literally but understood terms of the theme under discussion.

- *Nirvacanam* — **Explanation**. A detailed account wherein one may use any literary device to explain or elucidate a **vidhi** or prescription, or an incident etc.
- *Ākhyānam* — **Narrative**. A description of a happening – a simple statement of facts which is devoid of any rhetoric.
- *Dr̥ṣṭānta* — **Allegory**. A story, poem, or word picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one. Though it is similar to other rhetorical comparisons, an allegory is sustained longer and more fully in its details than a metaphor and appeals to imagination. The Rāmāyana is an allegory of the search for spiritual enlightenment.
- *Nirdaśanam* — **Metaphor**. A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable: “*I had fallen through a trapdoor of depression,*”. To grab the bull by the horns.
- *Sādrśyam* — **Analogy**. Comparison or simile which appeals to reason or logic. A comparison between two things, typically on the basis of their structure and for the purpose of explanation or clarification: *an analogy between the workings of nature and those of human societies | he interprets logical functions by analogy with machines.*
- *Prakaranam* — **Context**. When the validity of an injunction or teaching is dependant upon a specific time (*kāla*) place (*deśa*) and circumstance (*pātra*). Not all injunctions are perpetually valid and they need to be applied according to the context given within the passage. If the context is not explicitly stated then one should apply reason.
- *Abhyāsa* — **Repetition**. Often the same theme or point being made is repeated in a different way in order to impress it upon the mind of the reader. There are several ways in which repetition is used in literature,
 - the repetition of a single word, with no other words in between.
 - the repetition of a word in various places throughout a paragraph.
 - the repetition of the last word of a preceding clause.
 - the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of every clause.
 - the repetition of a word or phrase at the end of every clause.
 - the repetition of a word or phrase at the middle of every clause.
 - the repetition of a name, first to signify the person or persons it describes, then to signify its meaning.
- *anuvāda* — **Paraphrase**. *Paraphrasing* is the act in which a statement or remark is explained in other words or another way — as to clarify the meaning, or when a direct quotation is unavailable. Often, a paraphrase might substitute a euphemism for an actual statement, in order to avoid offense, but the paraphrase should not change the original meaning.

The problem of Interpolation

An **interpolation** is an entry or passage in a text that was not written by the original author. As there are often several generations of copies spanning thousands of years, between an extant copy of an ancient text and the original, each handwritten on palm leaves by different scribes, there is a natural tendency for extraneous material to be inserted into such documents over time.

Interpolations may be inserted as an authentic explanatory note, but may also be included for fraudulent purposes. However, most interpolations result from the errors and inaccuracies which tend to arise during handcopying, especially over long periods of time. Conscientious scribes tended to copy everything which appeared in a manuscript, but in all cases scribes needed to exercise personal judgement. Explanatory notes would tend to find their way into the body of a text as a natural result of this subjective process.

In ancient India this was complicated by the fact that often one would not sign a work but out of humility attribute it to one's teacher or a former teacher. So for example, all the Puranas and the Mahābhārata are attributed to "Vyasa" which simply means "The Compiler". In Manu for example there are many passages which are contradictory and unsuitable for a law-giver to have written. Sanskrit literature is notorious for the amount of interpolation there is. The only text which is considered to be totally free from interpolations is the Veda. The reason being that it was handed down orally from teacher to disciple in closed communities and never written down until the last few hundred years. Therefore whenever a discrepancy arises between the Veda (śruti) and the Traditional law (Smṛti) the Veda prevails.

INTERPRETATION OF THE VEDA

From ancient times the Veda has been interpreted in four particular ways.

(1) Ritualistic (adhiyajñika)

The ritualists (Yajñikas) consider the Veda as a source book for the performance of rituals for obtaining material prosperity in this life and heaven after death. They considered that the efficacy was in the ritual itself, the gods being incidental to the process. A person who knows and repeats the mantras properly, and performs the prescribed ritual acts punctiliously will be able to control the gods and direct events.

(2) Polytheistic (aitihāsika)

Some scholars accepted the Vedic gods (devas) as realities, as administrative cosmic forces, their battles with the anti-gods (asuras) as real incidents, and the rituals taught in the Vedas as effective acts of propitiation and worship. The various gods are worshipped in different ways to gain specific desirable material ends and some gods such as Rudra are propitiated in order to avert harm, sickness and untimely death. Most of the early Western scholars viewed the Vedas and the Vedic religion from this angle.

(3) Monotheistic (adhidaivika),

According to this view, the various gods who are glorified in the Veda are but functions and facets of the One Godhead. If the words are interpreted in the etymological sense, every hymn in the Veda can be understood as directly referring to the One God. Ramanujacarya, Madhvacarya, Jayatirtha, Raghavendra, Atmananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Sri Aurobindo.⁴ T.V. Kapali Sastry were all of this view.

(4) Metaphorical (adhyātmika).

Symbolic explanations of the sacrifices are already found in the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Bhagavad-Gita. The Mahabharata 14.11;7-20 also indicates that the legend of Indra killing Vrtra and sacrificial acts can be understood in a symbolic way. For example; if Vrtra represents *tamas*, ignorance, then Indra represents the *mind* (*manas*) and his thunderbolt (*vajra*) represents *discrimination* (*viveka*).

In another example, the phrase “pañca-janāḥ” (the five nations) can be interpreted as:

- (1) The four Vedic social groups and the tribals (Nisadas)
- (2) The five sacrificial fires,
- (3) The four Vedic priests and the patron
- (4) The eye, ear, mind, speech and breath.

It can only be argued that the entire Veda is uniformly either monotheistic, mystical or spiritual through tortuous and convoluted interpretations. The Vedas and the allied Scriptures like the Tantras and Puranas are in fact encyclopaedic in nature, containing profound and eternal metaphysical and psychological truths, ethical teachings of unsurpassed and perennial value as well as myths, legends, folklore, superstitions and baseless generalisations. The Sacred Literature of India caters for all tastes and inclinations, and the rituals prescribed range from extremely sophisticated spiritual techniques for self-transformation on the one hand to silly rituals that could only apply to credulous, indiscriminating fools on the other!

Eligibility for Veda Study

It has been traditionally believed that Veda study is open only to men of the upper three castes. This denial of universal access in fact has been one of the greatest obstacles to the preservation and propagation of the Veda. This prerogative for Veda study in latter centuries became the exclusive privilege of male Brahmins only. Even today most Brahmin Veda scholars and teachers generally do not teach any non-brahmins, women and certainly not foreigners. But the Veda itself, on the contrary declares that it is meant for all.

“Just as I have revealed this auspicious word to all human beings, so must you. I have revealed the Vedic truth to Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Sudras, Aryas, personal servants (svaya) and to the lowest of Sudras (aranaya) also”. (Sukla Yajur Veda. 26.2)

“O Man, I, being of the nature of truth and being unfathomable, have revealed the true Vedic knowledge; so I am he who gave birth to the Veda. I cannot be partial either to a Dasa (slave) or an Arya; I save all those who behave like myself (ie., impartially) and follow my truthful commands”. (Atharva Veda 5.11.3)

Although there are some passages in the Brahmanas which discuss the Sudras eligibility to perform sacrifices (yajnas) nowhere in Samhita or the Upanisadic portions is any mention made of eligibility based on gender, social differences or ethnic origins. The oft quoted passages limiting Veda study to male Brahmins only occur from the Smrti period onwards. Most of what the Smrtis have to say is redundant in modern times. Everyone has the right to the highest wisdom from the best source available, and everyone should be encouraged to study the Veda and the allied Sacred texts.

The golden rule of Hindu hermeneutics is that if the literal or primary meaning of a sentence is logical, non-contradictory, internally consistent and practical, then it can be accepted as such without any further interpretation. If, on the other hand the meaning appears to be illogical, contradictory, inconsistent and unpractical one may then interpret it in a figurative way.

Purport

The fundamental or basic meaning (*mukhya artha*) of a sentence, passage, chapter or an entire book is what may be called its **purport** (*tātparya*).

In a sentence the words all have literal semantic meaning. When these words are compiled into a sentence they then produce a combined meaning based on the interrelationship of the individual words in the sentence (*syntax*) this is called the **purport**.

When two or more sentences form a unitary passage, several sentences a chapter, and a number of chapters a book, while each sentence has its own meaning in itself, by correlating the sentences correctly, the purport of the passage is understood. Then by correctly correlating the passages of a chapter the purport of the chapter is understood, and then through correlation of the chapters the purport of the book as a whole may be obtained.

Purport is the meaning of words leading to **valid knowledge**.

The purport of a sentence may be an activity or a fact.

The literal or direct meaning of a particular sentence may be an activity or a fact.

The literal or direct meaning of a sentence may sometimes not reveal a purport; in which case its implied meaning or figurative meaning would be its purport.

For a scriptural statement or purport to carry any validity it must fulfil the following 5 conditions:—

- It should tell us something novel (*apūrva*) that we cannot obtain from any other source of information such as perception and reason.
- It must be logical.
- It mustn't contradict perception and reason.
- The content of the text must be internally consistent.
- The knowledge presented in the text must have a practical application leading to empirical outcomes.

A Shastra (sacred text) is a vast conglomeration of sentences, and unless selective judgment is applied in developing a coherent co-ordination of them, one cannot work out a proper perspective regarding its teaching. The selection of specific sentences & paragraphs has to be made based on a vision of their general importance and relevance to time, place and circumstance. One needs to juxtapose and correlate sentences and paragraphs to discover the recurrent coherent theme which must be in harmony with the concept of **Loka-sangraha** — the welfare of all sentient beings — the common and universal good.

The following sentences should be ignored:—

- **Irrelevant sentences** — those which have nothing to do with the real and meaningful aims of human life, (*puruṣārtha*)
- **Useless sentences** — those which merely give empirical information or information which cannot be successfully utilised.
- **Incongruous meanings** — those which are not in harmony with the general purport or theme of the passage or text.

All this can be done only if the recurrent dominant theme, in other words **purport**, is discovered; for once this is done, all statements can be harmonised with the general purport and a consistent teaching formulated. Purport, therefore, provides the clue to scriptural understanding.

Determining the Purport:—

There are six criteria (*ṣad-līṅga*) which must be born in mind when looking for the purport of a text:—

1. Unity of the initial and concluding passages
2. Recurrence of the theme
3. Any new conclusion discovered
4. The general consistency throughout
5. The commendation or criticism of specific matters
6. Alleged results

1. *Upakrama-upasamhara*; — the opening and concluding passage of a particular text introduce and summarise the subject matter — they provide the context in which the rest of the text is to be understood. They must be in context and in harmony with each other and thus determine the purport of the body of the text. It is a fallacy to begin with an assertion and then complete the argument with a different conclusion.

E.g. Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣad.

Upakrama — Then Narayana, the Supreme Being desired ' I shall produce offspring 'From Narayana emanates the Life Breath, mind and the sense organs, ether, air, fire, water, and the earth that supports all this.

Upasamhara — Whoever knows this attains Union with Narayana. He attains union with Narayana. This is the Upanisad. 5.

Eg. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras

Upakrama — Now begins the instruction in Yoga (1). Yoga is the control of the fluctuations of the mind (2). The seer then abides in his true nature (3)

Upasamhara — Since the constituents of Nature (The Gunas) no longer have any purpose to serve for the Self, they resolve themselves into Nature. This [freedom from the Gunas] is liberation. The Self shines forth in its pristine nature as pure consciousness. (33)

2. *Abhyāsa* — the recurrence of the theme. Often the same theme is repeated in a different way in order to impress it upon the mind or to clarify a particular point. The figure of speech in which the theme is re-presented should not be taken as a new teaching or precept but must be taken in context with the original injunction — these two passages must both be understood as conveying the same meaning.

3. *Apūrvata* — novelty of meaning. Often a text may introduce a new explanation of a Dharma concept or a new and expanded development upon a previous Dharma theme. Or perhaps a different way of conceptualising the Absolute Brahman.

4. *Upapatti* — Congruity or consistency of the conclusion and the argument throughout. In order for a text to have any validity it must be in harmony and agreement with all the relevant factors within the bounds of logic and pragmatism.

5. *Arthavāda* — Corroborative statement, commendation or criticism. It must be born in mind that many of the allegories and descriptions given in the text are merely for praising or encouraging a prescribed action or Dharma teaching and discouraging a forbidden one. These statements are not to be taken literally.

6. *Phala* — alleged results. Often at the end of a hymn (stotra) or story, various exaggerated results from the recitation or hearing of the passage are mentioned. These are also not to be taken literally — they are included merely to encourage the neophytes. In addition, all activities such as chanting hymns or reciting stories of sages and gods have the potential of planting seeds in the mind which hopefully will yield reward at some later stage when the conditions are right.

Narayana Upanisad 3.

“Whoever studies this mantra and chants it constantly, attains full life and supremacy over others. He enjoys royal pleasures and becomes the master of the senses. He attains Liberation yea Final Liberation”.

Considerations

1. Among these criteria the first one of thematic harmony (*prakarana*) between the initial and concluding passages is the most important. When a contradiction or lack of harmony is found between them, then the opening passage carries more weight and the concluding passage is to be interpreted in conformity with the opening one.

2. If this reconciliation does not work then the subsequent passage should be regarded as introducing a new topic. This is the principle of the ‘domination of the initial passage’. (*upakrama-parākrama*)

3. If the concluding passage contradicts the initial passage and if its sense is not intelligible unless what is said earlier is overruled, then this should be done. (*apaccheda nyāya*) This, of course, does not mean that every secondary cognition or statement should be taken to disprove the previous one. An erroneous understanding may follow a correct one, but sooner or later a mistaken understanding is bound to be nullified by the correct view, while the right view endures. Similarly, sometimes a right view may be stated first to refute a wrong view stated later; but still it should be understood that the statement of the erroneous view is meant to precede that of the right one; for then only there will be a meaningful sequence. In polemics the opponent's view is always stated first — this is called the *pūrva pakṣa* the polemicist then refutes this view using logic (*tarka*) and presents his own considered and reasoned conclusion known as the *siddhānta*.

Subjectivity verses Objectivity

While these six criteria may help in trying to reach an objective textual interpretation, selective judgment based on one's own agenda and sense of importance is unavoidable, therefore all interpretation is by nature more or less subjective. Even in the scientific model of objective observation of facts, every conclusion has its objectors based on each individual scientist's sense of importance. The great masters of Mimamsa and Vedānta (Kumarila and Prabhakara, Sankara and Ramanuja) knew and applied these criteria and principles rigorously, and yet still arrived at different interpretations. We need to approach the subject matter with great humility and sincerity. But it also does not mean that we accept the conclusions of the masters' blindly! We need to arrive at our own conclusions using theirs as markers.

Levels of Meaning

With these guidelines we can then proceed to examine the different levels of meaning of the Sacred Texts.

Śabdārtha — the literal sense

For example all the Gods and Goddesses mentioned in the Veda can be accepted as they are — as polytheistic deities living in heaven and accepting the sacrifices offered to them.

Bhāvartha — the allegorical sense

Based upon the statement within the Veda itself that there is only One Truth and the gods are manifestations of that Truth, we can then form a figurative explanation of the gods and goddesses as emanations or aspects of that One Truth.

Lakṣyārtha — the esoteric meaning.

Or we could also interpret the deities as beings subtle energies of the universe and aspects of our own consciousness, subtle forces that operate within the depths of the unconscious mind. **Indra** is not just a god but is a symbol of the enlightened mind which uses the **vajra** (thunderbolt) representing discrimination to slay the demon **Vrtra** symbolising ignorance, which has stolen and hidden the 7 cows representing the streams of wisdom.

Contradiction vs Paradox.

Contradiction which is a logical error applies to literal readings of a text and cannot easily be resolved without resorting to “exegetical gymnastics”.

Paradox is a tool that is used to explain the inexplicable or to introduce an extremely abstract concept by using the tension between 2 opposites.

Degree of Authority of Injunctions (*Vidhi*), Mantra & Corroborative Statements (*Arthavāda*).

“Authority” is defined as “the ability to influence somebody to do something that (s)he would not have, or could not have done”.

The Injunctions (*vidhi*) constitute Dharma and are therefore the essence of the śabda [Revelation]. Dharma is that act which is enjoined by the Veda through its injunctive passages and which is conducive to the happiness of all beings.

Arthavādas as such are authoritative only in so far as they serve the distinctly useful purpose of helping the injunction or prohibition.

Mantras convey a distinct meaning indicative in most cases of the deity connected with the sacrifice enjoined elsewhere and therefore in themselves have no authority whatsoever.

Degree of Authority of the Law (*Smṛtis*), Tradition (*Purāṇas*) and Epics (*Itihāsas*).

In the books on Law (*Smṛti*) written by various sages, in the 18 Traditional Texts (*Purāṇas*) and the two great epics (*Itihāsas*) *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* the direct injunctions are buried in a mass of verbiage of a purely descriptive character. These descriptive passages are relegated to the category of *arthavāda* as such need not be taken as absolutely correct with regard to biological, geographical or historical fact. These works were intended for the general public, who are of varying degrees of

intelligence and thus Vyāsa and the others inserted every kind of material in their works from pure injunctions to apparently useless and banal stories. The sole purpose was to make these works attractive to all people. Another element was aesthetics and pleasure in an age in which the main form of entertainment was story-telling, to delight people with beautiful descriptions and entertaining fables.

Sages & Direct Realisation

The Rishis (sages) through Yoga had a direct realisation (*sākṣātkāra*) of the Ultimate Truth (*Brahman*) and the way to attain that experience (*Dharma*) and through personal instruction (*upadeśa*) they taught it to others.

“Poets don’t invent poems
The poem is somewhere behind
It’s been there for a long time
The poet merely discovers it”.
Jan Skacel

Direct realisation may occur to an ordinary person, a contemplative or a god. One who has directly realised the Truth and desires to communicate that experience without some ulterior motive, is considered to be a “reliable person” (*āpta*) whose testimony is acceptable. There is an interesting text which says:—

“*When the Rishis were flying up*⁵, human beings asked the gods, ‘who among us will now become a Rishi?’ The gods bequeathed this *tarka-Rishi* (logic/reason) to humankind. The *tarka* so given was that which was drawn out by inference from reflection on the meaning of mantras. Therefore, whatever a learned person infers (arrives at through reflection) becomes ‘sageness’ (*arsam*).” (Kumarila -Tantra-vārttika 1.2.49)

This is an important text which permits one versed in the Veda to ponder over its meaning and deduce from it something new as the need arises, and that will be just as good as the teaching of a Rishi. In yore there were sages to guide you; now in their place *reason* shall do so — this is what the gods ordained.

“*Therefore seek refuge in Reason*” (*Gita 2;49*)

There is a passage in the Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad— “Meditate on Speech as a cow.... Her calf is mind”,

Sankaracharya interprets it as follows:—

The word ‘Speech’ means the Vedas It is mind (the calf) which makes (stimulates) the Veda (the cow) to reveal its meaning (its milk), for the Vedas proceed forward only in a subject thought of by the mind”. Unless the calf approaches the cow, takes its teats into its mouth one after another, sucks, and gently butts its mother’s udder with its head now and then, milk does not flow. Similarly, only a mind ‘ which has become active and reflected deeply and long over a relevant matter (eg., Dharma and /or the Brahman), can study the Veda and absorb and digest its meaning. To the unprepared inactive mind the Veda would mean nothing, just as a cow cannot give its milk to its calf which does not approach it and become pro-active in the right manner.

In Vedānta, reason (*tarka*) is employed

- (i) to ascertain the purport of Scripture which is our only source of knowledge concerning Brahman,
- (ii) to remove doubts and contrary beliefs and
- (iii) to convince us of the probability of the existence of what is to be known, ie., Brahman.

The dialectic used by Vedanta must be —

- (1) based on Scripture;
- (2) must elucidate the content of Scripture, and
- (3) must not be opposed to it.

Both Mimāmsa and Vedānta are hermeneutic philosophies, in which exegesis, apologetics, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics are synthesised. According to both the great teachers, Gauḍapāda and Śankara, the true meaning of the Veda must be ascertained with methodical reasoning, and nothing else.

niścitam yukti-yuktam yat tat bhavati netarat

Summary

- The entire ocean of sacred texts; the Veda, Tantra, Purana and epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) etc. are meant to reveal only what cannot be known through cognition and reason. There is no need for scriptural validation in empirical matters.
- Scripture has no authority to contradict knowledge gained from the two other sources; but its authority is infallible in matters pertaining to Dharma and Brahman.
- Scripture neither produces anything new nor alters what is. There are some modern scholars who attempt to demonstrate that subatomic physics and neuro-physiology are hidden in certain Vedic texts. But the Veda is neither validated by these findings if proved to be correct nor invalidated if they are proved to be wrong. The purport of the Veda is not science, physiology, biology, history etc. The essence of the Veda has to be assiduously contemplated upon for years in a sustained way with faith, by one who has refined the mind through ethical living; one may then eventually 'realise' it.

