

HINDU SCRIPTURES

(Contents taken from the book - ALL ABOUT HINDUISM by Swami Sivananda. Also refer to the book - Hindu Culture An Introduction by Swami Tejomayananda)

Hindu Scriptures can be classified under six orthodox heads. The six orthodox sections form the authoritative scriptures of the Hindus.

The six heads are:

- i) Srutis**
- ii) Smritis**
- iii) Itihasas**
- iv) Puranas**
- v) Agamas**
- vi) Darsanas.**

The Srutis

The *Srutis* are called the *Vedas*, or the *Amnaya*. The term *Veda* comes from the root *Vid*, to know. The word *Veda* means knowledge. When it is applied to scripture, it signifies a book of knowledge. The *Vedas* are the foundational scriptures of the Hindus. The *Veda* is the source of the other five sets of scriptures, and even of the secular and the materialistic.

The *Vedas* are the eternal truths revealed by God to the great ancient Rishis of India. The word *Rishi* means a seer from *dris*, to see. He is the *Mantra-Drashta*, a seer of Mantra or thought. The thought was not his own. The Rishis saw the truths or heard them. Therefore, the *Vedas* are what are heard (*Sruti*). The Rishi did not write. He did not create it out of his mind. He was the seer of thought, which existed already. He was only the spiritual discoverer of the thought. He is not the inventor of the *Veda*.

The *Vedas* represent the spiritual experiences of the Rishis. The Rishi is only a medium or an agent to transmit to people the intuitional experiences, which he received. The truths of the *Vedas* are revelations. The Rishis disseminated the knowledge. The Vedic Rishis were great-realised persons who had direct intuitive perception of Brahman or the Truth.

Vedas are an embodiment of divine knowledge. The books may be destroyed, but the knowledge cannot be destroyed. Knowledge is eternal. In that sense, the *Vedas* are eternal.

The Four Vedas and Their Sub Divisions

The *Veda* is divided into four great books:

- i) Rig-Veda,**
- ii) Yajur-Veda,**
- iii) Sama-Veda and**
- iv) Atharva-Veda.**

The *Yajur-Veda* is again divided into two parts, the *Sukla* and the *Krishna*. The *Krishna* or the *Taittiriya* is the older book and the *Sukla* or the *Vajasaneya* is a later revelation to sage *Yajnavalkya* from the resplendent Sun God.

Each *Veda* consists of four parts:

- i) **Mantra-Samhitas or hymns,**
- ii) **Brahmanas or explanations of Mantras or rituals**
- iii) **Aranyakas**
- iv) **Upanishads.**

The division of the Vedas into four parts is to suit the four stages in a man's life.

The Mantra-Samhitas are hymns in praise of the Vedic God for attaining material prosperity here and happiness hereafter. They are metrical poems comprising prayers, hymns and incantations addressed to various deities, both subjective and objective. The Mantra portion of the Vedas is useful for the Brahmacharins.

The Brahmana portions guide people to perform sacrificial rites. They are prose explanations of the method of using the Mantras in the Yajna or the sacrifice. The Brahmana portion is suitable for the householders.

The Aranyakas are the forest books, the mystical texts that give philosophical interpretations of the rituals. The Aranyakas are intended for the Vanaprasthas or hermits who prepare themselves for taking Sannyasa.

The Upanishads are the most important portion of the Vedas. The Upanishads contain the essence or the knowledge portion of the Vedas. The Upanishads speak of the identity of the individual soul and the Supreme Soul. They reveal the most subtle and deep spiritual truths. The Upanishads are useful for the Sannyasins.

The subject matter of the whole Veda is divided into *Karma-Kanda*, *Upasana-Kanda* and *Jnana-Kanda*. The Karma-Kanda or Ritualistic Section deals with various sacrifices and rituals. The Upasana-Kanda or Worship-Section deals with various kinds of worship or meditation. The Jnana-Kanda or Knowledge-Section deals with the highest knowledge of Nirguna Brahman. The Mantras and the Brahmanas constitute Karma-Kanda; the Aranyakas Upasana-Kanda; and the Upanishads Jnana-Kanda.

Vedanta

The Upanishads are the concluding portions of the Vedas or the end of the Vedas. The teachings based on them are called Vedanta. The Upanishads are the gist and the goal of the Vedas. They form the very foundation of Hinduism.

The most important Upanishads are Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chhandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Kaushitaki and Svetasvatara and Maitrayani. These are supremely authoritative.

The Upa-Vedas

There are four *Upa-Vedas* or subsidiary Vedas, viz.,

- i) **Ayurveda** – Science of Health
- ii) **Dhanurveda** – Science of War
- iii) **Gandharva Veda** – Science of Music
- iv) **Arthasastra** - Science of polity.

The Vedangas

There are six *Angas* or explanatory limbs, to the Vedas:

- i) ***Siksha*** - knowledge of phonetics, pronunciation and accent
- ii) ***Vyakarana*** of Panini – Knowledge of Sanskrit grammar
- iii) ***Chhandas*** of Pingalacharya - is metre dealing with prosody
- iv) ***Nirukta*** of Yaska - philology or etymology
- v) ***Jyotisha*** of Garga - Astronomy and Astrology
- vi) ***Kalpas*** (Srauta, Grihya, Dharma and Sulba) belonging to the authorship of various Rishis – Deals with method of ritual

The Smritis

Next in importance to the Sruti are the Smritis or secondary scriptures. These are the ancient sacred law-codes of the Hindus dealing with the Sanatana-Varnasrama-Dharma. They supplement and explain the ritualistic injunctions called *Vidhis* in the Vedas. The Smriti Sastra is founded on the Sruti. The Smritis are based on the teachings of the Vedas. The Smriti stands next in authority to the Sruti. It explains and develops Dharma. It lays down the laws, which regulate Hindu national, social, family and individual obligations.

The laws for regulating Hindu society from time to time are codified in the Smritis. The Smritis have laid down definite rules and laws to guide the individuals and communities in their daily conduct and to regulate their manners and customs. The Smritis have given detailed instructions, according to the conditions of the time, to all classes of men regarding their duties in life.

The Hindu, learns how he has to spend his whole life from these Smritis. The duties of Varnasrama and all ceremonies are clearly given in these books. The Smritis prescribe certain acts and prohibit some others for a Hindu, according to his birth and stage of life. The object of the Smritis is to purify the heart of man and take him gradually to the supreme abode of immortality and make him perfect and free.

These Smritis have varied from time to time. The injunctions and prohibitions of the Smritis are related to the particular social surroundings. As these surroundings and essential conditions of the Hindu society changed from time to time, new Smritis had to be compiled by the sages of different ages and different parts of India.

The Sruti and the Smriti

The Sruti and the Smriti are the two authoritative sources of Hinduism. *Sruti* literally means what is heard, and *Smriti* means what is remembered. Sruti is revelation and Smriti is tradition. Upanishad is a Sruti. Bhagavad-Gita is a Smriti.

Sruti is direct experience. Great Rishis heard the eternal truths of religion and left a record of them for the benefit of posterity. These records constitute the Vedas. Hence, Sruti is primary authority. Smriti is a recollection of that experience. Hence, it is secondary authority. The Smritis or Dharma Sastras also are books written by sages, but they are not the final authority. If there is anything in a Smriti which contradicts the Sruti, the Smriti is to be rejected.

The Itihasas

The Friendly Treatises and the Commanding Treatises

There are four books under this heading:

- i) **Valmiki-Ramayana**
- ii) **Yogavasishtha**
- iii) **Mahabharata**
- iv) **Harivamsa.**

These embody all that is in the Vedas, but only in a simpler manner. These are called the Suhrit-Samhitas or the Friendly Treatises, while the Vedas are called the Prabhu-Samhitas or the Commanding Treatises with great authority. These works explain the great universal truths in the form of historical narratives, stories and dialogues. These are very interesting volumes and are liked by all, from the inquisitive child to the intellectual scholar.

The common man cannot comprehend the high abstract philosophy of the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras. Hence, the compassionate sages Valmiki and Vyasa wrote the Itihasas for the benefit of common people. The same philosophy is presented with analogies and parables in a tasteful form to the common run of mankind.

The two well-known Itihasas (histories) are the epics (Mahakavyas), *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. They are two very popular and useful Sastras of the Hindus. The *Ramayana* was written by the sage Valmiki, and the *Mahabharata* by Vyasa.

The Bhagavad-Gita

The most important part of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It is a marvellous dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battle-field, before the commencement of the great war. Bhagavan Sri Krishna became the charioteer of Arjuna. Sri Krishna explained the essentials of Hindu religion to Arjuna. Just as the Upanishads contain the cream of the Vedas, so does the *Gita* contain the cream of the Upanishads. The Upanishads are the cows. Lord Krishna is the cowherd. Arjuna is the calf. The *Gita* is the milk. The wise men are those who drink the milk of the *Gita*.

The *Gita* is the most precious jewel of Hindu literature. It is a universal gospel. It ranks high in the religious literature of the world.

The Puranas

The Puranas are of the same class as the Itihasas. They have five characteristics (*Pancha-Lakshana*) viz., history, cosmology (with various symbolical illustrations of philosophical principles), secondary creation, and genealogy of kings and of Manvantaras. All the Puranas belong to the class of Suhrit-Samhitas.

Vyasa is the compiler of the Puranas. The Puranas were written to popularise the religion of the Vedas. They contain the essence of the Vedas. The aim of the Puranas is to impress on the minds of the masses the teachings of the Vedas and to generate in them devotion to God, through concrete examples, myths, stories, legends, lives of saints, kings and great men, allegories and chronicles of great historical events. The sages made use of these things to illustrate the eternal principles of religion. The Puranas were meant, not for the scholars, but for the ordinary people who could not understand high philosophy and who could not study the Vedas.

The Darsanas are very stiff. They are meant only for the learned few. The Puranas are meant for the masses with inferior intellect. Religion is taught in a very easy and interesting way through these

Puranas. Even to this day, the Puranas are popular. The Puranas contain the history of remote times. They also give a description of the regions of the universe not visible to the ordinary physical eye. They are very interesting to read and are full of information of all kinds. Children hear the stories from their grandmothers. Pundits and Purohiths hold Kathas in temples, on banks of rivers and in other important places. Agriculturists, labourers and bazaar people hear the stories.

The Eighteen Puranas

There are eighteen main Puranas and an equal number of subsidiary Puranas or Upa-Puranas. The main Puranas are:

- i) Vishnu Purana,
- ii) Naradiya Purana,
- iii) Srimad Bhagavata Purana,
- iv) Garuda (Suparna) Purana,
- v) Padma Purana,
- vi) Varaha Purana,
- vii) Brahma Purana,
- viii) Brahmanda Purana,
- ix) Brahma Vaivarta Purana,
- x) Markandeya Purana,
- xi) Bhavishya Purana,
- xii) Vamana Purana,
- xiii) Matsya Purana,
- xiv) Kurma Purana,
- xv) Linga Purana,
- xvi) Siva Purana,
- xvii) Skanda Purana and
- xviii) Agni Purana.

Of these, six are Sattvic Puranas and glorify Vishnu; six are Rajasic and glorify Brahma; six are Tamasic and they glorify Siva.

The best among the Puranas are the Srimad Bhagavata and the Vishnu Purana. The most popular is the Srimad Bhagavata Purana. Next comes Vishnu Purana. A portion of the Markandeya Purana is well known to all Hindus as *Chandi*, or *Devimahatmya*. Worship of God as the Divine Mother is its theme. *Chandi* is read widely by the Hindus on sacred days and Navaratri (Durga Puja) days.

The Agamas

Another class of popular scriptures is the Agamas. The Agamas are theological treatises and practical manuals of divine worship. The Agamas include the Tantras, Mantras and Yantras. These are treatises explaining the external worship of God, in idols, temples, etc. All the Agamas treat of (i) *Jnana* or Knowledge, (ii) *Yoga* or Concentration, (iii) *Kriya* or Esoteric Ritual and (iv) *Charya* or Exoteric Worship. They also give elaborate details about ontology and cosmology, liberation, devotion, meditation, philosophy of *Mantras*, mystic diagrams, charms and spells, temple-building, image-making, domestic observances, social rules, public festivals, etc.

The Agamas are divided into three sections: The *Vaishnava*, the *Saiva* and the *Sakta*. The three chief sects of Hinduism, viz., Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism, base their doctrines and dogmas on their

respective Agamas. The Vaishnava Agamas or Pancharatra Agamas glorify God as Vishnu. The Saiva Agamas glorify God as Siva and have given rise to an important school of philosophy known as Saiva-Siddhanta, which prevails in South India, particularly in the districts of Tirunelveli and Madurai. The Sakta Agamas or Tantras glorify God as the Mother of the Universe, under one of the many names of *Devi*.

The Agamas do not derive their authority from the Vedas, but are not antagonistic to them. They are all Vedic in spirit and character. That is the reason why they are regarded as authoritative.

The Six Darsanas

Philosophy has six divisions—*Shad-darsana*—the six Darsanas or ways of seeing things, usually called the six systems or six different schools of thought. The six schools of philosophy are the six instruments of true teaching or the six demonstrations of Truth. Each school has developed, systematised and correlated the various parts of the Veda in its own way.

The Shad-Darsanas (the six schools of philosophy) or the Shat-Sastras are:

- i) NYAYA, founded by Gautama Rishi,
- ii) VAISESHIKA by Kanada Rishi,
- iii) SANKHYA by Kapila Muni
- iv) YOGA by Patanjali Maharshi
- v) PURVA MIMAMSA by Jaimini,
- vi) UTTARA MIMAMSA or VEDANTA by Badarayana or Vyasa.

The Darsanas are divided into three pairs of aphoristic compositions, which explain the philosophy of the Vedas in a rationalistic method of approach. They are: the Nyaya and the Vaisesika, the Sankhya and the Yoga, and the Mimamsa and the Vedanta.

Conclusion

The Smritis, the Itihasas, the Puranas, the Agamas and the Darsanas are only developments of the Veda. Their ultimate source is the Veda. Their one common aim is to enable man to annihilate his ignorance and attain perfection, freedom, immortality and eternal bliss through knowledge of God or the Eternal. Purpose of scriptures is to make man like God and one with Him.