

HINDU SASTRAS AND SAMSKARAS

HINDU SASTRAS

1) *THE VEDAS*

Hindu scriptures are broadly classified into Shruti (meaning 'heard'), Smriti (meaning 'remembered') and Nyaya (meaning 'logic') based on its origin not on the mode of transmission. Shruti is something heard by the sages (directly from the Gods) and Smriti refers to what was written down and remembered. Shruti is considered more authoritative because it is believed, to have been obtained by the spiritual experience of the seers (directly from God) and has no interpretations. Vedas constitute the Shruti, Ithihaasa-s (epics), Puraana-s (moral stories), Agamas (emanated scriptures) are classified as Smriti, while Vedantha – Suthras (vedantha aphorisms) are classified as Nyaya. Smriti and Nyaya always jib with Shruti. It is believed that Vedas are timeless and eternal.

Knowledge about Brahman (the Supreme Being) and Dharma is the subject and object of all Hindu Scriptures. These scriptures in Sanskrit language, which are of the nature of revelations, have been handed down from master to disciple and thus from one generation to the next. In this hierarchy of literature, the Vedas are the first to be revealed, the others being evolved from them.

Towards the end of the last Kalpa, there was the Great Deluge or Pralaya; Rudra, as the then presiding Deity, created as part of His duty, a new Brahma for Swetarvaraha Kalpa, the present Kalpa. It is said his choice fell on this Brahma by the virtue of his tapas in the previous Kalpa. Rudra then commissioned him to create a new Universe and disappeared. As he started to work, Brahma realized to his consternation that he had completely forgotten the order of Creation, as a result, of course, of the enormous lapse of time; Brahma, therefore, performed an austere penance. Rudra appeared before him (now called Prajapati) and taught him once again the technique and the order of creation. Prajapati meditated as directed by God; the Lord Almighty appeared before him in the form of Pranava (AUM). Brahma prayed for knowledge when the Vedas manifested themselves and surrounded Brahma like million suns. Dazzled, Brahma appealed to the Lord and He mercifully picked out the four Vedas and taught them to Brahma who thereupon created the universe.

The Lord ideated from Pranava the Vedas – the Rig Veda out of its letter "A", Yajur Veda from the letter "U", Sama Veda from the letter "M" and Atharva Veda from the Adrdhamatra. Esoterically, the birth of the Vedas is explained in this manner: by joining of the Lord's Mind which is Pure Light with its Vritti of motion, Vak was produced which, by further mutation with Prana or breath, became successively Para, Pashyanti, Madhyama and Vaikhari forms of Vak. From out of the last form, the Vedas manifested themselves.

Chatvari Vak Parimita Padani
Thani Vidurbrahma Ye Manishinaha

Guham Treeni Nihita Nengayanti
Tureeyam Vacho Manushyo Vadanti

"Vak was divided into four categories. Three of them were hidden. Ordinary man can use the fourth category only and that is the word."

The word Veda means Holy knowledge. The other names of the Vedas are Sruti, that which is "heard" or "revealed" and Amnaya, that which has come down by tradition. The Vedas are "apaurusheya", of super-human origin.

Carnatic music has its origins in the Vedas. The Vedic swara system has seven 'equally spaced' tones or svaras per octave. They are called the Shadja, Rishabha, Gandhara, Madhyama, Panchama, Dhaivata and Nishada. Of these, only the second through the fifth are used in Rig Veda, Yajur Veda and Aharva Veda while all seven are used only in the Sama Veda.

The Sama Veda laid the foundation for India music and consists mainly of hymns of Rig Veda set to musical tunes, and sung using 3 to 7 musical notes during Vedic sacrifices sometimes accompanied by an instrument. The Yajur-Veda, which mainly consists of sacrificial formulae, mentions the Veena as an accompaniment to vocal recitations during sacrifices.

The holy scriptures of India, as is well known, consist of the Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva Vedas, and the exegetical texts, the Vedangas which are six viz., Siksha, Vyakarna, Nirukta, Chandas, Jyotisha and Kalpa; and their four supplements viz., Purana, Nyaya, Mimamsa and Dharma Sastra.

In this arrangement, Upa-puranas form part of Puranas; Vedanta forms part of Mimamsa. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, as well as Sankhya, Patanjala, Pasupata and Vaishnava form part of Dharma Sastras. Thus, altogether, they constitute 14 Vidyas.

Angani Vedashchatvaro Meemamsa Nyayvistaraha
Puranam Dharmashastram Cha Vidya Hyotashchaturdash

According to Yajnyavalkya, they are also the Dharma-sthanas or basic texts of Dharma. Apasthamba confirms it. (Dharmajna samayaha, pramanam vedashcha). Besides there, there are four Upa-vedas viz., Ayurveda, Dhanurveda, Gandharvaveda and Arthashastra, the respective appendages to the Vedas.

From another point of view, the contents of the Vedas can be broadly divided into two – Karmakanda and Jnanakanda – depending upon their objectives. The first is said to be oriented towards the attainment of Swarga or Heaven and the other, of immortality. Textually, the Vedas are divided into what are called Mantra portion used for propitiating different deities and the Brahmana portion, which are in the nature of commentaries on the Mantras.

Mantras are of different kinds. The first is the Rik type which are made up of Padas or which are composed in metres like Gayatri consisting of 24 syllables, Ushnig 28 syllables, Anushtubh 32 syllables etc, etc. These mantras, when set to the musical scale are called Sama Mantras. Music in the Vedas admits of the seven notes. There is a third category of Mantras, which does not fall under any of the above two. They are the Yajur Mantras.

The Brahmanas also are of three different varieties depending upon their content: Vidhi, Arthavada and the third, Vedanta Vakyas. Vidhis are of 3 kinds. Those that deal with the nature of Karma or a ritual are of one kind; those that explain the results of those Karma , sacrifices, etc, belong to the second type and those that speak about the materials used in Karma are the third type and the composite body goes by the name Shrauta Kalpa. The closing portions of the Brahmanas are the Upanishads, of which a hundred and twenty are known to us. Aranyakas, too, are taken along with the Upanishads.

Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taitiriyā, Aitareya Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Svetasvatara and Kaushitiki are the twelve principal Upanishads. They set the highest ideal for man.

The Rig-Vedic seers were poets of great vision. They are the original founders of Indian civilization. Their religion was poetic religion. Heroism and positive living appear to be the keynotes of most of the Rig-Vedic stories. It is common knowledge that in the matter of Vedic sacrifices, the Prayoga (operative) Mantras are taken from the Rigveda, Adhwaryu (priestly) from the Yajurveda and the Audgatra (singing) from the Samaveda. The word Rik from which Rig-Veda derived, means 'praise'. The Rigveda consists of 1017 hymns addressed to the various gods, grouped in 10 mandalas, each hymn being called a Sukta. The hymns are composed in a variety of meters – from those consisting of 24 syllables to those consisting of 104 syllables. Originally there were 21 Sakhas or recensions for the Veda but only six are prevalent now. They are Sakala, Bashkala, Ashwalayana, Sankayana, Mandukayana and Aitareya.

The Yajurveda, as the name implies, is purely devoted to use in rites or rituals. It has two branches, the Krishna (Black) and Shukla (White) Yajurveda. There were 101 recensions for the former and 17 for the latter. There are a few extant recensions of the former: Taitiriyā, Kathaka, Maitrayani and Kapishtala Sakhas. In the latter, Shukla Yajurveda, there are two recensions called Madhyadina and Kanva Sakhas. The main difference between Krishna and Shukla is that in the former, explanatory portions are included whereas the latter consists only of Mantras. This Veda contains some prose passages also.

The Sama Veda is ritualistic in content and highly poetic in form. Only a small portion is original, the bulk being selected from the Rig Veda, grouped together for ritualistic purpose, being meant to be sung in certain tunes at the time of sacrifices and rituals. Three recensions of this Veda, the Kautuma, Ranayaneeya, and Jaimineeya, are prominent. Kautuma consists of two sections Mantras and Brahmanas. – Mantras are sub-divided into Purvaarchika and the Uttaraarchika.

The Atharva Veda explains for the most part rituals connected with Shantika, Paushtika and Abhicharaka Vidyas i.e., for cure of diseases, gain of wealth etc.; in other words, for specific purposes in material life. There are also some exquisite philosophical and poetic passages. This Veda consists of about 6000 verses constituting 731 hymns grouped into 20 books. Some of hymns are common to the other three Vedas. There were originally nine recensions for this Veda of which the Paippalada and Saunaka Sakhas are available now.

Veda Vyasa codified the four Vedas and taught them to his disciples Paila, Vaisampayana, Jaimini and Sumantu with his grandson Sukarma. These disciples taught their knowledge to their disciples. Thus the Vedas came down to later generation. In this process, as the Vedas spread throughout the world, certain peculiarities depending upon geography and environment caused slight variations in pronunciation and diction. This gave rise to what are called Sakhas or recensions. All the same, there was no material change in the contents. Each Sakha in order to be perfect have the following complements: the Samhita, Upanishads, Sutras and Aranyakas.

The five ways of reciting the Vedas are (1) Mula (2) Pada (3) Krama (4) Jata and (5) Gana. Mula – Mantras are recited continuously. Pada- Mantras are split word by word. Krama – Padas are joined as 1.2, 2.3, 3.4, etc. Jata – Padas are joined and in textual order, then in reverse order and once again textual order as 1.2, 2.1, 1.2, 2.3, 3.2, etc. Gana – More complicated combinations like 1.2. 2.1, 1.2.3.3.2.1, 1.2.3, etc are used. These different ways of recitation are not mere verbal jugglery. The Mantras are said to gain in their potency by so chanting.

2) ***THE VEDANGAS***

Shiksha kalpo vyararanam niruktam jyotisham gahihi
Chandovichitirityevam shoungo veda uchyate

There are 6 vedangas. Siksha, Kalpa, Vyakarana, Nirukta, Chandas and Jyotisha. Among vedangas, i.e., limbs of the Vedas, Siksha comes first. It deals with the science of vedic phonetics – treading of sound pitches like Udatta, Anudatta, Swarita, Prachaya, Hraswa, Dirgha and Pluta of the vowels with the consonants appearing in the vedic text:

VaNa: Swara: Mathra Balam Saam Santana:

A knowledge of this science, especially in the context of the use of Mantras, is deemed to be absolutely essential. A defective pronunciation could bring even harmful results. This Siksha-sastra is common to all the Vedas.

Next comes Vyakarana or the science of grammar. It deals with the correct usage of vedic words and contains exhaustive rules of grammar. It consists of 8 chapters and is for that reason called Ashtadhyayi and contains 3996 sutras.

Next comes the Vedic limb called Nirukta. This science explains the etymology of the words contained in Vedic mantras as they have a good deal to do with their practical application. It is said that Nirukta is the sine qua non for understanding the Vedas. Vedic words are explained by dividing them into 4 classes: Nama, Akyhata, Nipata and Upasarga.

Next comes Chandas Sastra, the science that deals with the prosody of Vedic Mantras.

Next comes the Jyotisha. The need for it arose by reason of the fact that the Vedic Karmas had to be performed at certain periods and seasons of the year like the new and full moon days etc.

Jyotisha is used for both the sciences of astronomy and astrology.

Next comes the Kalpa. The need for this arose because the followers of the different Shakahas or branches of the Vedas had to perform Vedic rites in a slightly different manner.

According to Bhaskaracharya, Vyakarana or Sabda is the face, Jyotisha is eyes, Nirukta the ears, Siksha the nose, Kalpa the hands, and Chandas as the feet of Veda Purusha.

There is another kind of text relating to the Vedas called Anukramanika or Indices. This provides a list of Deities, Metres etc, of the different parts of Vedas. There are, again, some Vedic Koshas or lexicons other than Nirukta, which are very useful in the interpretation of Vedic mantras. Thus, we have a comprehensive set of literature on the Vedic methodology.

Four planets are said to preside over the Vedas: Guru or Jupiter over the Rig Veda; Sukra or Venus over the Yajur Veda; Mangal or Mars over Sama-Veda and Budha or Mercury over Atharva-Veda.

PURANAS

First among the supplementary angas comes the Puranas. The essential character of Puranas has been defined that they should contain 5 essential features viz., Sarga, Pratisarga, Vamsa, Manvantara and Vamsanucharitra.

Puranas are 18 in number viz., Brahma (10,000 verses), Padma (55,000), Vishnu (23,000), Shiva (24,000), Bhagawata (18,000), Linga (11,000), Varaha (24,000), Naradiya (25,000), Markandeya (9,000), Agni (15,400), Bhavishya (14,500), Brahmavaivarta (18,000), Skanda (81,100), Vamana (10,000), Kurma (17,000), Mathsayya (14,000), Garuda (19,000), and Brahmanda (12,000).

Sage Badarayana or Vyasa as he is otherwise called, is credited with the authorship of these Puranas.

UPA-PURANAS

There are 18 Upa-Puranas or sub-Puranas. Following are their names: Sanatkumara, Narasimha, Nandikeshwara, Shivadharm, Durvasa, Narada, Kapila, Manava, Ushanasa, Brahma, Varuna, Kali, Vasistha, Linga, Samba, Soura, Parasara, Maricha and Garga.

Nyaya Sastra:

It deals with the analysis of the mental process of knowing. It consists of about 537 Sutras in 5 chapters.

Vaiseshika Sastra:

This science helps us to get a clear knowledge of the six-fold type of existing things like Dravya, Guna, Karma etc. This science recognizes the scripture.

Mimamsa Sastra:

It is of 2 kinds: the Karma (or poorva) Mimamsa and Sharirika (or utara) Mimamsa or Vedanta. It consists of 12 chapters.

Brahma Sutra:

It consists of 4 chapters. It starts with "Athatho-Brahma-Jignyasa." The object of Mimamsa Sastra is to explain the process of realizing the identity of Jiva and Brahman. In the first, the world is taken as eternally dynamic while in the second it is phenomenal.

Sankhya Sastra:

The text is in 6 chapters. The goal of life according to this sastra is to get absolute freedom from the 3 kinds of miseries from a knowledge of the difference between Prakriti and Purusha. This science recognizes the scriptures as a source of valid knowledge.

Yoga Sastra:

The Yoga system explains the practical side of Sankhya. It consists of 194 sutras in 4 parts. Control of character by control of mind, body and emotions etc., forms the subject matter of the eight-fold steps taught in this sastra. The philosophical views of the physical world in Indian sastras are of 3 kinds. They are known by the names of Arambha Vada, ParinamaVada and Vaivartha Vada. According to them atoms are of 4 kinds – of the earth, water, light and air. They become molecules and gradually grow into the universe. Mimamsakas hold that the triple gunas, Satwa, Rajas and Tamas become Mahat, Ahankara and develop into the universe.

Dharma Sastra:

Dharma Sastra or Smritis is the 4th supplementary anga of the Vedas. A number of Smritis are known to exist. Some of them are the Manusmriti, Vishnu, Angirasa, Dadsha, Shatapa, Gautama, Yagnavalkya, Yama, Vasistha, Samvarta, Parasara, Shanka, Harita, Ushanasa, Katyayana, Devala, Apasthamba, Vyasa, Brihaspati, Narada and Paitheenasa Smritis. These are in the nature of texts prescribing or codifying social and religious norms during different stages of evolution of our society. The epics, Ramayana of Valmiki and Mahabharata of Vyasa may be classified under the head Dharmasastras.

3) UPA-VEDAS

They are 4 in number: Ayurveda, Dhanurveda, Gandharva Veda and Arthasastra.

Ayurveda:

It is the science of extending life, or in other words, of medicine. Ayurveda treats the whole man under 8 principal heads of treatment. Pharmacology is also included in this category. Kamasastra also belongs to this category. The object of Kamasastra appears to be not encouragement of indulgence but regulation of sex-life.

Dhanurveda:

It is called the science of archery. It consists of 4 chapters, dealing with Diksha, Sangraha, Sidhanta and Prayoga. Both the offensive and defensive modes are treated.

Gandharva Veda:

It deals with the science of music and dance (spiritual).

Arthasastra:

It deals with the acquisition of material things like wealth by righteous means. It also deals with Nitisastra, Shilpasastra, the 64 Kalas and also other physical and metaphysical subjects.

4) THE KALAS

The science of Kala or Time was written by Lord Kartikeya. Its division into definite periods, their classification into auspicious and inauspicious moments, the deities that preside over each are dealt.

Aksharalaksha:

It consists of 50 chapters. The first half deals with mathematics (325 to be exact) and the second half about the Shaktis that make up the world.

Sabda Sastra:

It deals with sounds, echoes of moving and non-moving objects in creation. It also deals in 5 chapters with capturing or mechanically reproducing sounds, measuring their pitch, velocity etc.

Lakshana Sastra:

It deals with the science of determining the sex in animate and inanimate creation.

Sakuna Sastra:

It determines good and bad effects from the sounds of birds, words of human beings etc., in other words, omen.

Shilpa Sastra:

It deals with 307 varieties of Shilpas including 101 types of idols.

Supa Sastra:

It deals with the science of cooking.

Malinee Sastra:

It consists of 16 chapters. It includes things like: flower arrangement, making garlands, bouquets, hair-do's in various styles for women, writing love messages on flower petals to convey to beloveds in codes.

Samudrika Sastra:

This sastra deals with palmistry.

Visha Sastra:

This treats 32 kinds of poison, their properties, their preparations, effects and antidotes.

Chitrakarma Sastra:

It deals with the science of fine arts. It treats about nearly 200 kinds drawings. Students are taught to recreate the figure of a person after seeing a single hair or nail or a bone of that person.

Malla Sastra:

It deals 82 kinds of gymnastics and sports necessary for preservation of health and athletic activities and 24 kinds of infantry warfare where hand-to-hand fight is involved.

Parakaya Pravasha:

It deals with science of entering into one body from another body, and it teaches 32 kinds of Yogas and the eight-fold Siddhis, Anima, Mahima etc.

Mahendrajala:

It deals with the science of magic. It teaches how illusions, like walking on water, riding in the air etc.

Artha Sastra:

Sage Vyasa teaches 82 ways of earning money, even while leading a righteous life.

Shakti Tantra:

It deals with the science of Mulaprakruti, Maya, etc., and 64 kinds of external shaktis of bodies like those of Sun, Moon, Air, Fire etc. Atomic fission or nuclear science also forms a part of this science.

Saudamini Kala:

It deals with the science where all phenomena could be attracted through shadows, even ideas. It also deals with photographing interiors of mountains, earth etc.

HINDU SAMSKARAS

The nearest word for Samskaras is Sacraments. They are rituals and sacrifices, by virtue of their performances the life of the Hindu receives a higher sanctity. They cover his entire life from the moment he is conceived in the mother's womb till his death – inclusive of his funeral ceremonies and further on, for the smooth passage of his soul to another world. A man needs these Samskaras or purificatory ceremonies in order to shine in his best form physically and spiritually.

The objects of the Samskaras are several which can be seen from the mantras and symbolism used in the ceremonies. It deals with the removal of hostile or evil powers that beset the human life at various stages and to invoke beneficial results from the kindly gods, so that man can prosper. Samskaras create an awareness to the individual. For e.g.- the boy who is given the sacred thread acquires the right to study the Vedas; the married man gains the title to perform the Dharmas mentioned in the Vedas. Sage

Gautama opines that Samskaras along with the 8 Atmagunas take one to Brahman or Moksha.

Samskaras are the ethical attempts for the moral uplift of the individual over material benefits and are moulders of character. They help an individual to develop moral virtues.

The prescription of these ceremonies by the ancients disclose "the deep rooted tendency in the heart of man to bring the chief events of human life into contact with a higher power, and to give to our joys and sufferings a deeper significance and a religious sanctification."

Kalpa-Sutras are exegetical texts of the Vedas. Among these texts are **Srauta Sutras** – those that deal with the vedic sacrifices; **Grihya Sutras** – those that deal with domestic rituals and **Dharma Sutras** – these are an extension of the Grihya Sutras, deal mainly with secular and religious laws relating to the Ashramas.

Some important Grihya Sutras are:

(1) Apastamba (2) Aswalayan (3) Baudhayana (4) Bharadwaja (5) Gobhila (6) Hiranyakesia (7) Jaimineeya (8) Khadira (9) Manava (10) Paraskara (11) Sankhayana (12) Varaha

They belong to different Vedas and Shakas and hence slightly differ in their contents.

Samkaras are 40 in number. Some say there are 48 of them.

(1) Garbhadhana – conception ceremony (2) Pumsavana – performed in the 2nd or 3rd or 4th month of pregnancy (3) Seemantha – performed between the 5th and 8th months of pregnancy (4) Jatakarma – performed immediately after the child is born (5) Namakarna – child is given a name (6) Annaprasana – first feeding of cooked rice to the child (7) Chowla – 1st tonsure performed normally in the 3rd year of the child (8) Upanayana – thread giving ceremony performed in the 8th, 11th and 12th years of the male child (9) Prajapatya (10) Saumya (11) Agneya (12) Vaiswadeva (13) Samavartana (14) Vivaha (15) Deva –Yajna (16) Pitur –Yajna (17) Manushya- Yajna (18) Bhuta –Yajna (19) Brahma – Yajna (20) Anvashtaka (21) Parvana (22) Sthalipaka (23) Agrahayani (24) Shravani (25) Chaitri (26) Ashwayuji (27) Agni Adhana (28) Agni Hotra (29) Darsa – Purnamasa (30) Agrayana (31) Chaturmasya (32) Niroodha Pasubandha (33) Shantaramani (34) Agnishtoma (35) Atyagnishtoma (36) Uktya (37) Shodosi (38) Vajapeya (39) Ati-ratra and (40) Adboryama.

The rituals connected with Samskaras contain both secular and religious ceremonies. Agni or Fire, for instance, is an invariable constituent of the functions. It personifies the living God, the patriarch of the home. It is Grahapati or lord of the house, protecting the members of the household. He is also Shakshi. Where is fire, there is always water or God Varuna. Often water is sanctified by the Gods, being invoked in it with mantras, and the sanctified water is sprinkled or sipped to wash away impurities and sins. Prayers, are the sine qua non of rituals. By means of them the appropriate gods are appealed to for removal of affliction, protection and prosperity. When it is for the gain of virtue, prayers

turn into an instrument of morality, to wit, the Gayatri-mantra. Again, there are mantras in the form of blessings and are uttered by the priests, as representing the gods invoked. Symbolism is another major constituent of the Samskaras. Stone for instance, that is used in marriage symbolizes permanence, even as the Pole Star (Dhruva Nakshatra), Sesamum seeds and cereal rice symbolize fertility; pani-grahana or clasping each other's hand shows assumption of responsibility, a bond; looking at the Sun assumes absorption of tejas, etc. A conscious effort at inculcating an elementary or suggestive information on hygiene, diet, eugenics and medicines is often noted in the Karmas.

All told, the total effect of the paraphernalia of Samskaras is the creation on the different occasions of an atmosphere redolent with spiritual significance and its awareness on the part of all concerned.

FUNERAL OR ANTYESHTI

According to Sage Baudhayana, the Samskaras performed while alive help one conquer the earth and that performed at death helps one conquer heaven. Life and death constitute a continuous process. The burning of the corpse is not an end in itself; it is a means to help the departing soul to obtain a new body in the world of Yama and join the Pitrus or ancestral gods.

The gift of cow, called Vaitarani at this time, again, is another means. She is supposed to conduct the dead over the stream of the underworld. The chief mourner prays: "Pusha who is the protector of the dark-region bears you. May Agni take you where you must go."

The act of cremation is deemed a sacrifice. The mantra says "O Agni! Do not consume this body to cinders; do not give it pain or scatter about its skin or limb. O, Jatavedas, when the body is burnt, deliver the spirit to its ancestors."

A touching hymn is this: "May the organ of vision go to the Sun: may the prana merge in the atmosphere; may you go to a virtuous place. May you rest there provided with food and endowed with a body."

Shedding copious tears prevents the departed soul from entering heaven. That is why Puranas (like Garuda Purana) and itihisas are read after the bath to divert or console the relatives and make them forget their sorrow and thus prevent them from shedding tears.

SRAADDHA

Among the Hindus, the Sraaddha is a religious ceremony, often performed annually, in propitiation of their departed ancestors who are technically known as Pitrus. The word Sraaddha, according to Sage Pulastya, is derived as follows: sraddhayaa deeyate yasmath, i.e., that which is performed with great faith. The faith referred to here is the faith in the Vedas, whose dictates are taken as incontrovertible and which enjoin its performance as

a duty. It is interesting to note that Sraaddha or faith, and Medha or intelligence, are actually deified in the Vedas.

Among the important items of a Sraaddha are the Arghya (water libation); Havana (fire-offering), the feeding of the Brahmins, Pinda-dana, Vikira, Dakshina-offering and Tarpana. Holy Brahmins are fed in a worshipful manner, after invoking on them the souls of the departed ancestors of three generations identified with Vasu, Rudra and Aditya on the paternal or maternal side, as the case may be. The Pitrus, who live in Pitru-Loka in the form of Spirits, are fetched into the Sraaddha venue by the Vishvedevas or the universal soul.

The darbha or kusa grass and til sesamum are two significant materials used in the performance of Sraaddha. The Padmapurana states that the kusa grass and black til sprang from the body of Vishnu. Asvaalayana Grihyasutra points out that the essence of waters became darbha, alluding to a Vedic story. Since Vishnu is anathema to evil spirits, the use of til prevents Sraaddha offerings from being pilfered by them. Use of kusa, being the essence of all holy waters, makes the whole rite holy. Silver vessels for arghya and pinda in Sraaddhas are highly recommended because, the ancient Pitrus milked Svadha in a silver vessel and they are highly pleased with the sight, use and gift of such vessels.

THE HOW OF IT

A question often asked about the Sraaddha as we perform it today is this: How, by feeding some Brahmins here and now, one expects to feed one's ancestors who are dead long since, and possibly, according to the Karma theory, live in other forms and climes.

The answer to this question is given in the Matsya Purana: What we do in our Sraaddha is to invoke the souls of the departed ancestors on the holy Brahmins invited, and the former are conducted to the venue of the Sraaddha by Visvedevas or the universal spirit. Thus for practical purposes, the spiritual bodies or souls of our ancestors, identified with Vasu, Rudra and Adityas who are the Sraaddha deities, are present, and we worship them. Now, the food the Brahmin eat or the oblations one offers in the sacrificial fire uttering the departed's name and gotra during the Sraaddha is transformed by the mantra and faith into food appropriate for current bodies of the departed souls and this food is carried to them by celestial messenger, Agni, the God of fire, or the Vasus, Rudras etc., who have access everywhere and gratify the Pitrus. If, for instance, the ancestor had been born an Angel, the oblation goes to him as nectar; if he is born as cattle, it is taken to him as grass; or if born as human, it goes to him as cereals, etc. Just as a calf finds its own mother from the many cows grazing, so the mantras uttered in the Sraaddha ceremony carry the food to the correct Pitrus.

The Pitrudevatas, after completion of the Sraaddha and gratified by the worship, bless the performer with health, wealth, children and prosperity and depart to their own region.

FAILURE

It has been pointed out by Smriti writers that failure on the part of the descendant to perform the Sraaddha rite will invite the wrath of the departed souls. So much so, as a wag says, our present food scarcity is directly traceable to the present truancy played by our own progeny in respect of Sraaddha! That, perhaps, also explains the present social inequality, in other words, the comparative affluence of some people and the abysmal poverty and misery of others.

It has been said that the curse of these Pitrus, who are essentially benevolent, takes no more vociferous a form than that of conferring a large number of children on their progeny but coupling this fertility with poverty! How true!

Another doubt often raised in connection with Sraaddhas is this: How can the oblation offered in the fire here turn into different forms of food suitable for the present state of the departed souls who might be anywhere on the earth?

This argument is met in the following manner: Suppose we remit a money-order in Indian currency at a local post-office or the bank, to our sons studying in a foreign country. We know very well that this money is paid out to our sons correctly in pounds or US dollars etc and what not, according to the country of their stay. If a human agency can accomplish this feat, a super-human agency such as the one we are dealing with, can certainly accomplish the proposition under discussion. Sri Rama, the human exemplar, performed Sraaddha.

Whatever the religious merit or otherwise of Sraaddha, it has this psychological merit, namely, it definitely helps us recall with affection and gratitude the memory of our elders and benefactors, which is an ennobling experience.

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