

INDIAN POETRY – Ancient Period

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Part I : Preclassical

Overview

Vedic literature Vedic literature contains two major divisions: ritual texts and the commentaries. Here we are concerned only with the ritual texts, which are a diverse compilation of hymns, formulae, myths, charms and philosophical speculations. They are not only the oldest texts in Indian literature but also the oldest texts of world literature still in use today. These ritual texts are commonly called the ‘four Vedas.’

Origins The four Vedas (Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva) were composed in Sanskrit between about 1,200 and 900 BCE, probably in northwest India. We assume they were created by the priests of the Aryans (or Aryas), who migrated across west Asia, through the Khyber Pass and into the river valleys of the Punjab, bringing with them the Indo-European language of Sanskrit (and its spoken variety, Prakrit) and an Indo-European mythology and pantheon.

History The four Vedas contain many recensions, or ‘paths,’ the most recent of which is thought to have been composed in about 100 BCE. As far as we know, the Vedas were not written down until the Gupta Empire (4th-6th c. CE). Extant manuscripts date from the 11th c. CE and printed texts from the 19th c. CE.

Four Vedas

The Rig Veda, which is the oldest and most literary of the four, contains 1028 hymns to be used at sacrifices. The Sama Veda is more abstruse, being a re-arrangement of certain verses from the Rig Veda for liturgical purposes. The Yajur Veda, composed probably two centuries after the Rig Veda, is a compilation of verses to be sung by an assistant priest at the sacrifice. The last, the Atharva Veda, is very different from the other three in that it mainly contains charms and imprecations

Composition

The Vedas were not written. Although writing was used in the earlier Indus Valley civilisation (c. 2500 -1500 BCE), the script remains undeciphered, and the first inscriptions in a known Indian language appear only in the 3rd c. BCE. Vedic literature was composed, performed and transmitted orally, using a complex set of mnemonic techniques, metrical schemes and literary conventions, by a series of poets, over a period of several hundred years. In other words, Vedic literature is speech (indeed, speech is deified as the goddess Vac). This fact cannot be repeated too many times: The Vedas were not read. They were heard.

Memorisation

Vedic priests underwent extensive training in memorising the sacred texts to ensure that they were passed down without error, thus ensuring their efficacy. Scholars, working from largely 20th-century field research, have identified eight different ‘paths’ of memorisation. In one path, for example, every two adjacent words were recited in their original order, then in reverse order and finally in their original order. The most complex method involved reciting the entire *Rig Veda* in reverse order.

Prosody

Metre The metric system of the Vedas, like that of most early and later Indian poetic traditions (and most Indo-European literatures) is measured by long and short syllables and not (as in English) by stress. A syllable was counted as ‘long’ if it contained a long vowel or a short vowel and two consonants. Most of the hymns are arranged in quatrains, although divisions of three and five also exist. Similarly, while the standard metre is iambic, there is considerable variation in metre.

Mantra The power of speech, especially carefully calibrated speech, is central to understanding Indian literature. A ‘mantra’ (word or formula spoken by a knowledgeable person in the correct way) is potent. Based on the concept of correspondences, through which the visible is linked to the invisible, speech can alter the material conditions of someone’s life, whether to increase prosperity through sacrifice or to thwart disease through a spell. The potency of the spoken word connects this ancient layer of Indian literature with later genres and traditions, both popular and sophisticated.

Rig Veda

As the oldest and most literary of the four Vedas, the Rig Veda carries huge cultural significance in India. It contains 1028 hymns in praise (*ric* means ‘praise’) of various deities, most of whom are not worshipped today but whose stories have been preserved by later myths and epics.

The literary brilliance and cultural authority of the Rig Veda lies in vivid imagery, cosmogonic conundrums and dramas enacted by priests, natural forces and the gods.

Contents For example, Indra, king of the gods, slays the cloud-dragon Vrtra with his thunderbolts. Gamblers lament their losses. The beauty of Dawn (Ushas) is evoked with tenderness. Surya (the sun) rides across the heavens in a chariot drawn by seven horses. Yama, the first human and the first to die, presides over the world of the dead, where others must travel after death. The virtuous are guided on this journey by two dogs, while the others are attacked by demons. Many hymns invoke Angi (fire) and Soma (an intoxicating libation), the two principal elements of the sacrifice that dominates the Rig Veda.

Creation Memorable verses also involve speculation about the creation of the world. But, as befits a Hindu text, the Rig Veda does not articulate just one creation myth: it contains several. One verse proclaims that sound (the goddess Vac) created the world. (Cf. ‘In the beginning was the word.’) Elsewhere, the world emerges from a primeval sacrifice of a man, who is then divided into four parts corresponding to the four major caste groups. The world also comes out of a ‘golden womb’ as well as a ‘universal egg.’ Later, creation becomes the work of a figure, named Prajapati. But where did the original substance come from? ‘How,’ ask the ancient sages, ‘did being evolve from non-being?’ There is no certainty, not even among those ‘who look down on it, in the highest heaven.’ When we ‘read’ these lines in the Rig Veda and feel a quickening of uncertainty, we enter a dialogue about the human condition that stretches back three thousand years.

Legacy

Today, the four Vedas are little understood by most Indians, and many of the gods and goddesses mentioned in them are no longer worshipped. Indeed, Vedic Sanskrit became obsolete long before even the turn of the Christian era. However, and partly for this reason, it acquired a sacred status that continues to this day. The category of ‘Veda’ has persisted throughout Indian history, with many important texts in regional languages being hailed as the ‘Fifth Veda.’ And while the practice of chanting the full four Vedas has declined, some Brahmin priests, especially in Kerala on the southwest coast, still chant Vedic verses to accompany ceremonies.

Discussion questions

1. The Vedas are the oldest religious literature still in use, yet they were orally composed and transmitted. Describe the mnemonic devices and techniques in the Vedas that facilitated oral transmission. Then analyse the role of orality in a sacred tradition, by comparing the Vedas with the literature of two other world religions.
2. Study the ‘Hymn of Creation’ (Rig Veda 10.129). What evidence of oral composition can you find? What explanation is provided for the creation of the world? Can you correlate any features of this short text with the context (of semi-nomadic pastoralism) in which it was composed?
3. Although the Vedas are said to be the source of modern Hinduism, many of the deities in the ancient texts are no longer worshipped or even recognised. Analyse the continuing cultural significance of these poems, through the centuries and today. .
4. Given that there are virtually no archaeological or other material remains from the Vedic period, these ancient Sanskrit verses are the primary source from which we must try to understand the society and

culture of those times. Analyse the reconstruction of Vedic society by scholars by closely reading the texts and the secondary sources.

Reading

Joel Brereton and Stephanie W. Jamison, *The Rig Veda* (OUP, 2014)
Wendy O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda* (Penguin, 1981)
Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol. 1* (Columbia, 1988)
Frits Staal, *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Rituals, Mantras, Insights* (Penguin, 2008)

Texts

1. Creation of the World (*Rig Veda* 10.129)

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows. Or perhaps he does not know.

(translation by Wendy O'Flaherty, 1981)

2. Purusha, the Creation of Man (*Rig Veda* 10.90)

Thousand-headed is Purusa, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed. Having covered the earth on all sides, he stood above it the width of ten fingers.

Only Purusa is all this, that which has been and that which is to be. He is the lord of the immortals, who grow by means of [ritual] food.

Such is his greatness, yet more than this is Purusa. One-quarter of him is all beings; three-quarters of him is the immortal in heaven.

Three-quarters of Purusa went upward, one-quarter of him remained here. From this [one-quarter] he spread in all directions into what eats and what does not eat.

From him the shining one was born, from the shining one was born Purusa. When born he extended beyond the earth, behind as well as in front.

When the gods performed a sacrifice with the offering Purusa, spring was its clarified butter, summer the kindling, autumn the oblation.

It was Purusa, born in the beginning, which they sprinkled on the sacred grass as a sacrifice. With him the gods sacrificed, the demi-gods, and the seers.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the clotted butter was brought together. It made the beasts of the air, the forest and the village.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the mantras [Rig Veda] and the songs [Samaveda] were born. The meters were born from it. The sacrificial formulae [Yajurveda] were born from it.

From it the horses were born and all that have cutting teeth in both jaws. The cows were born from it, also. From it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided Purusa, how many ways did they apportion him? What was his mouth? What were his arms? What were his thighs, his feet declared to be?

His mouth was the Brahman [caste], his arms were the Rajanaya [Ksatriya caste], his thighs the Vaisya [caste]; from his feet the Sudra [caste] was born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born; from his mouth both Indra and Agni [fire]; from his breath Vayu [wind] was born.

From his navel arose the air; from his head the heaven evolved; from his feet the earth; the [four] directions from his ear. Thus, they fashioned the worlds.

Seven were his altar sticks, three times seven were the kindling bundles, when the gods, performing the sacrifice, bound the beast Purusa.

The gods sacrificed with the sacrifice to the sacrifice. These were the first rites. These powers reached the firmament, where the ancient demi-gods and the gods are.

(translated by Michael Myers, 1989

http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/world_civ/worldcivreader/world_civ_reader_1/rig_veda.html)

Part II : Classical Period

Overview

Classical Indian poetry is a broad category, encompassing a variety of Sanskrit traditions, from court compositions to the great epics, and the Tamil traditions of south India. While most of these poems, north and south were composed at roughly the same time (during the early centuries of the Common Era), they show sharp differences in aesthetic, content and audience.

Court poetry: Sanskrit and Prakrit

Genre Classical Sanskrit poetry was dominated by *kavya*, a capacious category that is perhaps best understood as a meta-genre containing several sub-genres. The most common, prominent in Sanskrit court poetry, is the lyric verse devoted to love and longing and using a repertoire of 'adornments' (*alankara*), such as stock epithets, alliterations and metaphors. *Kavya* poets flourished during the Gupta Empire (3rd-5th c. CE). Long poems were called *maha* ('great') *kavya*.

Sattasai An early but little-known collection of classical Indian poetry is the *Sattasai* ('Seven Hundred') by Hala (c. 100 CE). These 700 single-verse, largely secular poems were composed in Prakrit (a regional variant of Sanskrit), probably in the Deccan. The poet Hala was a king of the Satavahana dynasty, though little is known of his life.

Buddhacarita The *Buddhacarita* ('Life of the Buddha') by Asvaghosa is often recognised as the earliest classical Sanskrit poem. Composed approximately 100 CE as a hagiography of the historical

Buddha, it is also composed in one of the simplest Sanskrit metres. Of its 28 chapters, or cantos, only the first 14 are found in extant Sanskrit versions, although complete versions do survive in Chinese and Tibetan.

Kalidasa The most influential classical Sanskrit poet was Kalidasa (5th c. CE), who was patronised by Gupta kings. Kalidasa was prolific. He wrote two long poems or *mahakavyas* (*Kumarasambhava*, 'Birth of the War God Kumara' and *Raghuvamsa*, 'Dynasty of Raghu'), plus a well-loved lyric poem (*Megaduta*, 'The Cloud Messenger') and a still-performed play (*Shakuntala*). He was also a famous playwright.

Bhartrhari Little is known about Bhartrhari, though most scholars believe he lived in the 5th century CE and wrote important Sanskrit texts, such as the [Vākyapadīya](#) (an original discourse on Sanskrit grammar and philosophy). He is best known, however, for the poems in the [Śatakatraya](#), a collection of short verses in which each group is dedicated to a different [rasa](#) (the distillation of an aesthetic mood in a reader/listener).

Court Poetry: Tamil

Cankam Classical Tamil poetry is known as *cankam* ('academy'), after the academy of poets who, by tradition, composed this corpus of nearly 2,400 poems probably between 100-300 CE. Most of the 473 named poets composed only a single poem, although a few (Kapilar 235 poems and Ammuvar 127) were prolific. Avvaiyar, one of the few female poets, wrote 59. Unlike the Sanskrit poets of the Gupta court, these Tamil poets were patronised by the rulers of small kingdoms, and many were itinerant.

Genre Tamil poetry has two overarching genres: *akam* ('interior') and *puram* ('exterior'). This dichotomy, which refers to both the topographical and psychological dimensions of a poem, may be translated as 'love' and 'war' poems.

Love poems Love poems (*akam*) describe inner states of love, usually in or around the house. They are divided into five groups, each devoted to a specific type or condition of love. Each of these five states of love is also associated with a specific landscape, flower, time of the day, season of the year and bird. Convention requires that no names, only stock figures, appear in the love poems. Many are extremely short, not more than ten lines.

War poems War poems (*puram*) typically describe public events, especially war and the actions of kings. Unlike the love poems, the war poems contain the names of kings, poets, battles and towns. They are filled with an ethos of fame and shame. A mother, for instance, does not want to see wounds on her son's back. A king places his daughters in the care of a bard before he starves himself to death, rather than face defeat.

Epic poetry: Mahabharata

Composition The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* ('Great War') was composed over a number of centuries. When completed about 400 CE, it had amassed 100,000 couplets (more than 8 times the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together). The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* is only one of many, many variants of the story that is found in numerous accounts in every major Indian language.

Orality Like all early Indian texts, this sprawling epic was composed orally. Even its traditional author, the sage Vyasa, is said only to have composed and declaim the verses, while the writing was done by the ever-helpful Ganesa. The orality of this great epic is further revealed by its frequent use of the story-within-a-story device.

Contents The core of the *Mahabharata*, interspersed with large chunks of didactic and mythological material, is the story of a dynastic struggle between two groups of cousins: the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

This core story is told in the form of a conversation between a blind king (Dhritarashtra) and his charioteer, who describes the details of the 18-day war between the king's nephews. That this great war did in fact occur at Hastinapur (not far from Delhi) is accepted by most historians, who place it sometime between 1,200 and 800 BCE. Thus, not unlike the *Iliad*, this Indian epic reconstructs a battle several centuries after the historical event.

Themes While war is the centrepiece, the background is equally important to the dramatic tension. We watch as the cohesion among fraternal kin (a high priority in a patrilineal and patrilocal society like Hindu north India) slowly breaks down. Jealousy, poor judgement, childlessness, a curse, sexual humiliation of a wife and a disastrous game of dice breed animus and lead to the exile of one group by the other.

Dharma Underneath the tale of war, however, the *Mahabharata* is a discourse on the subtleties of *dharma*, or right conduct. It repeatedly comments on the code of conduct for a king, a warrior, a father and a son, and then pits one loyalty against another. The moral dilemmas are sometimes so complex that even a righteous character is 'trapped' and cannot avoid making a 'wrong' decision.

Bhagavad Gita These complexities of *dharma* are dramatised in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is told in Book 6, again as a dialogue, this time between prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna. Arjuna faces his cousins across the battle field and expresses his doubts about the morality of killing his kin. Krishna then launches into the famous discourse in which he tells the prince that, as a warrior, he must engage in battle. The renunciation of action, continues Krishna, is for others and is not proper conduct for a warrior-prince. A warrior must act, but he must act without attachment to the consequences ('fruits') of his action. Finally, Krishna explains that the prince can attain that detachment by surrendering himself and his actions to Krishna (*avatar* of Visnu).

Epic poetry: Ramayana

Composition The Sanskrit *Ramayana* ('Way of Rama' or 'Story of Rama') was composed over several centuries (about 200 BCE to 300 CE), drawing on versions of the story circulating in oral tradition. It was thus composed by different poets, but its author is said by tradition to be the legendary sage Valmiki. We thus speak of the *Valmiki Ramayana* because there are hundreds of other versions of the story, and more than 25 in Sanskrit alone. The multiple versions, simple metre and frame story all point to the origins of the Rama story in oral tradition.

Frame story Valmiki begins his story with a frame-tale, in which he watches a hunter kill one of a pair of love-birds and then curses the hunter. After a moment's reflection, the poet realises that his grief (*soha*) has been expressed in a particular type of verse (*shloka*) which he then uses to compose the Rama epic. This lends a self-conscious aesthetic tone to the composition but also introduces the theme of love and loss, which runs throughout the story.

Contents The core story is the life and adventures of Rama, *avatar* of Visnu and heir to his father's throne. Major episodes include his marriage to Sita, their exile in the forest and Sita's kidnapping by a demon king (Ravana) who takes her back to his palace in Lanka (Sri Lanka). Rama rescues her with the assistance of an army of monkeys, led by the resourceful Hanuman. Rama eventually kills the demon and the lovers are reunited.

Themes As with the *Mahabharata*, the story illustrates the value of fraternal loyalty and *dharma*. Underlying this is the power of love, which motivates nearly every character, sometimes to act against his own best interest. Love can also be destructive, especially in the case of the demons. For example, the brooding love of Ravana for Sita pervades the entire epic and eventually drives him to destruction.

Epic Poetry: Cilappatikaram The 'Lay of the Anklet' (*Cilappatikaram*) is an epic composed in Tamil about 500 CE, probably by a Jain monk. Consisting of more than 5,000 verses, it is a tragic story of jealousy, deception, undeserved death and the power of a woman's love. While it bears some similarity to contemporaneous Sanskrit court poetry, especially in its ornate descriptions of place and nature, its deeper message of loss and revenge sets it apart. The heroine, Kannaki, became a popular goddess in Tamil culture, reversing the usual sequence in which a deity becomes a literary figure.

Questions

1. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* turn on the loyalty and betrayal of brothers. The strength of fraternal bonds is not a unique theme in world literature, especially in epics. Compare the Indian articulation of this theme with two other examples from epics in world literature.
2. The Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram*, on the other hand, focuses on the bond between husband and wife. The wife, Kannaki, is the emotional centre of the story and its heroine. Analyse the epic on three levels: as a south Indian/Tamil story, as an Indian story and as a universal story.
3. Study the character of Rama in the *Ramayana*. He is the hero who defeats the demon, rescues his wife and renounces the throne to uphold truth. In most versions he is the incarnation of god Visnu and of *dharma* (moral law/duty). However, he has many shortcomings, not least in his treatment of his wife. He also makes errors of judgement and is indirectly responsible for his father's death. Is he really a god, or simply a flawed human?
4. The *Bhagavad Gita* episode in the *Mahabharata* is the best-known part of this rambling, massive epic. Read it carefully and analyse the ethical debate it dramatises. Is it a dilemma that is peculiar to Indian/Hindu culture or does it have wider ramifications?

Reading

Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths* (2nd ed.) (Penguin, 2004)
Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, vol. 1* (Columbia, 1988)
A.K. Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape* (OUP India, 1994)
William Buck, *Ramayana* (California, 2000)
John Smith, *Mahabharata* (Penguin, 2009)
Daniel Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry* (Harvard, 2000)
R. Parthasarathy, *Cilappatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet* (Penguin India, 2004)

Texts

1. From the *Buddhacarita*, translated by Charles Willemen, 2009

Birth, old age, illness, and death are suffering; separation from what one loves or meeting with enmity, not attaining something one wants, and so on are kinds of suffering.

If one renounces desire or does not yet renounce it, has a body or is without a body, if one is without any pure quality, one may briefly say that all this is painful.

When, for instance, a great fire is appeased, it does not give up its heat, even though it may have become smaller. Even in a self that is quiet and subtle by nature, great suffering still exists.

The afflictions of greed and the others, and all kinds of wrong actions—these are the causes of suffering. If one gives them up, suffering is extinguished.

When, for instance, seeds are without earth, water, and so forth, when all conditions are not combined, shoots and leaves do not grow.

Existences continue by nature, from heaven to the woeful destinations. The wheel keeps turning and does not stop. This is produced by desire. Demotion differs according to weak, intermediate, or strong, but all kinds of actions are the cause.

If one has extinguished greed and so forth, there is no continuation of existence. When all kinds of actions have ended, different kinds of suffering know long-lasting appeasement. If this exists, then that exists. If this is extinguished, then that is extinguished.

Absence of birth, old age, illness, and death; absence of earth, water, fire, and wind; and both absence of beginning, middle, and end and condemnation of a deceptive law—these mean tranquility without end, abodes of the noble.

2. From the Tamil *Kuruntokai*, translated by AK Ramanujan, 1967

What could my mother be to yours?
What kin is my father
to yours anyway?
And how did you and I ever meet?
But in love,
our hearts have mingled
As red earth and pouring rain.

3. From the *Kuruntokai*, translated by AK Ramanujan, 1967

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for this man
of the mountain slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the flowers of the kurinci
that has such black stalks.

4. . From the *Purunanuru*, translated by AK Ramanujan, 1985

This world lives
Because some men do not eat alone,
not even when they get
the sweet ambrosia of the gods;
they've no anger in them,
they fear evils other men fear
but never sleep over them;
give their lives for honor,
will not touch a gift of whole worlds
if tainted;
there's no faintness in their hearts
and they do not strive for themselves.
because such men are,
This world is.