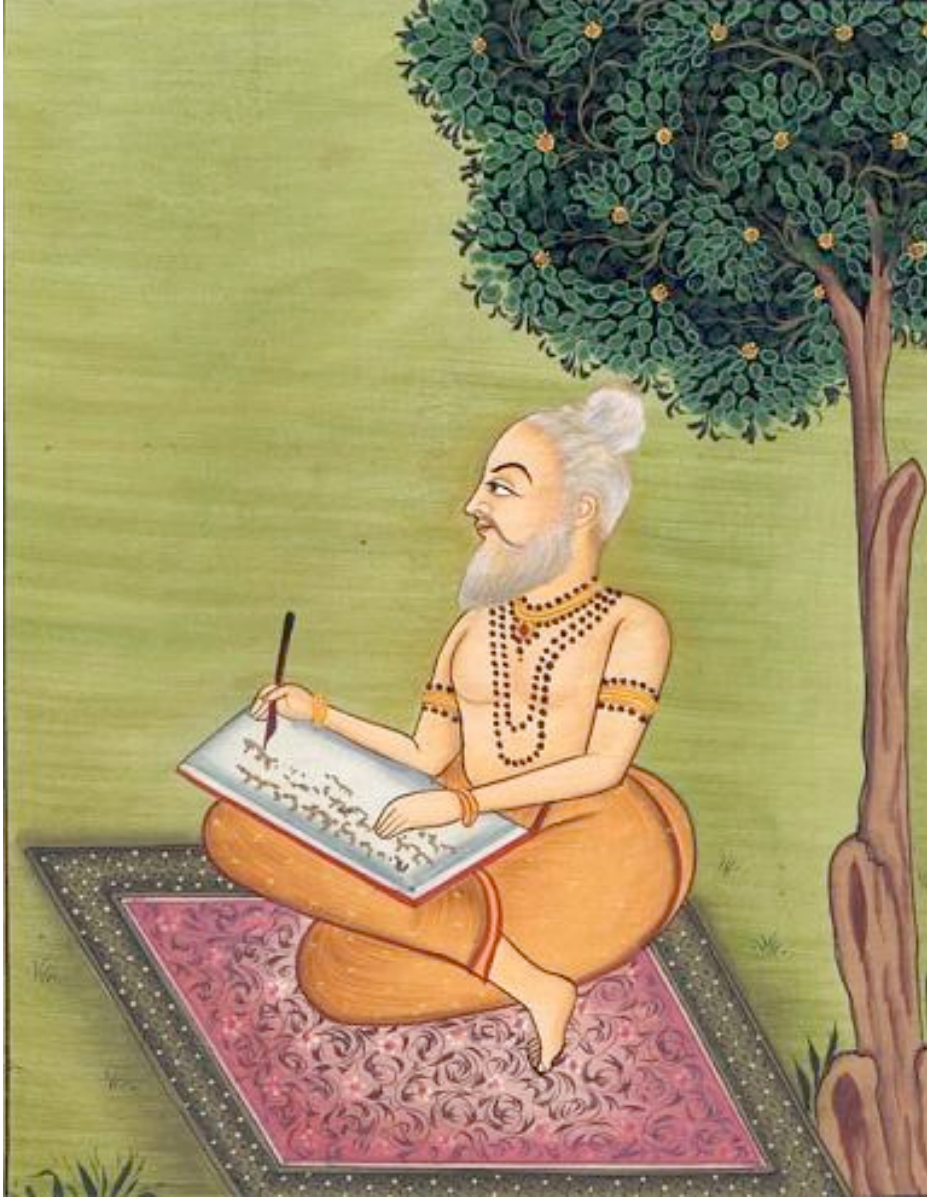


# MĪMĀṂSA

The Study of Hindu Exegesis — the  
Interpretation of Sacred Texts



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## Preface



For Hindus there is no clear distinction between philosophy and theology as in the west. In the west theology is based upon the revelations of the Bible and the teaching of the doctors of the Church whereas philosophy is investigation into life and the pursuit of happiness based upon pure reason — both approaches being more in conflict than in harmony.

The Vedānta which is the major school of Hindu philosophy is based primarily upon revealed texts — the Upaniṣads, which are the revelations of enlightened sages or mystics called Rishis, but the teachings derived from them and the theological and philosophical systems grounded on these ‘revelations’ are subjected to rigorous semantic analysis and reasoned debate. So the Hindu approach is one in which revelation is subjected to rigorous logical analysis to produce the doctrines upon which practice is then based.

Thus all Hindu philosophers/theologians are required to study logic (*nyāya*) and exegesis (*mīmāṃsa*) prior to their excursion into the Vedānta.

The 3 major schools of Vedānta differ in their interpretation of teachings of the Vedic Rishis, and all of them argue and debate with one another and among themselves over the subtleties of exegesis and interpretation of the texts and arrive at nuanced understandings and insight into the nature of the Ultimate Reality. The theological differences are sometimes quite radical but they almost all agree in the implementation of the teaching and it’s application in daily life.

It is important to remember that in Hinduism there is no thought crime. Freedom of thought and expression are paramount and are vigorously encouraged. It is not adherence to dogma or subscription to a particular theory or membership of an elect group which is the cause of Liberation but rather one’s personal practice and conduct.

According to Rāmānujācārya the study of exegesis is an essential pre-requisite to the study of Vedānta. In their commentaries on the Brahma-sūtras both Rāmānujācārya and Śaṅkarācārya engage in vigorous and witty polemics with the opposing schools of thought. All their reasoning is based upon the principles of Mīmāṃsa and for modern readers it is for the most part extremely confusing and recondite.

This book is written with a view to helping readers to make sense of Scripture and to provide an insight into the commentaries of the great ācāryas.



## Introduction

In the complexity of our daily lives here are two paths of possible pursuit:— **Preyas** —that which is ‘pleasant’, or **Śreyas** — 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 fulfillment 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 *samsāra* — rebirth and suffering.

**Śreyas** is the universal good. Dharma. It is the spiritual path which leads to liberation — mokṣa and non-rebirth — nirvāṇa. 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 sampāśyan kartum arhasi || Gītā 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 Saṅkaṭa* — Dilemmas of Dharma.

According to Manu there are four sources of Dharma:—

*vedaḥ smṛtiḥ sadācāraḥ svasya ca priyamātmanah |  
etaccaturvidhaṃ prāhuḥ sākṣād dharmasya lakṣaṇam ||*

The Veda (śruti), tradition (smṛti), 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 Mīmāṃsa 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 of texts.**

Exegesis is the application, it 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 <sup>1</sup>
- examination of the general historical and cultural context of the passage,
- confirmation of the limits of the passage,
- examination of the context within the text itself.

Hindu hermeneutics is based on the methodology propounded by Mīmāṃsa.

The term *Mīmāṃsa* 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.

Mīmāṃsa is "rational enquiry" which "attempts at rational conclusions".

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

## Origin of Mimāṃsa

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:—

- 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.
- 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 contemporize it in

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that every attempt at translation also involves an interpretation. The translator tries to understand the text and then to make it intelligible to others using metaphors and images the readers can understand.



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.

## The Scope of Mīmāṃsa

Mīmāṃsa simply takes for granted the philosophical concepts of the other 5 systems; it does not enter into any analysis or debate on the nature of the Ultimate Reality, the 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. And, on the other hand all the declared effects of Dharma would be meaningless without the analysis of the evolution of consciousness taught by the Sāṃkhya-Yoga school.

However, Mīmāṃsa makes specific use only of those factors that are needed for its own 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 (*mokṣa*) cannot be achieved by Right Knowledge alone, for the Self must first exhaust its negative and positive potentialities gained through action (*Karma*), as a seed fulfils itself through growth. No amount of contemplation (*dhyāna*) 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 (*karma*) and the rewards (*phala*) 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 interpreted by it. Mīmāṃsa is the life of the super-structure of Indian Civilisation.

## The Two Divisions of Mīmāṃsa

Mīmāṃsa is divided into two systems based on the twofold division of the Vedas (*karmā-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.

### 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.

### 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.

## The Vedas (Nigama)

Vedic literature is divided into four sections Saṃhita, Brāhmaṇa, Aranyaka and Upaniṣads. 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 (*su-uktas* = well said).

The Brāhmaṇas and Aranyakas are ritual texts based upon the practical application and usage of the Samhita portion in rituals (*yajñas*) and the Upaniṣads 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

Jaimini defines Dharma as:

*codaṇā-lakṣaṇaḥ arthaḥ dharmah*

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

Dharma 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 a 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.

In fact *Brahman* also means “sacred wisdom” — it is both the knowledge, the knower and the thing to be known.

The Veda does not necessarily 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.

The Veda 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 sound 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)

## The Purpose of Mīmāṃsa

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

The basic premise of Mīmāṃsa 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.

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

Vidhis are those (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. According to Vedānta knowledge must have a practical application, so therefore Brahman, jīva etc are always mentioned in the context of “doing” something i.e. meditation.

In the Smṛti context these *vidhis* related to Dharma in any given situation as well as all aspects of jurisprudence and interpretation of laws.

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

## Mīmāṃsa Methodology

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

- *viśaya vākya* — noting the Scriptural sentence under discussion
- *saṁśaya* — formulating the doubt as to the correct and relevant meaning of the sentence.
- *pūrva-pakṣa* — presentation of the unsound interpretation (the objector or the opposing school)
- *uttara-pakṣa* — the refutation of the former position and presentation of the reasoned interpretation
- *nirṇaya* — arguments for the conclusion reached

All commentaries on the Brahma-sūtras etc. are presented in this format.

## Mīmāṃsa Principles

The central theme of Mīmāṃsa is stated in the opening verse of the sutras:—

*athāto dharma-jijñāsā* — "Now the investigation of duty [dharma]"

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

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

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

## Acquisition of Knowledge.

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

- Direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) — tangible evidence.
- Inference/reason (*anumāna*) — evidence based upon reason.
- Valid testimony/teaching (*śabda*) — trustworthy witness.

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:—

- ❖ 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.)
- ❖ *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*.
- ❖ In matters dealing with the invisible realm (*niṣkala*), *Śabda* — teaching of the Veda — is the only infallible guide.
- ❖ The knowledge derived from *Śabda* is called *Upadeśa* (teachings).
- ❖ In the opinion of Bādarayana<sup>2</sup> also, *Śabda* is authoritative.

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<sup>2</sup> The celebrated author of the Brahma-sūtras.

## Śabda — Reliable Testimony

*Śabda* as the valid teaching or trustworthy testimony (*āpta vākya*) is based upon language.

Here 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 Mīmāṃsa the meaning of Sanskrit words is intrinsic to them by their very nature and not dependant upon human agency — i.e. The meaning is 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 childish 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.

### Learning of Language

According to Mīmāṃsa 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 Mīmāṃsa 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.



## For Reflection

### 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, Torah, 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 realized 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 evidence, 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, 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 and constrained 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 generalizations based on them, spiced with superstitions and a fair amount of erroneous generalizations. 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

Whatever the source of knowledge, something can only be articulated using words that have a commonly understood meaning. Once written down, a “revelation” therefore takes the form of descriptions and propositions that can be assessed rationally. On the other hand *that* assessment is likely to reveal more about the limitations of concepts and logic than about the original “knowledge” that they seek to articulate.

The fact that something is known through revelation does not logically preclude it from being known by reason alone, unless what is “revealed” goes against reason — and this we do not accept. Revelation must accord with reason as far as possible. Once you reflect upon religion you are involved with concepts and use your reason to sort them out and relate them one to another.

You can remember something without concepts, but you cannot *think* about it without concepts. You can draw a picture without concepts but you cannot describe it without concepts.

As soon as religion gets beyond the area of personal religious experience it encounters human reason, and the result is language.

### The Purpose of Narrative

When an author composes a narrative 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, Puranic and Tantric literature.

Mimāṃsa classifies all the subject matter of this vast body of literature under five different headings: —

- ❖ injunctions (*vidhi*)
- ❖ hymns or sonic formulae (*mantra*),
- ❖ categories or descriptions (*nāmadheya*),
- ❖ prohibitions (*niṣedha*)
- ❖ corroborative passages (*arthavāda*).

It then explains the method of interpreting every grammatical rule and literary device employed and of analyzing 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/ Āgamic texts as well.

## 1. Vidhi — Precepts or Injunctions

A **vidhi** is a statement that induces one to act.

All actions (*karma*), according to Mīmāṃsa are said to have two effects:

1. one external, manifest and gross; (*dṛṣṭārtha*)
2. the other internal, potential and subtle (*adṛṣṭārtha*).

The internal aspect is regarded as being long-lasting, while the external effect is transitory.

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

### How a Vidhi operates

The inducement to act 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 realized

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

**“How?”** — By 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.  
eg. “One desirous of attaining heaven should perform the agnihotra”.  
(a fire sacrifice)
- (2) **Viniyogaḥ** — Injunction of Application — establishes a particular relation between the principle activity and the subsidiary actions.

(3) **Prayogaḥ** — Injunction of Employment — the injunction(s) that describe the order of performance of all the subsidiary or minor parts of the central activity, it determines the process and order of all the actions which constitute the process.

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:—

**Apūrva-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"

**Parisaṅkha-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 six factors:—

3 objective factors	3 subjective factors
<i>Deśa</i> — the place	<i>Svabhāva</i> — one's disposition
<i>Kāla</i> — the time	<i>Bhūmika</i> — one's level of development
<i>Pātra</i> — the circumstance	<i>Adhikāra</i> — one's suitability

The discerning student is required to distinguish between grades of *vidhi* or to compare their levels of authority or applicability.

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.

e.g. "Non-aggression (*ahiṃsa*) is the highest form of Dharma"

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

e.g. “Take refuge in wisdom”. (Gita)

So in other words, the ideal of non-aggression (*ahiṃsa*) is not a fixed absolute but rather a guiding principal which needs to be modified according to time place and circumstance.

## Precepts regarding Brahman & Ātman

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

These declarations on Brahman and Ātman 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 kiñcana* — 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 human, to hinder your munificence, The wealth which, when praised, you wilt give. (Rik Veda 8:14:4)
Incoherent	<i>Om aiṃ hrīṃ klīm cāmuṇḍāya vicche</i>
Plaintive	<i>ambe ambike</i> — O mother! (V.S. 23:18)
Injunctive	Come to us, Indra, come you who 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 furthest limit, where is the centre of the world, I ask thee. (R.V. 1;164;34)
Descriptive	This altar is the earth's furthest 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 and 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 13 general categories:—

Classification	Example
1. Anecdotal	<i>Varuṇam pitaram upasasāra</i> (Varuna approached his father Tait. Up.)
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 MNT 2:12.
4. Eulogistic	Then first listen, O Devi! to the Mantroddhāra 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. MNT 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. MNT 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 MNT 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. MNT 6:95
11. Indicative of time	In the second half of the last quarter of the night the disciple should rise from sleep. MNT 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 . MNT 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.)

These broad categories can be summarized as being of five kinds:—

- ❖ condemnation
- ❖ eulogy
- ❖ heroic performance
- ❖ past incident.
- ❖ explanatory

### a. Condemnatory Arthavādas

“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 — *asuras*, 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 giving away 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 shrew; 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

### b. Eulogistic Arthavādas

“The Wind is indeed a very swift deity; if a person approaches (i.e., 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)

### c. Heroic performance Arthavādas

That corroborative statement which demonstrates that a particular work was done by a great personage or persons 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.

Krishna Yajur Veda II:ii.1.4 Yonder sun did not shine; the gods desired an atonement for him; for him they offered this offering of ten bulls; verily thereby they restored his brilliance. For him who desires splendour he should offer this offering of ten bulls; verily he has recourse to yonder sun with his own share; verily he bestows on him splendour; he becomes resplendent.

### d. Past incident corroborative statement Arthavādas

— 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. ix. 4), that it is ghee. So this corroborative statement is authoritative as deciding a doubtful meaning as well.

### d. Explanatory Arthavādas

"Indra opened the hole of Vrtra; the topmost cattle he grasped by the back and pulled out; a thousand cattle followed it, it became hump backed." KYV II:11.1.5

This arthavāda explains how cattle became hump-backed.

Indra having killed the son of Tvaṣṭra was guilty of the sin of killing a Brahmin. He ran to women and asked them: "take upon yourselves a 3<sup>rd</sup> of my sin!" They said: "what will we gain by doing that?" Indra said: "choose a boon." They said: "May we obtain children during our season and may we live at pleasure with our husbands till the time of giving birth to our children." Having obtained the boon they took upon themselves a 3<sup>rd</sup> of the sin of Indra. Therefore they become guilty of the sin of killing a brahmin every month with their discharge. (Vasishtha Dharma śāstra 6)

This arthavāda rationalizes why women are socially isolated for 3 days during their periods.

# Sanskrit Literature

## 1. Styles used in Sanskrit Literature

There are 3 principle styles found in Sanskrit literature.

**1. 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 memorization by students and depended upon the commentary given by learned scholars.

Example:—

*yogaś citta vṛtti nirodhaḥ* (Yoga Sūtras 1:2)  
“Yoga (is defined) as the restraint of the fluctuations of the consciousness.”

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, Mīmāṃsa sūtras, Yoga sūtras, Vaiśeṣika sūtras, Dharma sūtras, Gṛhya sūtras etc.

**2. 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.

Example:—

*nāsad āsīnno sadāsīttadānīm | nāsīd rajo no vyomā paro yat |  
kim āvarīvaḥ kuha kasya śarman | ambhaḥ kim āsīd gahanaṁ gabhīram ||*

There was not the Non-existent nor the Existent then; there was not the air nor the heaven which is beyond. What did it contain? Was there water, unfathomable and profound ? (R.V. 10:129:1)

**3. 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.

Example:—

*etāvāneva puruṣo yajjāyā'tmā prajeti ha |  
viprāḥ prāhustathā caitadyo bhartā sā smṛtāṅganā ||*

A man alone is nothing — he is incomplete. The perfect man is one who is completely united in harmony with his wife and children. These three are ONE. (Manu 9;45)

## 2. 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.

### 3. 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 its 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 in 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.

**Dṛṣṭānta** — 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.

**Sādhāryam** — 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.

**Upakrama-upasamhāra**; — 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.

In terms of the general theme under discussion the introduction and the conclusion should be in harmony. It is a fallacy to begin with an assertion and then complete the argument with a different conclusion.

**Prakaraṇam** — 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,

1. the repetition of a single word, with no other words in between.

*om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||*

2. the repetition of a word or phrase in various places throughout a section.

*śaṃ no mitraḥ śaṃ varuṇaḥ | śaṃ no bhavatvaryamā | śaṃ na indro  
brhaspatiḥ | śaṃ no viṣṇur-uru-kramaḥ |*

3. the repetition of the last word of a preceding clause.

*| yaḥ potā sa punātu mā | (V.S.19;42) punantu mā deva-jaṇāḥ |*

4. the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of every clause.

*punantu mā deva-jaṇāḥ | punantu manavo dhīyā | punantu viśva āyavaḥ ||*

5. the repetition of a word or phrase at the end of every clause.

*lomaśaṃ paśubhiḥ saha svāhā | āmāyantu brahmacāriṇaḥ svāhā |  
vimāyantu brahmacāriṇaḥ svāhā | pramāyantu brahmacāriṇaḥ svāhā |  
damāyantu brahmacāriṇaḥ svāhā | śamāyantu brahmacāriṇaḥ svāhā ||*

6. the repetition of a word or phrase at the middle of every clause.

**apūrvata** — Novelty of meaning. Often a text may introduce a new explanation of a term or a new and expanded development upon a previous theme.

**upapatti** — Congruity. 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.

**arthavāda** — Corroborative statement. 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 form of Dharma and discouraging a forbidden one. They are not to be taken literally.

**anuvāda** — Paraphrase (translation). 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.

**phala** — Outcomes. 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 *arthavādas* and are 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”.



## 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 of Sanskrit texts 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 hand-copying, 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 judgment. Explanatory notes would tend to find their way into the body of a text as a natural result of this subjective process.

Al Biruni who visited India in 1017 after testing the caliber of the Indian scribes complained bitterly about their shoddy and incorrect transcriptions. Indian scribes when compared to their middle-eastern and Chinese counterparts were far below standard.

The emphasis in Brahmanism was on the oral transmission of a text and for thousands of years texts were never written down but passed down through an oral transmission and memorization. The written word was also held in disrepute by the Brahmins.

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 Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata are attributed to "Vyāsa" which simply means "The Compiler".

In Manu for example there are many passages which are contradictory and unsuitable for an ethical 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.<sup>4</sup> 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!

Please see appendix for the article “Attitudes to the Veda”

## 1. 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.

*yathemām vācam kalyāṇīṃ āvadāni janebhyaḥ |  
brahma rājanyābhyām śūdrayā cāryāya ca svāya cāraṇāya ca ||*

"Just as I have revealed this beneficial [Vedic] truth to all people, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Sudras, Vaishyas (*aryas*), our own kin (*svaya*) and to the foreigners (*aranāya*) also". Sukla Yajur Veda 26:2

*satyam aham gabhīraḥ kāvyena satyaṃ jātenāsmi jātavedaḥ |  
na me dāso nāryo mahitvā vratam mīmāya yad ahaṃ dhariṣye ||*

“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 Dāsa (sudra) or an Arya; I save all those who behave like myself (i.e., 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 (*yajñas*) 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 Smṛti period onwards. Most of what the Smṛtis have to say is redundant in modern times. And if there is a conflict between Smṛti and Śruti the Śruti is the final authority.

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 Exegesis 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 — Tātparya

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 fulfill 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 Śāstra (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 on Dharma in context.

The selection of appropriate 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-saṅgraha* — the welfare of all sentient beings — the common and universal good.

The following sentences should be ignored:—

- **Irrelevant statements** — those which have nothing to do with the real and meaningful aims of human life, (*puruṣārtha*) in the present context.
- **Useless statements** — those sections which give descriptions and information

which cannot be successfully utilized.

- **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-upasaṃhāra;** — 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.

**Upasaṃhāra** — Whoever knows this attains Union with Narayana. He attains union with Narayana. This is the Upaniṣad. 5.

E.g. 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)

**Upasaṃhāra** — 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 (*prakaraṇa*) 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 Mīmāṃsa 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.

### a. 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.

### b. 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.

### c. 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 cows representing the streams of wisdom.

## Contradiction vs Paradox.

**Contradiction** is a logical error and applies to literal readings of a text or statement. A contradiction needs to be resolved by applying hermeneutics. There may be contradiction in one single text; —

Example:

Manu 5:35. But a person who, being duly engaged (to officiate or to dine at a sacred rite — yajña), **refuses to eat meat**, becomes after death an animal during twenty-one existences.

Manu 5:48. Meat can never be obtained without injury to living creatures, and injury to sentient beings is detrimental to (the attainment of) heavenly bliss; **let one therefore shun (the use of) meat**.

or between 2 or more different texts;

Example

Manu 9:65. In the sacred texts which refer to marriage the appointment (of widows) is nowhere mentioned, **nor is the re-marriage of widows prescribed** in the rules concerning marriage.

Paraśara 4:30 **When the husband** disappears, **dies**, goes forth to a mendicant life, becomes impotent, or falls from social status, then in all these five cases **remarriage is ordained for women**.

**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.

*tad ejati tan naijati tad dūre tadvantike |  
tad antarasya sarvasya tad u sarvasyāśya bāhyataḥ || 5 ||*

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. (Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad 5.)

These apparently contradictory statements are not suggestive of the mental unbalance of the writer. He is struggling to describe what he experiences through the limitations of human thought and language. The Supreme is beyond the categories of thought. Thought is symbolic and so cannot conceive of the Absolute except through negations; yet the Absolute is not a void. It is all that is in time and yet is beyond time.

It is far because it is not capable of attainment by the ignorant and it is very near to the wise because It is their very Self.

## Hyperbole

Hyperbole are exaggerated claims or outrageous statements that are forms of *arthavāda* and not to be taken literally. Hyperbole is common in many cultures, and is all too frequent in Hindu literature.

The numerous phala-śrutis or declared benefits of reciting certain *stotras* is one such device.

*raṅganātha aṣṭakam puṇyam prātar utthāya yaḥ paṭhet |  
sarvān kāmān avāpnoti raṅgi sāyujyam āpnuyāt || 10 ||*



Those who recite this hymn on Sriranganatha upon waking in the morning attain the fulfillment of all their goals and are completely unified with Sri Ranganatha.

Another is the benefits of taking a bath in a holy river or even just mentioning the name of the river:—

*gaṅgā gaṅgeti yo bruyād yojanānām śatairapi |  
mucyate sarva pāpebhyo viṣṇu-lokā sa gacchati ||*

The person who simply recites the name Ganga, Ganga, even though thousands of kilometers away, will be absolved of all sinful reactions and will attain the realm of Vishnu.

A particularly nasty prescription is allegedly by Gautama who says:

Now, if a Sudra listens intentionally to the recitation of the Veda, his ears shall be filled with molten tin or lac. (Gautama 12:4)

It is extremely doubtful whether this was ever taken seriously or any such punishment was ever metered out. Certainly neither Manu nor Apastamba mention it. It has been the custom in South Indian temples for centuries to recite the Vedas during services and the majority of people attending the ceremonies would have been Sudras. During the daily, monthly and annual processions of the deities the Brahmins walk around the town with the palanquin of the deity loudly reciting the Vedas in the hearing of everyone standing within range.

## 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*).

### Veda-Vyāsa

All the 18 Purāṇas and Upapurāṇas, the Mahābhārata and the Brahma-sutras are claimed to have been authored by a sage named Sri Vedavyāsa (visit <http://srivedavyasa.org/>.) — also known as Kṛṣṇa-dvaipāyana.

He is also said to have edited the four Vedas and divided them among his disciples with a view to preserve and perpetuate them for future generations. In fact the name *Vyāsa* simply means the ‘compiler’ or ‘editor’.

The Rig-veda was assigned to Pail, the Yajur-veda to Jaimini, the Sama-veda to Vaiśampāyana and the Atharva-veda to Sumanta.

Vedavyāsa as the source of all the Hindu Scriptures is also said to be an incarnation of the Supreme Lord who instantly upon his birth to Satyavati grew into a youth.



*Vyāsāya viṣṇurūpāya vyāsa rūpāya viṣṇave |  
Namo vai brahma-nidhaye vāsiṣṭhāya namo namaḥ ||*

Salutations to Vyāsa who is in the form of Viṣṇu and to Viṣṇu in the form of Vyāsa. The one who's the treasure house of the Vedas. Salutations to the one born in the noble family of Vasiṣṭha.

### Objections

If we accept this account literally then there are a number of problems that need to be resolved.

1. How could one individual in a pre-computer age compose and transmit so many millions of verses without ever writing them down — writing came much later — the Puranas were transmitted orally for thousands of years before they were written down.
2. Since they were transmitted orally from teacher to disciple for thousands of years how can we be certain that nothing in them has been changed since Vyāsa originally composed them?
3. If Vyāsa was in fact an incarnation of God and therefore omniscient, how come there is so much confusion and so many conflicting statements in the Puranas? There are biological errors, scientific errors, geneological errors, historical errors, geographical errors, legendary errors etc.
4. If Vyāsa was God then why did he compose scriptures praising Śiva and saying that Vishnu is his podiatrist, then praising Vishnu saying that Siva is his

cleaner, then praising Devi saying that both Siva and Vishnu are her gate-keepers etc.?? How come God himself doesn't know who the Supreme Being really is and communicate that to us in clear and uncompromising terms?

5. Surely God being omniscient could have foreseen this theological confusion and not created it in the beginning? If he did it on purpose then the only reason would be to prove that Brahma, Viṣṇu, Śiva and the Devi are all ONE Divine Godhead playing different but equal roles.

6. Vyāsa did *not* compose all the Purāṇas — the oldest and the most authentic of the Puranas — the Vishnu Purāṇa was narrated by Parāśara — the alleged father of Vyāsa. (It is claimed that Vyāsa later redacted and rearranged it).

7. The Brahma-sūtras which were written to clarify the teachings of the Vedānta (Upaniṣads) are extremely abstruse, unclear and subject to many interpretations. Surely an omniscient being could have provided explicit clarification rather than cause further confusion and sectarian fission.

8. Most of the Purāṇas mention the Buddha who was an historical character but are confused about his actual parentage and biographical details as well as his teachings. Buddhist monks — *śramanas* — are also mentioned. Any mention of the Buddha and his *sangha* would prove that the texts must have been composed after 500 B.C.E. The apologists claim that the Buddha mentioned in the Purāṇas is not the historical Gautama Buddha.

## Conclusion

If a text exists it must have had a author. We in fact do not know who the authors of the Purāṇas were, so we simply say it was “Vyāsa” — the compiler. 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.

There were and are some teachers of the Madhva and Gauḍīya sampradāyas who emphasize Purāṇa as the highest Scriptural authority but this is not accepted by the two major schools of Vedānta. The highest authority is the Veda only, because the transmission of the Vedas over 1000's of years has been perfect and there has been no interpolation.

*Itihāsa purāṇābhyām vedam sam-upabṛmhayet |  
Bibhetyalpa śrutād vedo mām ayam prahariṣyati ||*

The Veda is to be interpreted through means of the Itihāsas and Purāṇas. The Veda dreads a person of little learning fearing — “he will misunderstand me!” (Vasiṣṭha Dharma sūtra 27:6)

The primary sources of knowledge are the Vedas/Upaniṣads, the Purāṇas and Itihāsas are authoritative only in so far as they confirm and elucidate the Vedic teachings.

They are not accepted as independent sources of knowledge by Śankara and Rāmanuja as Mādhava claims they are.

## 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. Direct realisation may occur to an ordinary person, a contemplative or a god.

“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

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, 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.

## Conclusion

There is a passage in the Bṛhadarāyaka 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 true purport of Scripture which is our only source of knowledge concerning Dharma and 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, i.e., 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 Mīmāṃsa and Vedānta are hermeneutic philosophies, in which exegesis, apologetics, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics are synthesised.

According to both the great teachers, Gauḍapāda and Śāṅkara, the true meaning of the Veda must be ascertained with methodical reasoning, and nothing else.

*nīścitam yukti-yuktam yat tat bhavati netarat*

## Summary

- ❖ The entire ocean of sacred texts; the Veda, Tantra, Purāṇa and epics (Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata) etc. are meant to reveal only what cannot be known through cognition and reason. There is no need for scriptural validation in empirical matters which can be known through science.
- ❖ Scripture cannot 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.

*Itihāsa purāṇābhyām vedam sam-upabṛmhaḥ |  
Bibhetyalpa śrūtād vedo mām ayam prahariṣyati ||*

One should interpret the Veda through means of the Itihāsa<sup>3</sup> and Purāṇas. The Veda dreads a person of little learning fearing “he will misunderstand me!” (Vasiṣṭha Dharma sūtra 27:6)

<sup>3</sup> Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata

## ATTITUDES TO THE VEDA:— SOME ANCIENT VIEWS

(Author — unknown)

**P**araskara in his grhya-sutras informs us that in his time those who planned to become priests just learnt the mantras by heart, while Adityasena, a commentator on Laugakshi grhya-sutra mentions that many celebrants at rituals knew only how to recite the mantras without knowing their meaning and that they even insisted it was useless to know it.

Venkata Madhava thought that even the authors of some kalpa-sūtras did not fully understand the mantras. Some Smrtis like Dakṣa, Aśvanasa and Yajñavalkya had to exhort that one should not limit oneself to learn how to recite the Veda but also learn its meaning.

All this means from very ancient times usually most learnt the Veda by rote without caring to know what it meant. Naturally, such reciters known as '*chandasas*' or *srotriyas* were looked upon somewhat contemptuously, as is evident from literature. They were dubbed as "ignorant of the Veda" and as its "sellers". For instance, the Bhojacaritra narrates that when some *srotriyas* came to seek an audience with king Bhoja, himself a scholar-poet and a great patron of poetry, literature and scholarship, his chamberlains "laughing in fun at them" (*kautukat hasanto*) went to the king and reported that "at the gate were standing *chandasas*, enemies of poetry, with ugly discoloured teeth and their hands placed on their hips"<sup>4</sup>. This image of mere *Veda-pathakas* as lacking in commonsense, refinement, scholarship and proficiency in anything useful or productive, still by and large continues.

### Nyāya — the school of logicians

Early Nyāya maintained that the Veda is the work of reliable persons; while later Nyāya mentioned God as its author. The latter argued that the omniscient and compassionate creator of the world, who can be known through inference, could not have left beings without teaching them the means of attaining the good. The teaching of this Being, who is like a father of all, must have been preserved with great respect by the earliest beings. The Veda embodies that Divine teaching. None else except an infinite omniscient being could have authored a work like the Veda as its contents are so unique, profound, all-embracing and consistent.

The Veda, for Nyāya, is inerrant and free from contradictions. If it were not the authentic Scripture, it could have neither established the institution of four castes and four stages of life, nor would it have been acceptable to generations of good men from immemorial times till now. Reasoning cannot give the entire truth; it cannot establish what is 'good' or 'bad'. Any inference opposed to perception or the Scripture is only an apparent inference. In the realm of Dharma, Nyāya holds, reason is useful only in protecting the truth revealed by Scripture from heresies, and has no positive role.

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<sup>4</sup> The Sahitya Darpana (1.2.) declares poetry superior to the Veda, for, its commentary explains, it is insipid, troublesome to learn and fit for aging intellects.



## Vyākaraṇa — the school of Grammarians

The *Vaiyakaraṇas* claim that the purpose of grammar is

1. to protect (*rakṣa*) Vedic forms which must remain changeless;
2. to provide appropriate words through conjecture (*uha*);
3. to make available an easy method of grasping the language; and
4. and to clear doubts.

## Sāṅkhya

According to Kapila,

- the Veda is neither eternal, nor a product.
- No one could have produced it: for a person in bondage, lacking omniscience, could not have authored it, while a 'liberated' person would not have a motive to do anything.
- The Veda itself says it is a product; so it cannot be eternal.
- The Veda came into existence spontaneously, like the grass and trees in a forest.
- Its validity is intrinsic and self-proved.

The *Sāṅkhya-kārika*, considered the oldest available work of this system, says for the complete eradication of suffering there is neither an empirical, nor an '*anuśravika*' means. '*Anuśravika*' is what is transmitted orally from person to person, generation to generation, continuously; and that is known through Scripture, viz., the Veda.

"*Anuśravika*" means are defective, says the Karika, because

- they are impure as in sacrifices, etc., they involve injury to beings,
- their effects (heavenly happiness, etc.), are impermanent, and
- they may create jealousy, etc., due to inequality of their fruits.

So, freedom from suffering, Samkhya teaches, will be possible only through non-empirical and non-scriptural means.

## Yoga

According to Yoga, God is the perfect Guru untouched by any defect whatsoever. Scriptures are the proof for this; and Scriptures have their proof in the perfect quality of God's '*sattva*' (principle of light and harmony). Both Scriptures and perfection are present in God's *sattva*, and there is an eternal relation between the two. God having resolved to instruct all beings in right knowledge and Dharma composed the Scriptures, which are the expressions of God's perfect thought.

## Vaiśeṣika

Sacred tradition, it says, is authoritative, because it is 'their teaching' (*tadvacana*). The author's reliability guarantees its authority. The Veda is not eternal; it is the work of some persons or person. Nevertheless, it is authoritative, because it deals with Dharma.

Verbal testimony is not an independent means of knowledge, but really an inference from the reliability of its giver to the truth of what he says.

## Manu — the Law Giver

The Manu-Smṛti has lavished the highest praise on the Veda, considering it to be the Scripture par excellence and its authority and validity paramount. In its second chapter occur these remarkable verses:—

"It is not good to have desire <sup>5</sup> (*kāma*); yet there is no desirelessness. But acceptance and study of the Veda as well as '*Vedic Karma yoga*' is dependent on desire (or, arises from desire). The will is the root of desire, and sacrifices are generated by the will. All vows, religious observances, restraints and Dharmas are considered to be products of the will. In this world no action whatsoever of a desireless one is seen; whatsoever one does is the doing of desire. One who is well-engaged in actions goes to the immortal world, and, also, here he has all his desires fulfilled as willed by him".

In its last chapter after saying all that has to be said on the rise of results of actions, the Manu-Smṛti continues as follows:

"Now hear about the action which, for a brahmin, produces the supreme good (*naiḥ-sreyasa*). Regular study of the Veda, askesis (*tapas*), knowledge, control of the senses, non-injury (*ahimsa*) and service of guru: this constellation is the highest in producing the supreme good. Now, here of all these auspicious actions, one is said to be the most productive of the supreme good for a human being. It is the knowledge of the Self which is considered the best among them; it is the foremost of all branches of knowledge (*vidyas*); and by that immortality is attained. Among these six actions Vedic action is to be cognised as action most conducive of good in life and after death. In the different components of 'Vedic karmayoga' all these are included one after another. Vedic action is twofold, involved (*pravṛtta*) and uninvolved (*nivṛtta*); from the former happiness and prosperity, and from the latter the supreme good are attained. Involved action is motivated by desire here and in the other world; while desireless action done with knowledge is taught to be uninvolved action. One who performs involved action becomes like gods, while one who performs uninvolved transcends the five elements (*pañcabhūtas*). Seeing the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self, thus seeing the Same (*samam paśyan*) the sacrificer of the self attains self-rule (*svarājya*). A superior brahmin, even neglecting all the prescribed actions, ought to be diligently engaged in the knowledge of the self, tranquillity and regular study of the Veda".

In this Smṛti-exposition may be found as good an exposition of the essence of Vedic religion as anywhere else, and the closeness of this '*Vedic karma yoga*' to the *karma-yoga* of the Bhagavad Gita. It succeeds in showing a way of understanding from a higher standpoint the apparent ritualistic religion of the earlier part of the Veda and relating it to the obvious spiritual teaching of the later part. This is what is important in this Smṛti, and not its many verses about social organisation, the "do's" and "don'ts", the tabus, etc., which are irrelevant.

## Mahabharata

From the '*Pati-vratopakhyāna*' (the Story of the Chaste Married Lady) in the *Aranyaka-parva*:—

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<sup>5</sup> Another way to translate this is: It is not laudable to be desireful (desireful = in a state of having desires).

"It is very difficult to know the eternal Dharma, which is established in truth. The elders laid it down that *Sruti* is the authority for Dharma. Dharma is subtle and appears in diverse ways. [It cannot be said that the actual nature of Dharma becomes manifest just from a study of the Veda.] Although you are pure, a knower of Dharma and engaged in study of the Veda, I think you do not know Dharmas in it's true nature".

So admonishing, a chaste married lady advised a brahmin to go to a righteous butcher to learn Dharmas. In the teaching imparted by the butcher, the following appears to be a part of what is striking: "The essence of the Veda is truth, of truth sense-control (*dama*) and of the latter relinquishment (*tyaga*)" <sup>6</sup>. "Non-injury is the supreme Dharma, and that is established in truth. Having basis in truth, the inclinations of a good, man proceed (or take from)". "The unsurpassed behaviour of the good has only three steps: do not harm, give and speak truth".

From the '*Sanatsujata-parva*' (the Teaching of Sanatsujata) in the '*Udyoga-parva*':

(1) A question was raised, "will one who has studied the three Vedas be defiled by the sins one has committed, because there are texts like "one who is purified by the three Vedas becomes glorified in *brahmaloka*?" The reply given was, "Neither singly nor together can the three Vedas save one from the result of one's actions; I am not telling anything false. The Vedas cannot save a sinner or a deceitful person continuing to deceive. For the attainment of the Supreme Self the Veda has propounded tapas, sacrifice, etc., through which sin is destroyed and merit gained; then through the light of knowledge will come *sakṣātkāra* of the Supreme Self. Thus from knowledge only is the Self attained"

(2) There is no one who knows the Vedas; or there may be some rare one who knows their essence. He who knows only the Vedic sentences does not know what ought to be knowable through them. But he who firmly abides in truth knows what ought to be known through Vedic sentences.

(3) A question was asked, "who should be supposed to be a brahmin, the one who knows the 5 Vedas, including *itiḥāsas* and *purāṇas*, or the one who knows 4 Vedas, 3, 2, 1 only, or not even 1? " The reply was: "As the One Veda was not known, many were made. In the essence of the One Veda of the nature of Truth rarely is someone found to be rooted. Without knowing at all the true nature of the Veda some suppose themselves to be great wise men.... The brahmin who has read much is merely a well read man; do not consider anyone who can just talk a lot a brahmin. Only he who does not swerve from Truth is to be known as a brahmin. Those who know the mantras but do not know what ought to be known from the Vedas, are not really knowers of them".

From the '*Kapila-go-samvada*' in the *Santi-parva*, which is actually a dialogue between Kapila and Syumarashmi. In order to know the truth, as the latter himself states, he submits for the former's consideration the thesis that the Vedic ideal is the married householder (*grhastha*) who

- (i) fulfils the duties pertaining to his caste and station in life,
- (ii) carries out the ritual and actions necessary for discharging the three debts which everyone owes<sup>7</sup>, and
- (iii) performs sacrifices<sup>8</sup>, the obligatory ones and also those which will take him to heaven; for (according to him) except through sacrifice heaven is

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere between *dama* & *tyaga*, *tapas* (askesis) is placed, and the final result of *tyaga* is said to be *sama* (tranquillity). (Sukanuprasna', p. 2318).

<sup>7</sup> to gods, sages and manes.

<sup>8</sup> including those which may involve killing of animals.

impossible, and men, animals, plants, etc., all, desire heaven. Along with the sacrificed animals, etc., continues, the sacrificer goes up to heaven.

According to him, it is certain

- (i) that for the non-sacrificer there is neither this world nor the other, and
- (ii) that liberation is impossible without discharging the three debts.

Only the *grhastha*, he thinks, does productive work (*śrama*), performs sacrifices and askesis and sustains the continuity of the human race as well as supports those who have become renunciates abandoning all productive work and rituals, because of their disbelief, foolishness, hopelessness, idleness or tiredness. Thus the position of the *grhastha* being the root of all Dharma, how can it be true, Syumarasmi asks, that 'from the house liberation is impossible'? He further argues that according to *sruti* anything other than Vedic utterances cannot be *Shastra*. A man with family accomplishes something very difficult, for he is engaged in scriptural study, sacrifices, begetting and bringing up of children and cultivating straightforwardness (honesty, *ārjava*), while pursuing some occupation for the maintenance of himself and his family; and if, in spite of doing all this, he has not done all that ought to be done and, consequently, there is no liberation for him, Syumarasmi exclaims, then fie (*dhik*) upon such a doer, what is done and such profitless labour ! He concludes: liberation or whatever is the ultimate good must be attainable by relying on Vedic utterances; not to admit this leads to nihilism (*nāstikya*) and violation of the Veda. Finally, he begs Kapila to comment on his thesis and enlighten him as to what really is welfare (*nirāmaya*) and eternity (*anantya*).

*'Nima kimye niramayam?' "Anantyarnicluimi"*

Kapila, in response to the above, sets forth what he deems to be the correct Vedic position, which may be summarised as follows:—

"The strivers (*yatis*) after the supreme state (*para gati*) following the path of knowledge, sure in their mind, determined to relinquish and be liberated and having relinquished, are freed from all desires, impurities, sin and grief, and devoted to Brahman, become It and are established in It. There is no purpose in their becoming *grhasthas*. While there are various and several types of rituals performed by the devout, the pure, steadfast and contented who have given up all action and have taken recourse to Brahman satisfy the gods by their knowledge of Brahman only. If one 'safeguards' one's hands and feet, speech, belly and sex organ<sup>9</sup>, one is a true brahmin; if one has not done so, what can one do with *askesis*, sacrifice or oneself? He, who with minimum necessary worldly possessions, lives in peace and contentment, knowing the nature of reality, and the causes and conditions of all that is happening and the destiny of beings, who is fearless of all and of whom all are fearless, and who has become the self of all beings, is a true brahmin. Such a person's conduct and behaviour is what truly reflects the Vedic norm; it is what interpenetrates all Dharmas. Those who cannot conform to it consider actions conducive for treading the path of knowledge useless. As for other actions and rituals, first, it is difficult to understand their nature and procedure; secondly, even after understanding them it is very difficult to perform them; and, lastly, even after performing them one finds their fruits to be transient. To the questions at the end of the last paragraph, Kapila's answers are: Whatever is performed according to *Shastra* results in welfare. Whoever follows the path of knowledge is purified, whoever goes astray from it is destroyed. Those who, not understanding

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<sup>9</sup> 'Safeguarding hands and feet' = not to play dice, not to take another's money, not to accept food of an inferior, and not to harm anyone in anger. 'Safeguarding speech' = not to abuse or curse anyone, not to lie, not to speak unnecessarily, not to spread rumours, to be devoted to truth and to be alert 'Safeguarding belly' = neither to fast nor to eat too much, not to be greedy about food, and to eat only as much as is necessary to live. 'Safeguarding sex organ' = fidelity to one's own spouse and to have intercourse even with her only during the days suitable for conception, and chastity.

*Shastra* and supported by argumentation and impelled by desire and aversion, become subject to egoism cannot achieve Shastraic knowledge, but cite *Shastra* to justify their position. They are, indeed, unbelievers in *Shastra* who 'rob the Veda'-83 they enter into darkness only. But the others who rightly understand *Shastra* see that involvement in the *gunas* of *prakṛti* (basic stuff of the universe) results in being affected by aversion, desire, anger, falsehood and pride. So, strivers engaged in self-control, aiming at the supreme state, relinquish good and evil.

Kapila continues and concludes thus:— For all people the Vedas are the authority; they cannot and should not be violated. Both the Brahmanas, i.e., Brahman in its verbal form and in its absolute nature (Sabda- and para-brahman) are to be known; one who knows the former well would be able to know the latter. Actions done in the following manner indirectly lead to eternity. Those who perform sacrifices and other rituals without expecting anything, just because it is Dharma to perform them, are freed from all passions, egoism and sins, obtain certain knowledge and hold fast to it, and work for the good of all beings. They are always content, happy, peaceful, sincere and honest, and conduct themselves according to the Vedas. There have been many like that, Kshatriyas, Brahmanas and others, who remained as *grhasthas* and never abandoned actions. They do attain *everlastingness* (anantya), says the eternal Veda. Actions purify and knowledge liberates. The eternal Dharma of the strivers which culminates in liberation may be practised independently by the renunciates, or conjointly with their duties by others in any station of life (as celibate-students, householders, or forest-dwellers). Persons belonging to any caste or station in life can practise this safe and faultless Dharma and attain Moksha. The one and same Dharma is, indeed, fourfold (as the four *ashramas*), and everyone in any situation may follow it. Thus in the path of knowledge all *ashramas* are unified, and all castes are eligible for it. The paths to Brahman, the Supreme, are sincerity, patience, peace, non-injury, truth, straightforwardness, non-malice, non-arrogance, modesty, tolerance and tranquillity. No human being is precluded from cultivating them. That which the happy and contented who possess these and have certain knowledge attain is the ultimate good, the supreme end. According to Kapila while the Veda-knower is one who knows the Vedas and what is to be known through them, anyone else only emits 'gas'. A Veda-knower knows everything, as everything is established in the Veda. Whatever is and is not, has its basis in the Veda. What is known from and knowable in the Veda (Kapila finishes) is righteousness and truth, the Self of all, Brahman, which is the good established in total relinquishment (*samasta-tyāga*), tranquillity (*sama*) and contentment (*santoṣa*).

## Ramayana

The second great Indian epic, Valmiki's Ramayana, is considered to contain the essence of Vedanta. Vaishnavas of the school of Ramanuja-acharya believe it to be

- (i) an interpretation of the *dvaya-mantra* which teaches about both what is to be attained and what leads one to it, the means and the end, the choosing of the means and self-dedication to the Divine and
- (ii) an explanation of the Gayatri-mantra, which is believed to be the essence of the Veda.

Acharyas of that school as well as a commentator of the Ramayana, Govindaraja, have endeavoured to show this in their writings. For the Vaishnavas it is a long Scripture on the doctrine and practice of surrender to the Supreme Person (*dirgha-saranagati-grantha*). Without going into all that, I will refer only to what this epic says about the Veda in two places.

In the *Ayodhya-kāṇḍa* in the course of rebutting a materialistic position which also denied scriptural authority, Rama is described as having said the following: "The

universe is established in Truth. The highest Dharma is Truth. Truth is the lord of the Universe.<sup>10</sup> All have their roots in Truth. There is no position or abode higher than Truth. The Vedas have their foundation in Truth (or, they have their glory due to it). '*Vedaḥ satya-pratiṣṭhanaḥ*'. Therefore, one should be devoted to Truth."<sup>11</sup> This implies the Veda teaches truth and hence its authority.

In the *Yuddha-kāṇḍa* occurs (four-faced) Brahma's laudation of Rama in the course of which we find, among others, these utterances: "You are Nārāyaṇa, the immutable Brahman, the eternal Truth, the ultimate Dharma, the Supreme Person, the Creator. You are of the nature of (or the very self of) the thousand-branched [Sama] Veda, the teacher in various ways of the Dharma of diverse types and the best among the best. '*Sahasra śṛṅgo Vedātma śata-jihvo mahārśabhaḥ*'. The Vedas are your breath. There is nothing that can be without you. It may be concluded that, according to the Ramayana, the source of the Veda is the immortal divine Person and it teaches the saving truth.

## Srīmad Bhāgavata

Among the Purāṇas, one of the most, if not the most, profound and spiritual is the Srīmad Bhāgavata. What it says about the Veda is most interesting. In the chapters of its middle *skandha* dealing with the Ajāmila story, this Purāṇa contrasts the Dharma of the three Vedas dependent on the Gunas<sup>12</sup> with the pure "*Bhāgavata Dharma*" (Dharma of loving devotion to God, or *bhakti-yoga*); and comments thus:

"Alas, most of these great men, deluded by, divine *Māyā*, do not know that bhakti-yoga consisting of utterance of divine names, etc., is the highest Dharma; and that the glorification through recitation of God's qualities, actions and names, is entirely sufficient for the removal of sin. So, with their intellect dulled by the flowery honeyed language of the three Vedas they get involved in huge empty rituals."

This is a devaluation of Vedic ritualism.

A chapter in the tenth *skandha* of the Bhāgavata is concerned with the problem, how can the *Srutis* conditioned by *guṇas* (*guṇa-vṛttayaḥ*) deal with Brahman, indescribable and devoid of *guṇas*, which is beyond existence and non-existence? The problem is sought to be resolved by narrating a legend of personified Vedas lauding God to wake him up at the end of the dissolution of the world (*pralaya*)! Known as "Veda-stuti" (Vedic Laud), it consists of 28 verses expounding a number of mostly Upanisadic sentences in a quite original way. They are supposed to show how the Vedas deal with Brahman. But here, to illustrate the attitude of this Purāṇa to the Veda, I would only provide the translation of an introductory verse before the beginning of the *gāthā* and of the very last verse of this chapter, which comes after the *gāthā* is finished and extolled. First, the former:

(1) "This Upanishad related to Brahman was borne (*dhṛta*) in mind by the primordial ancestors; whoever bears it likewise with faith reaches '*kṣema*' (lit. security, felicity; ie., highest state), having nothing (ie., freed from conditions, *upādhis*)". Here we find the real *Srutis* are impliedly taken to be the Upanishads only and it is attempted to show how they are able to talk about the Absolute. In another sloka the portion of the Veda

<sup>10</sup> The passage could justifiably be also translated as "God is Truth".

<sup>11</sup> From this can be seen the antiquity of the idea of the identification of Truth-Supreme Reality-God, often expressed by Mahatma Gandhi.

<sup>12</sup> fundamental qualities/constitutive elements of all things, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.



which praises rituals, though accepted as God's word, is dismissed as confusing the obtuse. Now the last Sloka:

"One should constantly meditate on Hari, the absolutely free and fearless, devoid of Maya (the world-cause). The origination, sustenance and dissolution of this universe are His projective imaginative willing. He is the lord of the unmanifest (avyakta, prakṛti) and Selves (jivas). Having projected all this, He entered into it along with the jiva as its Self and made different kinds of bodies and governs them. Just as one in deep sleep does not attend to one's body, a jiva who attains Him becomes free from Maya."

Here the ultimate goal is propounded as the Free and the Fearless <sup>13</sup> conceived as the Supreme Person, the creator and lord through His illusory power which is the material cause of the universe, by meditating on whom one attains Him and transcends the effect of His illusory power. This is presented as the essence of "Veda-stuti".

Finally, in its last but one *skandha*, in a chapter dealing with forest-dwellers and renunciates, the Bhagavata lays down that "one should neither be an addict to '*Veda-vāda*' (Vedic disputation or discussion), a heretic, or a mere logician, nor adopt any position in 'dry' controversies and argumentation". It is surprising '*Veda-vāda*' is put on a par with heresy, sophistry and fruitless argumentation, although in the context of prohibitions for those in the last two stages of life. Apparently, this prohibited '*Veda-vāda*' is not discussion and meditation on the meaning of Upanisadic sentences, but is about the contents of the portion of the Veda dealing with '*vaitanika mahat karma*' (huge empty ritual), which dulls and confuses (*jaḍi-karoti*) one's intellect. '*Veda-vāda*' like '*Brahma-vāda*' cannot be at all taken as pejorative when it is not endless argumentation about how different rituals are to be performed and what the specific 'intention' (*abhiprāya*, *saṅkalpa*) of each is. In such cases it is legitimate reasoning with a view to ascertain truth and assimilate it.

## The Gita

I have reserved to the last consideration of the attitude of the Gita to the Veda, as it may be taken to be the conclusive Hindu position, because although the Gita forms part of the Mahabharata it has been more or less treated as an independent Shastra, and its authority is held to be next only to the Sruti and superior to all other works by almost all the acharyas. In the introductory portion of his commentary to it Sankara has declared that the Gita-Shastra being the summary of the substance of the meaning of the entire Veda is difficult to be comprehended'. 100 In his *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* he quoted the Gita 42 times, and Ramanujacarya in his quotes it 104 times.

In 6 of its 18 chapters something or other is said about the Veda. In the 11 chapter 8 Slokas are devoted to it; in XI and XV in each 3; in VIII, IX and XIII in each 2; and only 1 in 17. The two last Slokas in 16 virtually refer to it. All these will be considered now.

The Veda is brought into the discourse for the first time in the following manner. In a certain context the Gita starts by asserting that purposeful and decisive thinking is one-pointed, while purposeless and indecisive thinking is many branched and endless. Then it goes on thus (freely translated): Addicted to Vedic disputation (*Veda-vāda*), the unwise utter flowery language arguing that there is nothing more. Covetous, intent on heaven, involved in seeking pleasures and power, they are robbed of their intelligence

<sup>13</sup> cp. What Yajnavalkya made known to Janaka was the Fearless. After receiving the upadesa (teaching) the king told the sage, "You have made the Fearless known to us. Salutations to you". "Yo no bhagavannabhayārṇ vedayase; namaste'stu". Brhadarapyaka Upani.~ad, IV.2.4.

by the flowery language which yields only rebirth and the fruit of actions and is full of various rituals aiming at pleasures and power. For such people establishment of one-pointed thinking in *enstasis* (*samādhi*) is impossible. It continues: The sphere of the Vedas is that of the three *gunas*;<sup>14</sup> become free from the latter, as well as from the pairs of opposites and from acquisition and possession, and, always abiding in purity, be self-possessed. All the Vedas, the passage concludes, are of as much use to an enlightened brahmin as a tank is to anyone in a place flooded with water on all sides. (2:41-46)

The last sentence is explained by Sankara thus: Vedic works have endless fruits. Whatever profit is in them is included in the profit which a renunciate knower of the absolute reality gains through his knowledge. Sankara takes the metaphor in the verse to mean: small containers of water like wells, tanks, etc., have only limited uses (bathing, drinking, etc.), but a huge full reservoir of water is of unlimited use. For example, it can in addition to catering to the needs of bathing, drinking, etc., provide for the irrigation of huge tracts of land. The bliss of *Brahma-jñāna* (Brahman-knowledge) includes the fruits of all possible good actions/ rituals. In support of this interpretation Sankara quotes a *Sruti* text, "Whoever knows *That* obtains the fruits of all the good works that people may perform", and a *Gita* text, "All action without remainder culminates in knowledge". (2:46) The latter text significantly follows these statements: (i) knowing that all kinds of sacrifices spring from action, one becomes free, and (ii) the sacrifice of knowledge (*jñāna-yajña*) is superior to that of things (*dravya-yajña*).

Different but no less enlightening is Ramanujacarya's explanation of the same sentence:—

"A thirsty man should drink from a tank only as much water as he needs and not all that is in it. Like that, to a follower of the Vedas who seeks liberation, in all the Vedas only that which is the means to liberation must be acceptable, not anything else in them." (gita 2:46)

This implies that although all the Vedas contain besides the means to liberation what is not so, a believer in Vedic authority desiring liberation should accept only what is conducive to it.

Chapter 11 of the *Gita* contains two more important verses on scriptural authority:

"When your thinking becomes free from the pollution of delusion (indiscrimination),<sup>15</sup> then you will become indifferent<sup>16</sup> to "What is to be heard and what has been heard in the Veda (*śrotavyasya śrutasya ca*).

"When your thinking distracted by the *Sruti* becomes immovable and steadfast in enstasis, then you will attain yoga (discriminative insight)."<sup>17</sup> (2:52-53)

For one free from 'pollution' mentioned in the former verse, Sankara explains, the yet to be heard and the already heard from the Veda become infructuous.

"*Tadā śrotavyārḥ śrutaḥ ca niṣphalaḥ pratipadyate iti abhiprāyaḥ.*"

<sup>14</sup> "Trai-gunya-visayi Vedah" is explained by Sankara — the subject-matter of the Vedas is what is constituted by the three *gunas*, the phenomenal world, on which they shed light. To be free from *gunas*, he wrote, is to be free from desire (*niskama*).

<sup>15</sup> Indiscrimination is of the self from the not-self.

<sup>16</sup> *nirvedam vairagyam* (unattachment), Sankara.

<sup>17</sup> *yogam viveka-prajnam*, Sankara.

He further adds: The *Srutis* throw light on the relations between many ends and means. By hearing them thinking becomes distracted; but the wavering of the mind due to this must be stopped in order to steady it.

*"Aneka-sādhyā-sādhana-saiḥbandhaprakāśana śrutibhiḥ śravanaiḥ vipratipanna nānā-pratipanna vikṣiptai ca sahā . . .*

All this does not mean that the Gita does not accept the authority and validity of the Veda. It does so very much. In chapter XVI after distinguishing between the divine and demonic types among men, in the last two verses of it, according to Sankara, the Gita teaches that — "only by relying on the authority of Shastra. it is possible to abandon the demonic lot and adopt good conduct (*sreyācaraṇa*); so for both Shastra is the cause". These two verses are:

"whoever disregards the injunctions of Shastras and lives wantonly, will not attain perfection, happiness or the ultimate goal".

"Therefore, let the Shastras be your authority in determining what is duty and What is not. It is appropriate for you to act with a knowledge of the dictates of Shastras". (16:23-24)

As Shastras can be only those which are the sources of the knowledge of what is duty and what is not,<sup>18</sup> and as only they can properly prescribe or prohibit any actions, obviously the Vedas are Shastras par excellence. They certainly are meant in the two verses. To the extent the Smrtis and Itihasa-Puranas supplement and amplify what is in the Vedas, the former too are Shastras. The Gita claims its own teaching to be Shastra; (15:20) as already said, Sankara refers to the Gita as a Shastra. The Brahma-sutra refers to it as a *Smṛti*; 1;2;6 in his *sūtra-bhāṣya* Sankara quotes from the *Kurma Purana* stating the citation is from a *Smṛti*. 4;3;11 I do not propose to discuss here the problem of "*Sruti-dvaidha*" (conflict of Vedic precepts), apparent or actual, and contradictions (seeming or otherwise) between *Srutis* and other *Shastras* or among the latter. But the Gita has itself provided a solution for that: "One ought to take refuge in one's own reason". (2:49) After completing his teaching, the divine teacher of the Gita advised: "Reflecting<sup>19</sup> on this fully, do as you wish to do." These principles as well as What the Gita has said about the Veda in its several chapters, provide a useful guide to determine which is a Shastra and which is not and to what extent a Shastra is to be followed. Detailed discussions of this occur in the Mahabharata and other works.

The justification for the critique of the Veda in chapter 11 of the Gita has been given there itself, as already explained. In two verses of chapter IX some of this is reiterated more clearly. The first verse affirms that the performers of Vedic 'soma' sacrifices worship the One God through them, and being purified from sin do go to heaven and enjoy celestial delights. But, the next verse after pointing out that through such enjoyment when their merit is exhausted, they come back to the mortal world, concludes that devotees of the Dharma of the three Vedas who crave for the objects of desires and pursue them manage only to get to heaven and then return to earth, but do not obtain any kind of Liberation. Here and at other places too the Gita affirms that like charity and *askesis*, sacrifices do purify, but its considered and definite opinion is that they ought to be performed without attachment and abandoning fruits. It also broadens the concept of sacrifice (*yajna*) and teaches that the best sacrifice is. that of knowledge, because as already referred to, all other, sacrifices arise from action and cannot lead to freedom. Real sacrificial action is well-performed action without

<sup>18</sup> kartavyakartavya, what ought to be done and what ought not to be, Sankara.

<sup>19</sup> 'Vimrshya', the text reads. Sankara explains: 'Vimarsanam alocanam kṛtvā'. Vimarsa = examination; consideration; reflection, discussion. (Macdonell's Dictionary)

attachment, and that liberates<sup>20</sup>; all other action binds. 'So, in the Gita whenever the Sruti, Vedas or the Dharma of the three Vedas, appears to be disvalued or disparaged, the reference is only to Vedic ritualism performed in a mechanical way solely for fulfilling desires here or in heaven. The teaching in the portions of the Veda other than those which deal with this is not different from that of the Gita. This becomes clear from the following Gita citations:—

1. The supreme Imperishable (aksara, Brahman) which the Veda-knower proclaim, which the men of self-control freed from passion attain, desiring which brahmacarya (life of chastity, truth and study) is practised—that is what Bhagavan Krsna<sup>21</sup> briefly declared to Arjuna. The yogi who knows well Brahman, the individual soul, etc., transcending the fruits of the merit mentioned in the Vedas, sacrifices, *askesis* and charity, goes to the highest state.'

2. The highest form of God, described in chapter XI, was shown to Arjuna by God being pleased (prasannena), but no one else in the mortal world can behold it by the Vedas, sacrifices, study, charity, rituals or intense askesis. Only by exclusive devotion (*bhaktiya ananyaya*) God in that form can be known and seen in truth, and entered into.

3. The true nature of the body and self has been chanted by the Rishis in various ways; in several Rig and other Vedic metres in a discriminative way; and in the reasoned decisive sentences indicating Brahman found in the Upanisads.

4. The peepal tree (the transmigratory world, '*samsara*') has an upward root<sup>22</sup> (*Brahman*) and downward branches (cosmic intellect, egoism, subtle elements, etc.) It is called imperishable (because though it<sup>23</sup> is undergoing destruction every moment, it has been in existence from beginningless time and sustains the beginningless and endless series of bodies, etc.). The Vedas are its leaves (for, like leaves which protect a tree, they protect the world by revealing Dharma and Adharma, as well as their causes and results). He who knows this tree (of *samsara* along with its root, *Brahman*) is a knower of the Veda (he knows the meaning of the Veda).

5. Only God is to be known through all Vedas; He is the maker of the Upanishads and the knower of the Veda. Since He transcends the changing and is superior to the changeless, He is well-known in the world and the Veda as the Supreme Person.

6. *Aum Tat Sat* is the threefold designation of Brahman<sup>24</sup>. With it, in ancient times Brahmins, Vedas and sacrifices were ordained. The theologians<sup>25</sup> after pronouncing OM undertake, as prescribed, acts of sacrifice, charity and askesis. The seekers of liberation pronounce *Tat* (That) and then undertake the same acts without coveting their fruits. *Sat* means the real, the good as well as any praiseworthy action. Action meant for, as well as steadfastness in, sacrifice, askesis and charity is also called *Sat*, but if these are without faith they are *Asat* (not-sat).<sup>122</sup>

<sup>20</sup> yajna-artha karma' is 'karma' of 'muktasanga', which must be 'samacarita'.

<sup>21</sup> Hereafter I use the term 'God' for Him.

<sup>22</sup> Its root (Brahman) is Called 'upward' (urdhvam) because of its causality, eternity and greatness — Sankara).

<sup>23</sup> Its name in Sanskrit 'asvattha' actually means what will not last even till tomorrow (na svah api sthata). (Sankara)

<sup>24</sup> According to Ramanuja Brahman here means the Veda. The Veda is Sabda-brahman, the Absolute in verbal form. But Upanisadic sentences like "Om iti brahma (Om is Brahman), Tat-tvam-asi (That Thou art) and Sadeva-idam-agra asit (Sat alone was this in the beginning)", show these words are designations of Brahman. (Tai. 1.8.1. Cha .6.8.7; 6.2.1).

<sup>25</sup> Brahma-vadinah = those who study and expound the Veda — Sankara.

These citations and the preceding discussion of the critique of the Vedas, *Sruti* and *trayi-Dharma* found in the Gita show its assessment of the Veda, which may be taken to represent the most authoritative traditional Hindu attitude to the latter. Considering that not only the Vedantic acaryas, but also great Mahesvaras like Abhinava Gupta, Yogis like Jñanesvara and others from Kashmir to Daksinapatha, and from the followers of Ramananda in the middle of India to those of Chaitanya in the east of India, have venerated and expounded the Gita, it is justified to hold this opinion.

## Epitome

The previous section has provided a diversity of views regarding the Veda. Starting with what later parts of the Veda have said about its earlier parts and mere recitation of it, and after referring to the views of some *sutras*, *Smrtis* and literary works, as well as of Kautsa and Bhartrmitra, it has briefly outlined the views of four *darśanas* (philosophical systems) and *Vyākaraṇa*. The positions of the two *Mīmāṃsas*, (*purva*, prior, and *uttara*, later) are passim in the first chapter and earlier sections of this chapter. These are followed by presenting the perspectives offered by the *Manusmṛti*, the *Brhad-devata*, the *Ramayana*, *Srimad Bhagavatam* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The various views may be classified as follows. There were

- # 1. Those who thought the Veda contained only gibberish, but potent when uttered — a ridiculous theory; it would make the Veda a collection of incantations and would make morality meaningless.
- # 2. Those who held that its injunctions and prohibitions have no moral effects, a theory which would be correct only if all action has no moral effect;
- # 3. Those who rejected its authority on the ground that only sense perception and inference can be the sources of truth; that would be the position of the Lokāyatas or Cārvākas.
- # 4. Those who would admit the teachings of the omniscient too to be sources of valid knowledge, but deny omniscient authorship to the Veda. Of these, the Jainas and Buddhists

# 3 is an intelligible viable position if transcendence (the trans-empirical, *param*) is denied; for the irreligious and the atheistic can be congruent (of course, not necessarily) with the moral, while the religious and the theistic are also not necessarily so<sup>26</sup>. But, according to Gaudapada and Udayana or Jabali<sup>27</sup> and Carvi<sup>28</sup>, on logical or scientific grounds transcendence can be neither proved nor disproved; while its denial can be demolished, and argumentative affirmation of it can be destroyed. Curiously, all the adharmic (non-moral) men indulging in evil actions (*duskrta*) whom Rāma and Kṛṣṇa fought and destroyed were neither atheistic, nor *avaidic*. They were worshippers of (four-faced) Brahma or Siva, performers of Vedic rites and askesis. Hanuman found fire-sacrifices and Vedic chanting in the houses of all the demons (*rākṣasas*) in Lanka.

<sup>26</sup> What is spoken of here is logical necessity.

<sup>27</sup> Jabali was one of the 'best brahminas' who denied transcendence: "Sa nasti paramityeva kuru buddhim", he taught. (Ramayana, U.108.17)

<sup>28</sup> Carvi was a teacher of Lokayata (Kashika vṛtti, 1.3.36)

Moreover, the atheistic need not be necessarily irreligious (eg., some Mimāṃsakas, Jains, etc.).

Regarding # 4 it has been ably argued (but not demonstrated) that there cannot be an omniscient being and as such the teachings of 'tīrthaṅkaras' and 'tathāgatas' have no validity; while, per contra, it has been ably argued (but not demonstrated) that an eternal impersonal collection of sentences (as the Veda is claimed to be by some) is an impossibility and, on the other hand, that God being a myth there can be no Scripture with divine authorship. Both these positions have been logically assaulted in forcible ways, but not knocked to pieces; they both thrive!

Of the four philosophical systems considered in this chapter, the *Nyāya* is the one which sought to defend logically Vedic authority and knowledge. Warding off possible criticism that the Veda suffers from the defects of falsity, contradiction, and repetition, it developed ingenious apologetic argumentation to refute it. Knowledge of truth, generated by enstasis (*samādhi*) preceded by ethico-psychological discipline, has to be fully developed through apprehension, constant study and meditation of it and through dialogues with the adepts in it, and this steady development and application of knowledge of truth has to be protected against the arguments of opponents not only by reasoning (*tarka*) such as *reductio ad absurdum* and discussions (*vāda*) using syllogisms, but, if necessary, even by wrangling (*jalpa*) and cavilling (*vitāṇḍa*). The process of constant study, meditation and dialogues, *Nyāya* explains, is for removing doubts, and the use of argumentation, including extreme types of it, is for protecting the growing knowledge which has to attain unshakeable assured certainty. The use of *jalpa* and *vitāṇḍa* is like putting a fence of thorny branches around seedlings, says Gotama.

*Tattva-jñāna* (knowledge of truth) has to be fostered, *Nyāya* contends, by sustained thinking and logic. The place of *tarka* in understanding Vedic truth according to Nirukta and both the Mimāṃsas has been elucidated in earlier sections of this chapter. Vacaspati's dictum "Vedānta Mimāṃsa is verily *tarka*" has also been quoted there. *Vyākaraṇa*, which claims to have protection of the Veda as its aim, gives an important role to conjecture and analysis of sentences for understanding them and removing doubts.

*Sāṃkhya* grants the Veda validity, but restricts its authority by asserting it to be a source of knowledge of defective means which give us temporary relief from suffering.

For *Vaiśeṣika* all verbal knowledge being virtually inferential knowledge, the Veda is not really an independent source of knowledge. *Purva Mimamsa*, *Sāṃkhya* and *Vaiśeṣika* systems do not seem to have given a place for God during much of their histories; while *Nyāya* asserted that God's existence may be logically proved.

Even for *tattva-jñāna* necessary for liberation, according to *Sāṃkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyāya* and *Vaiśeṣika* systems, it is *viveka* (discrimination), *samādhi* (enstasis), or *nishkama karma* (desireless action) respectively which are necessary, not the Veda. But all these accepted the Veda as the source of Dharma. Consequently, as an impure mind is unfit for discrimination, etc., and as for purifying it Dharmic life has to be led, the importance of the Veda for the followers of all these systems is obvious.

According to *Mimamsa*, due performance of all daily and occasional duties prescribed by the Veda for their own sake, without any "desire", leads one to liberation. So arises its total reliance on the Veda. Depending upon different schools of Vedānta, either pure knowledge of the Supreme Self, or knowledge of it which has assumed the form of loving devotion of *Him* (*bhakti-rūpapannam jñānam*), is the cause of liberation. As such knowledge arises either directly from the sentences of the last part of the Veda, or from sentences such as those of the *Smṛti-Purana-itihāsa*s dependent upon them, the Veda is for the Vedantic systems the ultimate source of saving knowledge. That knowledge again is the fruit of a good life and pure mind; and only from the Veda can

be learnt how to lead a good life. Thus the classical Vedantic schools totally relied on *Sruti*. So, as far as the classical philosophical systems are concerned, it is not correct to think, as Renou, did, that only external homage or substanceless adoration to the Veda became more usual in due course.

It is not so much the *darshanas*, but the *Smṛti-Itihasa-Puranas* which influenced the life and thought of the people; and as the Vedāntic systems accepted the authority of the latter they were able to acquire gradually more power to affect people than the other systems. But, as already made clear in this section and what preceded it, none of these philosophical systems or *Nirukta* underrate reason, logic and argument. In this they follow the Veda itself.

The Rigveda Itself enjoined that "one should conform to one's own wisdom and attain with one's own mind even more excellent capacity<sup>29</sup>." There are a number of Upanisadic texts which emphasise that the Supreme has to be after all apprehended /known by reason/mind, purified by leading an ethical life and made sharp and fit by deep thinking, argument, discussion, dialogue and debate, with the motive of ascertaining truth. *Cintana*. (reflection) on the meaning of Upanisadic sentences ought to be a life-long activity for any Brahman-seeker, according to Vedanta. Naturally, the great classical Vedantic systems, which rely on the Upanishads, are rational systems, in the sense they cannot and do not accept as truth anything that contradicts empirical experience, science and history. Such is the case with *Mīmamsa* and *Nyaya* also; *Samkhya* and *Vaiśeṣika* give even more scope to reason and Yoga to individual inner experience. The absurd cannot be true according to any classical Indian Philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

If we take a look at the *Manusmṛti*, the *bête noir* for some Hindu social reformers and revolutionaries, which in its present form does contain much that outrages civilised modern sensitive persons (some of which appears to have been incorporated in it by the unscrupulous later at different periods), its emphasis on good sense and logic is clear; and in the light of that, the principles it itself sets forth and the universal values it upholds, all that is revolting in it can and should be discarded.

This has to be done even in the case of bloody sacrifices<sup>31</sup> and such other things which are to be found in the Veda itself, which have been condemned outright in many contexts in the *Mahabharata*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*<sup>32</sup>, etc. As said in the first chapter, Scriptures of all religions and great classics of other cultures also contain obsolete, reprehensible and revolting material<sup>33</sup>, but the pure gold in them has to be separated from the dross with which it is mixed.

The enlightened portion of the *Manusmṛti*, which I like to take as authentic and original and the only one of relevance at present, does not advocate Vedic fundamentalism, but declares: "One who wishes purification of Dharma (*Dharma-suddhi*) must very well know perception, inference and many branches of knowledge. Only he who is able to

<sup>29</sup> Uta svena kratunā samvadeta śreyāṁsam dakṣam manasā jagrubhyāt. Rīg Veda, X. 20).

<sup>30</sup> Whatever is said in this Paragraph about Vedanta, Yoga, etc., is only about those darshanas as presented in the satras, bhāṣyas, and writings of thinkers like Kumarila and Vacaspati, and not about what is expounded as Vedanta or Yoga in later medieval or modern works.

<sup>31</sup> Traditional authorities assert that the Veda does not countenance human sacrifice at all. 'Purusa-medha' and 'Sarva-medha', according to them, do not at all involve any injury to human beings. (Mm. Chinnaśwami Sastri, *Yajña-tattva-prakāśa*, reprinted in his Janma-gatibdasmaraka-grantha, ed. Mandana Mishra and others, Varanasi, 1990, pp. 105-06). But some modern scholars think those are human sacrifices.

<sup>32</sup> What has been just said about the *Manusmṛti* is applicable to all *Smṛti-itihasa-puranas*,

<sup>33</sup> eg., Ideas like all non-Greeks are barbarians and slavery is justifiable in some Greek classics; thinking of African blacks as subhuman beings by Hume, Kant and others; glorification of the West and denigration of the East by many European thinkers, of the Prussian military State as the ideal by Hegel, of the superman by Nietzsche; and anti-Jewish tendencies in some communist works.



apply reasoning (*tarka*) not opposed to the Veda Shastra to the Veda as well as to the teaching of Dharma by the Rishis, will be able to know Dharma, not anyone else". It also contains this principle:

*"Any (so-called) Dharma which will not later result in happiness and which is (generally) condemned in the world (lokavikrasta) must be abandoned". (Manu 12:105-106)*

Another great Smṛti, that of Yajñavalkya, confirms this, "A (so-called) Dharma hated by the world (*lokavidvīṣṭa*) must not be practised".(6:156) According to the Mahābhārata, actions opposed by the people (*lokaviruddha*) are as sinful as those condemned by the Veda (*Veda-viruddha*).

It is significant that in reply to the question, how should one behave when the world is in total Dharmic confusion and ethical pollution? The Mahābhārata advises: A wise man with controlled mind should rely on reason to decide what is Dharma and what is not. (*visvāmitra-svapāca samvade*) The Bhagavad Gītā expressly enjoins: "Take refuge in reason". (Gītā 2:49)

The *Manu-smṛti* does not also promote Vedic exclusiveness. Even the entire Veda is not the sole source of Dharma, it says, but a source along with: —

- (a) the Smṛtis and
- (b) conduct of its knowers, as well as
- (c) the conduct of the good and
- (d) the glad satisfaction of oneself (*ātmana-samtustī*).

It is important to note that in addition to the first two, it mentions two more factors, implying that the good may not be the Veda-knowers only and that what is taken to be Vedic teaching must also appeal to and satisfy an individual. The good in the world or a country constitute a much larger number than that of the Veda-knowers; the first includes the second. This Smṛti goes on to say that the character of Dharma is fourfold: the Veda, Smṛti, the conduct of the good and what is pleasing to oneself (*priyam-ātmanah*). It goes without saying that 'the glad satisfaction of oneself' or 'what is pleasing to oneself' cannot be also the exclusive source or character of Dharma. Of course, for those inquiring into Dharma, it ordains, the ultimate authority is Śruti. But, another significant thing in this connection is the chapter in which these verses occur begins with a definition of Dharma which does not refer to the Veda!

*"Dharma is that which the wise and the good, without attachment and aversion, always practised, and which they acknowledged heartily (hrdayenabhayanujnata) as Dharma". (Manu 2:1)*

It is difficult to think of a more enlightening and progressive definition of Dharma. As this is followed by the other verses already cited, one may venture to conclude that what is cumulatively defined by all these verses put together is the Vaidika Dharma.

I will now refer to a problematic issue which the Mahābhārata raises in connection with Vedic authority, and solves it. The issue is posed as follows: The knowers of Śāstras have determined the Veda as the *pramāṇa* (the right means of knowledge) of Dharma. But there is a decrease (*hrasa*) of Vedic utterances from aeon to aeon.<sup>34</sup> Dharmas differ

<sup>34</sup> This may mean one of these: (i) The decisions of the Veda regarding Dharma change from aeon to aeon. Or (ii) the corpus of the Veda is infinite, but from aeon to aeon starting after the Kṛta what is available of it to mortals becomes more and more limited, thus resulting in a virtual shrinking of it.

from aeon to aeon"<sup>35</sup>. The system of Dharmas in each aeon seems to depend on the capacities of human beings, which change from aeon to aeon. "What *amnayas* (traditions/sacred texts) say is true", seems to be a platitude for the propitiation of mankind. The Vedas are superior to *amnayas* and are projected universally. If all of them are *pramana*, then there is no *pramana*. If *pramana* and *apramana* are mutually contradictory, then from where is the Scriptural authority of which? — Such is the problematic put forward, which expressed in a simpler form would be: If Dharmas are not the same from age to age and the *pramana* for all of them, the one Veda, is also changing, can it still be the source of eternal truth? How can mutually-contradictory traditions, some of which also contain what is opposed to the Veda, together with the Veda, or each of them be *pramana*? The Mahabharata answers this through a declaration of the principal character of a Story it narrates:

*"I know the Dharma eternal with its secret, ancient, good and friendly for all beings. To live without malice, or at least with minimum malice, towards beings is the supreme Dharma"*<sup>36</sup>.

*Adroheṇaiva bhūtānām alpa droheṇa vā punaḥ yā vṛttiḥ sa paro dharmah*

Thus the fifth Veda in one sentence enunciates an admirable principle by conforming to which Dharmic life would be possible. It can and should be followed in all ages and situations, and is thus an eternal law. It is as ridiculous to consider patterns of social order and mores like *varnashrama* (caste and station in life), and untouchability as eternal Dharma as it is to consider slavery, apartheid or colonialism as ordained according to eternal law.

Another problematic issue raised in the Mahabharata is this: "Perform actions", "Relinquish them", if both these are Vedic statements, what is the destiny of those who resort to rituals and those who take to knowledge? To this a reply, which has become famous, is given: "A man is bound by action and is liberated by knowledge; so, the far-seeing strivers do not perform action". A little later in the same dialogue this question is asked in a slightly different way: The two sorts of Vedic sentences, viz., "perform" and "relinquish", appear to be contradictory from the empirical standpoint. Are they both valid, or is one of them only valid? The former is not possible, and if the latter, how can a Shastra contain conflicting statements, one valid and another invalid? Without opposing actions, how is liberation possible? To this the answer is: In any life station all those who act as prescribed will reach the supreme stage. One should fulfil one's duties according to the life stations he passes through; whoever is without desire and malice will be glorified in the beyond.

The bewildering varieties of actions, sacraments and rituals prescribed in the Vedas, *sutras* and *Smrtis* and the conflicting statements in each of them and the mutual contradictions among them, gave rise to the first problematic issue mentioned above. The Mahabharata solved it in its various dialogues and, of course, in the Gita too. The second problematic issue arose out of the seeming conflict, especially between the earlier portions of the Veda and its last portion, and it was settled in the *Manu-Smṛiti* and in the different philosophical discourses of the Mahabharata including the Gita. "Which is better, renunciation of actions or yoga of action"? "Both lead to the highest good, but yoga excels". "Indeed, the perpetual renunciate is one who neither hates nor

<sup>35</sup> The Manu Smṛiti says exactly the same: The first three *padas* of its 1. 85., and the first three of the Mahabharata, XI.1. 252.8., are identical except for one word. In the Smṛiti the last word in the third pada is "nṛnam", but in the other it is "Dharma".

<sup>36</sup> *Adroheṇaiva bhūtānām alpa-droheṇa vā punaḥ yā vṛttiḥ sa paro Dharmah*

desires; one without the pairs of opposites (*nir-dvandva*) is easily freed from bondage." So run the first three verses of chapter V of the Gita. "I want to know the essence of renunciation (*samnyasa*) and of relinquishment (*tyaga*) separately". "Renouncing actions motivated by desire is *samnyasa*, and relinquishing the fruit of all actions is *tyaga*". So run the first two verses of the last chapter of the same work. Of course, this kind of answer is suggested in the earlier portions of the Veda also, and quite clearly of all in the first verse of the Isa Upanishad, which is the last chapter of the Sukla Yajurveda-samhita. But the *karma-kanda* — *jnana-kanda* harmonisation was probably done clearly and in some detail for the first time by the Mahabharata and the Manu-Smṛti, the nuclei of which were formed not long after the Buddha's age and the earlier versions of which were crystallised by or certainly in the Sunga period. Later the Vedantic systems and the Puranas made use of this and developed it further.

This is how the *Smṛti-itihasa-puranas* did amplification and supplementation (*sam-upabrmhana*) of the Veda. The attitude of this literature as well as of the *darshanas* and the *Nirukta* towards the Veda is certainly neither one of "sceptical scrutiny", commended by Whitney, nor like "that of an ancient Greek at the oracle of a crazed priestess, or a red Indian at the door of a medicine-lodge", which "amused" or "nauseated" that American Indologist. It is on the whole that of a reasonable<sup>37</sup> faith.



<sup>37</sup> reasonable = "in accordance with reason; not absurd". (COD 1990)