

INDIAN ESSAY – Ancient Period

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Part I : Preclassical Period

Overview

History From about 900 to 500 BCE, the Aryans composed three types of mainly prose texts to complement the ritual texts of the four Vedas. These three later types of texts, composed orally in Sanskrit (like the earlier ritual texts but in an already distinctly different form of the language) are the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. At the same time, they also include many verses, either as samples to be used in ritual or as quotations from the ritual texts.

Sruti These prose texts are regarded (like the four Vedas themselves) as *sruti* ('heard') texts, as opposed to *smriti* ('remembered') texts, and thus have the highest authority in Hindu tradition. Nevertheless, they are distinct from the poetic Vedic texts in that they present arguments and explanations, and thus are the origins of prose literature in the Indian tradition. In addition, while the *Rig Veda* contains allusions to myths and stories, these later texts (especially the Upanishads) actually tell stories.

Language Shift One significant marker of this shift in the use of language is the difference in syntax between Vedic poetry and these Vedic prose texts. The Subject-Object-Verb pattern (I' see you'), which is characteristic of Sanskrit (and nearly all Indian and Indo-European languages), is found more often in Vedic prose than in Vedic poetry, which includes VOS and OVS patterns, as well.

Coherence The coherence of the entire Vedic literary category is shown by the fact that each *Brahmana* (16 or 17 in total), *Aranyaka* (eight in total) and *Upanishad* (18) is attached to one of the original four Vedas. The earliest two categories of these prose texts, the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, are often referred to as 'commentaries,' inasmuch as they do provide arguments and explanations for the ritual texts of the four Vedas.

Brahmanas

Contents The *Brahmanas* are mainly prose explanations of how to perform sacrifices, that is, a sort-of manual to be used by men less learned than the priests. For example, the opening section of the *Chandogya Brahmana*, one of the oldest Brahmanas, lists the hymns to be used during a marriage and at the birth of a child. It also then instructs the user in how to perform the ritual, how to hold one's fingers or how to pronounce the ritual words. This is followed by a short exposition of the social importance of marriage.

Storytelling Also, in order to illustrate a ritual technique, they now and then tell a story. One instructive example is the story of Pururavas (a man) and Urvashi (his divine lover), told as part of the instructions for becoming a divine musician (Gandharva). This story is alluded to in the *Rig Veda* (one hymn contains a dialogue between the two lovers), but it is narrated in the *Satapatha Brahmana*.

Aranyakas

Transitional texts The *Aranyakas*, or 'Forest Books,' are less functional and more contemplative, to be used by men toward the end of life when, by convention, they enter the forest for meditation. They are transitional texts, in that they provide a bridge from the ritual and mythology of the four Vedas and the philosophical speculation of the Upanishads. This point is crucial since it parallels the overall shift in Hindu thought from the correct external performance of a ritual to the internalised vision of the ritual. In other words, from action to thought. And from the exuberant and sanguine outlook in the four Vedas to doubt and contemplation in the Upanishads.

Aitareya Aranyaka As an example, the *Aitareya Aranyaka* contains discussions of correct recitation of specific words, of breathing techniques and of the esoteric meanings of certain rituals and mantras. It is

transitional in that three of the last sections of this Aranyaka become, with minor changes, one of the Upanishads.

Upanishads

History While there are more than 200 texts bearing the title ‘Upanishad’ (lit. ‘sitting near [a sage]’), only twelve are considered major texts. These major texts were composed over a number of centuries, probably from about 800-300 BCE. Like all early Indian literature, the major Upanishads were orally composed and transmitted; however, tradition maintains that they were created by named sages. The earliest surviving written texts date from about the 14 century AD, although, like other Vedic texts, they were probably written down much earlier.

Prose The Upanishads are central to understanding the development of Indian literature since they develop the prose style begun in the commentaries. The short passages of prose found in the *Brahmanas* are here extended to the equivalent of full pages. Despite the growing presence of prose, two general points are pertinent: 1) poetry would remain the dominant form of literary expression until the twentieth century and 2) the prose in the Upanishads is nothing like what we find in modern Indian literature, which evolved from later Sanskrit and Pali story literature and then inspiration from Persian and English literature.

Conceptual shift The Upanishads are also important in that they show the development of key concepts in Hinduism. Overall, the emphasis in the four Vedas on ritual as action was replaced by an examination of ritual as symbol. Knowledge of the sacrifice became more important than performing the sacrifice. And the greatest knowledge concerned the self or soul (*atman*). It is also significant that this conceptual shift occurred as part of a broad movement in religious thinking, among Buddhists, Jains and Hindus.

Atman (soul) In earlier Vedic texts, the *atman* appeared distinct from the *brahman* (the underlying reality of the universe). The grand conclusion of the Upanishads is that the *atman* and the *brahman* are one, that there is no difference between individual souls and the ultimate reality. This realisation is possibly only when a person understands, through meditation, that the *atman* is pure consciousness and that the body is a mere manifestation of that consciousness. The flux of fleeting impressions that make up the material world is unreal because it is impermanent and therefore subject to death.

Transmigration This realisation also led to the Hindu belief of transmigration in the Upanishads. In Vedic ritual texts, dead people are said to go to ‘the House of the Fathers’ or ‘to the House of Clay,’ where they would reside permanently, although there are a few cryptic references to souls becoming plants or animals and then reborn. In the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*, however, the principle of merit is introduced. The souls of those who have lived lives of charity and austerity pass into the paradise of Yama (god of death), then to the moon, to empty space, to the atmosphere and eventually descend to earth as rain.

Release We can escape this endless wheel of birth and death only if we achieve the pure consciousness represented by the equation: *atman = brahman*. Then we do not die because we are not born. While most of these ideas are not original with the Upanishads, they receive full exposition only in these later texts.

Worldwide influence

It is arguable that, of all Indian literature, the Upanishads have had the greatest impact on the wider world. Following the first partial English translations in the early 19th century, they were brought to an international audience with the translations by Max Muller at the end of that century. Soon they had been read and quoted by major European philosophers, most famously Schopenhauer, and later Emerson and then T.S. Eliot, whose ‘The Waste Land’ concludes with a section inspired by these contemplative texts.

Questions

1. Many scholars claim that the central idea in the Upanishads (that *atman=brahman*) is similar, or even identical, to the doctrine of forms in Platonic philosophy. Is this claim justified? And if so, is the parallel explained by the transmission of an idea across territory or by the independent discovery of the same idea?
2. Buddhism, especially early Buddhist thought, developed within the same historical-philosophical context as the Upanishads. Identify both major differences and similarities between these two systems.
3. Comparing prose passages in all three categories of texts (Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads), describe the historical development of prose in this period.

Reading

Patrick Olivelle, *Upanisads* (Oxford, 2008)

Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, vol. 1* (Columbia, 1988)

Samuel Geoffrey, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra. Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2010)

Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (Harper Collins, India, 1953, Reprinted 1994)

Text

From the *Katha Upanishad*, translated by Eknath Easwaran, 2007

Know the Self as lord of the chariot,
The body as the chariot itself,
The discriminating intellect as charioteer,
And the mind as reins.

The senses, say the wise, are the horses;
Selfish desires are the roads they travel.
When the Self is confused with the body,
Mind, and senses, they point out, he seems
To enjoy pleasure and suffer sorrow.

Part II : Classical Period

Overview

The thousand years of the classical period in India saw the proliferation of the essay in diverse forms. Not all these forms, however, meet the criterion that the essay should present the author's own argument because so much of Indian literature is based on the authority of tradition rather than a named individual. Similarly, while most of the classical essay forms are written in prose, some do use verse or some combination of the two. However, the content of these essay forms, which range across law, political science, drama, grammar and aesthetics, and their intention, which is neither to instruct nor to entertain but to document and describe, resemble the conventional essay.

Sutras

Hindu With the passage of centuries, the meaning of esoteric Vedic texts became obscure and a new type of prose text emerged to elucidate them. These were the *sutras* (lit. 'thread', cf. English 'suture'), or compilations of aphoristic expressions that functioned as manuals to explain the scriptures. Three major examples of these texts, all composed in the second half of the first millennium BCE, were the *Srauta Sutras* (a manual for Vedic rituals), the *Grhya Sutras* (a manual for domestic rituals) and the *Dharma Sutras* (a set of four manuals on Hindu law).

Buddhist The Mahayana Buddhist tradition of north India also produced remarkable religio-philosophical treatises called *sutras*. These texts explicated the esoteric doctrines of Mahayana 'perfectionism' and 'visualisation'. The most famous of these texts is the *Vajracchedika* or 'Diamond Sutra', so named because of the power of the diamond (a metaphor for insight) to cut through ignorance and reveal wisdom. The text was probably composed in the 4-5th c. CE, though the earliest surviving text (a Chinese translation found by Auriel Stein in the Dunhuang caves) is dated 868 CE.

Dharma Sastras

Law texts In the early centuries of the Christian Era, the prose *sutras* were expanded, revised and collected in compilations known collectively as the *Dharma Sastras* ('Instructions on Dharma [Law]'). The number of these new, much longer, texts is unknown (many cited texts have not survived), but experts place the total at about 5,000. The *Dharma Sastras* are composed in a simple verse form (the *sloka*), but their content and intent are close to those of the academic essay.

Technique The technique of the *Dharma Sastras* is to quote from an old text, explicate it and then attempt to reconcile differing interpretations that have accrued over time. This approach means that the texts are veritable encyclopaedias of Hindu tradition, gathering verses, maxims, aphorisms and quotations from anywhere and everywhere. For example, the *Manu Smṛti* (see below) contains hundreds of verses found also in the *Mahabharata*, probably culled from a common source.

Key texts Four of these *Dharma Sastra* texts, which are commonly known as *smṛti* ('remembered' rather than 'heard' or *śruti*), are particularly influential in the development and practice of Hindu law. These four are: *Manu Smṛti*, *Yajñavalkya Smṛti*, *Narada Smṛti* and *Viṣṇu Smṛti*. The first two were composed in the period 200-500 CE, while the last appeared somewhat later.

Manu Smṛti Among this dense forest of Sanskrit law texts, the *Manu Smṛti* stands out as the most prominent in the development of the Hindu tradition. Even today, it is cited and studied by the general public, by law-makers and by public officials, especially in village councils known as the *panchayat*. The *Manu Smṛti* is primarily a discourse on the rights and obligations of individuals within society understood within a cosmological and teleological framework. This is evident from its four main divisions:

1. Creation of the world
2. Source of dharma [law]
3. The dharma of the four social classes
4. Law of karma, rebirth and final liberation

Theatre

Natya Sastra Another important yet very different *sastra* text is the *Natya Sastra*. Composed sometime in the early centuries of the Christian Era, and ascribed to the legendary Bharata, this Sanskrit work of approximately 6,000 verses is a manual on the theory and the performance of the theatrical arts: music, dance and drama. It describes the *raga* theory of Indian music, lists hundreds of gestures for dancers (including thirty-six for the eyes) and explains which pose is correct for which emotion. Even today, Indian dance-drama traditions, from classical Bharatanatyam to folk Teyyam, continue to combine these three arts of sound, movement and story.

Aesthetics The *Natya Sastra* is most famous for its articulation of the classical Indian theory of aesthetics. The two key terms are *bhava*, the mood or emotion, and *rasa*, the distillation of that mood that is evoked in a (discerning) audience. Eight different *rasas* are recognised (love, pity, anger, disgust, heroism, awe, terror and comedy). The *rasa* theory guides not only theatre arts but also literary arts, especially poetry

Statecraft

Artha Sastra Another major essay text in this period is the *Artha Sastra* ('Manual on Material Gain'), which was composed over several centuries, probably taking final form about 300 CE. Attributed to Kautilya, a Brahmin advisor to the king Chandragupta (4th c. BCE), it does in fact contain some observations on, and reminiscences of, that earlier kingdom.

Material gain The *Artha Sastra*'s discourse on polity elevates the science of 'acquiring and maintaining power' above the spiritual science of Vedic literature, and represents the gradual ascent of merchants and kings in Indian social history. Classical Hindu thought recognises four ends of man: *dharma* (social order), *artha* (material gain), *kama* (physical pleasure) and *moksa* ('spiritual release'). Proclaiming the prominence of *artha*, the text says: 'On material gain rests the realisation of social order and pleasure.'

Tirukkural The subjects of politics and material gain were also addressed in an influential Tamil text of this period, the *Tirukkural* (c. 400-500 CE). Attributed to Tiruvalluvar, who is said to have been an Untouchable/Dalit, this text contains 133 chapters, each with ten couplets (*kural*), offering advice on the ethics of everyday life. As such, it is much wider in scope than the *Artha Sastra* and speaks to concerns of the common man and woman. Even today, the memorable couplets, are quoted in daily conversations and in the media. A very popular couplet says: 'Everyone my kin, everywhere my home.' This is often quoted to counter the hierarchy of caste and religion.

Grammars

Panini The Sanskrit grammar attributed to Panini (6th-5th c. BCE) is a masterful and precise work that, in effect, created the modern field of linguistics. It describes the language of the time and then proscribes rules for

its use, using the aphoristic *sutra* form. Many linguists claim that this grammar has never been surpassed in descriptive accuracy of Sanskrit.

Tolkappiyam An equally famous Tamil grammar, ascribed to Agathiyar, is the *Tolkappiyam*. This Tamil text is dated variously, although a late date of about 400 CE seems reasonable inasmuch as its title ('On Ancient Literature') suggests it appeared sometime after the corpus of ancient Tamil poetry (c. 100-300 CE). It is divided into three sections: orthography and pronunciation; parts of speech and syntax; prosody and meaning. This work remains not only a major influence on the study of Tamil language but also a symbol of Dravidian cultural identity.

Questions

1. The *rasa* theory of classical Indian aesthetics rests on two key terms: *bhava* ('mood,' 'emotion') of the artist and *rasa* ('taste,' 'sentiment') or the distillation of that mood in a discerning audience. The eight *rasas* provided an emotional vocabulary for Indian poets, intellectuals and audiences to use when discussing culture. Compare this aesthetic theory with another theatrical aesthetic, such as that Greek, Chinese or Shakespearean.
2. The *Dharma Sastras*, or Hindu law books, are large compilations of older texts and interpretations. Looking at the legal traditions in other parts of the world, do you think this 'encyclopaedic' approach is effective or cumbersome?
3. The ancient Indian grammar of Panini is considered one of the finest works ever produced in the field of linguistics. After reading the secondary literature on this topic, can you identify its major contributions to modern linguistics?

Reading

Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Columbia, 1988)

A.L. Basham, *Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1982)

Patrick Olivelle, *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Ancient India* (Oxford, 1999)

Sheldon Pollock (ed.) *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley, 2003)

Texts

1. From the *Artha Sastra* 7.2 trans by Patrick Olivelle

When the degree of progress is the same in pursuing peace and waging war, peace is to be preferred. For, in war, there are disadvantages such as losses, expenses and absence from home.

2. From the *Artha Sastra* 2.1.3.6-2.1.39 trans by Patrick Olivelle

The king should grant exemption [from taxes]
to a region devastated by an enemy king or tribe,
to a region beleaguered by sickness or famine.

He should safeguard agriculture

when it is stressed by the hardships of fines, forced labor, taxes, and animal herds
when they are harassed by thieves, vicious animals, poison, crocodiles or sickness

He should keep trade routes [roads] clear

when they are oppressed by anyone, including his officers, robbers or frontier commanders
when they are worn out by farm animals

The king should protect produce, forests, elephants forests, reservoirs and mines
established in the past and also set up new ones.

3. From the *Tirukkural* trans. by P.S. Sundaram, 1990.

Make foes of bowmen if you must, never of penmen.

Great wealth, like a crowd at a concert, gathers and melts.

It is compassion, the most gracious of virtues, that moves the world.