

INDIAN LITERATURE – Pre-Classical

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POETRY

Overview

Pre-classical Indian literature contains two types of writing: poetry and commentary (which resembles the essay). These ancient texts (dating from about 1200 to 400 BCE) were composed, transmitted and recited in Sanskrit by Brahmin priests. It is poetry, however, that dominates the corpus of Vedic literature and is considered the more sacred style of expression. Vedic verse is often puzzling, sometimes intentionally so, because it explores complex ideas and was a language reserved for priests.

Four Vedas

History The most famous and the oldest of these texts are known as the Four Vedas (Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva), which date from about 1200 and 900 BCE. Brought to India by the Aryans, who migrated to the subcontinent from the northwest, the Four Vedas contain a recognisably Indo-European mythology and pantheon. The Vedic sky-father god Dyaus, for example, is cognate with the Greek Zeus. 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 century CE and printed texts from the 19th century CE.

Contents The Rig Veda, which is the oldest and most literary of the four, contains 1028 hymns to be chanted 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 Four Vedas were orally composed, transmitted and recited, using a complex set of mnemonic techniques, metrical schemes and literary conventions, by a series of poets over a period of several hundred years. Although writing was used in the earlier Indus Valley civilisation (c. 2500 -1500 BCE), the Indus script remains undeciphered, and the first inscriptions in a known Indian language appear only in the 3rd c. BCE. Vedic literature is sacred speech (speech is deified as the goddess Vac). 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.

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

Contents The Rig Veda is not only the oldest but also the most 'literary' of these ancient texts in that it contains mythic stories. Told in verse form, these stories paint a picture of human drama and divine power. Indra, king of the gods, slays the cloud-dragon Vrtra with his thunderbolts. Gamblers lament their losses. The beauty of Dawn (Usas) 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,' the ancient sages ask, 'did being evolve from non-being? There is no certainty, not even among those who look down on it, in the highest heaven.'

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 facilitate oral transmission. Then analyse the role of orality in religion by comparing the Vedas with the literature of two other world religions.
2. Study the 'Hymn of Creation' (Rig Veda 10.129, Text 1 below). 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 socio-economic 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.
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 scholarly reconstruction of Vedic society 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), trans. Wendy Doniger

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.

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

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.

ESSAY

Overview

The largely poetic texts of the Four Vedas were followed in time by three other types of texts composed (c. 900-400 BCE) as commentaries and explications of them. The three sets of primarily prose texts are: 1) Brahmanas, 2) Aranyakas and 3) Upanishads. While the language and content of these commentaries are quite different to what we might think of as an 'essay,' they do approach that modern genre in their intention to instruct and inform. Early Indian inscriptions are perhaps closer to the model of argumentative prose writing suggested by the essay.

Brahmanas 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. In order to illustrate a ritual technique, they also now and then tell a story. One instructive example is the story of Pururavas (a man) and Urvashi (his divine lover), narrated 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 The *Aranyakas*, or 'Forest Books,' are less functional and more contemplative than the Brahmanas. They are meant to be used by men toward the end of life when, by convention, they enter the forest for meditation. They are also transitional texts, in that they provide a bridge from the ritual and mythology of the Four Vedas and the philosophical speculation of the Upanishads. As an example, the *Aitareya Aranyaka* contains discussions of the correct recitation of specific words, of breathing techniques and of the esoteric meanings of certain rituals and mantras. Continuity is also evident in that three of the last sections of this Aranyaka become, with minor changes, one of the Upanishads.

Upanishads 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 800-400 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. 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.

Inscriptions Another important early source for the development of Indian prose in this period is the large corpus of inscriptions, mostly in Sanskrit but also in Prakrit. Many inscriptions were in verse, and many were heraldic declarations or hagiographical statements, but some of the most famous were written in prose (or a combination of verse and prose).

Among these prose inscriptions, the Ashoka edicts in Prakrit resemble the modern essay in that they present a personal argument (see Text 2 below, in which the Buddhist king explains why he has renounced warfare). This early use of prose is a rich, but so far untapped, resource for the study of Indian literary history.

Discussion/questions

1. Compare prose passages in all three categories of texts (Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads) and use them to trace the historical development of prose in this period.
2. Although the essay in its modern form did not appear in Indian literature until the 19th century, its antecedents can be found in earlier periods, all the way back to the ancient Vedic texts. Assess the validity of this statement by a study of argumentative prose in India. Can similar claims be made for the essay in other classical literatures, such as Chinese, Greek or Latin?

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)

Texts

1. From the *Katha Upanishad*, trans. Eknath Easwaran

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.

2. Edict XIII of King Ashoka, in Prakrit, trans. E. Hultzsch,

(A) When king Dēvānaṃpriya Priyadarśin had been anointed eight years, (the country of) the Kaliṅgas was conquered by (him).

(B) One hundred and fifty thousand in number were the men who were deported thence, one hundred thousand in number were those who were slain there, and many times as many those who died.

(C) After that, now that (the country of) the Kaliṅgas has been taken, Dēvānaṃpriya (is devoted) to a

zealous study of morality, to the love of morality, and to the instruction (of people) in morality.

(D) This is the repentance of Dēvānāmpriya on account of his conquest of (the country of) the Kaliṅgas.

(E) For, this is considered very painful and deplorable by Dēvānāmpriya, that, while one is conquering an unconquered (country), slaughter, death, and deportation of people (are taking place) there.

(F) But the following is considered even more deplorable than this by Dēvānāmpriya.

(G) (To) the Brāhmaṇas or Śramaṇas, or other sects or householders, who are living there, (and) among whom the following are practised: obedience to those who receive high pay, obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders, proper courtesy to friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives, to slaves and servants, (and) firm devotion,—to these then happen injury or slaughter or deportation of (their) beloved ones.

(H) Or, if there are then incurring misfortune the friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives of those whose affection (for the latter) is undiminished, although they are (themselves) well provided for, this (misfortune) as well becomes an injury to those (persons) themselves.

(I) This is shared by all men and is considered deplorable by Dēvānāmpriya.

(J) And there is no (place where men) are not indeed attached to some sect.

(K) Therefore even the hundredth part or the thousandth part of all those people who were slain, who died, and who were deported at that time in Kaliṅga, (would) now be considered very deplorable by Dēvānāmpriya.

(L) And Dēvānāmpriya thinks that even (to one) who should wrong (him), what can be forgiven is to be forgiven,

(M) And even (the inhabitants of) the forests which are (included) in the dominions of Dēvānāmpriya, even those he pacifies (and) converts.

(N) And they are told of the power (to punish them) which Dēvānāmpriya (possesses) in spite of (his) repentance, in order that they may be ashamed (of their crimes) and may not be killed.

(O) For Dēvānāmpriya desires towards all beings abstention from hurting, self-control, (and) impartiality in (case of) violence.

(P) And this conquest is considered the principal one by Dēvānāmpriya, viz. the conquest by morality [dhamma vijaya].

(Q) And this (conquest) has been won repeatedly by Dēvānāmpriya both here and among all (his) borderers, even as far as at (the distance of) six hundred *yōjanas*, where the Yōna king named Antiyoka (is ruling), and beyond this Antiyoka, (where) four—4—kings (are ruling), (viz. the king) named Turamaya, (the king) named Antikini, (the king) named Maka, (and the king) named Alikasudara, (and) towards the south, (where) the Chōḍas and Pāṇḍyas (are ruling), as far as Tāmraparṇī.

(R) Likewise here in the king's territory, among the Yōnas and Kambōyas, among the Nabhakas and Nabhitis, among the Bhōjas and Pitinikas, among the Andhras and Palidas,—everywhere (people) are conforming to Dēvānāmpriya's instruction in morality [dhamma].

(S) Even, those to whom the envoys of Dēvānāmpriya do not go, having heard of the duties of morality, the ordinances, (and) the instruction in morality of Dēvānāmpriya, are conforming to morality and will conform to (it).

(T) This conquest, which has been won by this everywhere,—a conquest (won) everywhere (and) repeatedly,—causes the feeling of satisfaction.

(U) Satisfaction has been obtained (by me) at the conquest by morality.

(V) But this satisfaction is indeed of little (consequence).

(W) Dēvānāmpriya thinks that only the fruits in the other (world) are of great (value).

(X) And for the following purpose has this rescript on morality been written, (viz.) in order that the sons (and) great-grandsons (who) may be (born) to me, should not think that a fresh conquest ought to be made, (that), if a conquest does please them, they should take pleasure in mercy and light punishments, and (that) they should regard the conquest by morality as the only (true) conquest.

(Y) This (conquest bears fruit) in this world (and) in the other world.

(Z) And let there be (to them) pleasure in the abandonment of all (other aims), which is pleasure in morality.

(AA) For this (bears fruit) in this world (and) in the other world.