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HINDU PRIESTHOOD

1. The Significance of the Vedas

The term 'veda' carries a primary meaning and a secondary meaning. The primary meaning can be stated as follows. 'Veda' is a 'certain group of texts' belonging to different ages. They differ considerably in content. In short, 'Veda' is a term applied to a group of literature that constitutes the earliest record of Indian civilization. They are declared to be ageless in content. They comprise thousands of hymns or songs of lyrical character mainly addressed to deities, the chief of whom are Indra, Varuna, Vishnu, Rudra, Agni and others. In the Vedic hymns these gods are invited to receive oblations at the sacrificial altar. Thus the Vedas are the sacred books of the Hindus. They are the ancient literary monuments of the Aryan race in India. In the Hindu tradition, the Vedas are referred to as Śruti, that which is heard or *apauruṣeya*, not written by men (impersonal) and eternal (*nitya*). The term Veda derived from the root 'Vid' means knowledge, it is supreme knowledge, knowledge *par excellence*.

Now, as regards the secondary meaning of the Veda, it is believed that they are not of human origin. The original texts and the commentary portions are not circumscribed by the limitations of humans. Hence the Veda refers to any statement of Law or Truth. The statement of every Law or Truth is a Vedic statement.

Generally, the Vedas are accepted as the true foundation and starting point of all spiritual movements and philosophies in India. Dr. Radhakrishnan says, "A study of the hymns of the *Rg-Veda* is indispensable for any adequate account of Indian thought." Again, "The Hindus trace the original source of their cultural life to the Vedas which they hold to be divine truths revealed from time to time to the *Rsis*, Seers in their Super-normal consciousness. Their religion philosophy, ritualistic practices, civic conduct and even social relations are guided by certain codes which are known as *Smritis*, but all of them are based upon the sacred sanctions of Vedic authority" No school

of philosophy will be recognized as orthodox, if it is not supported by the authority of the Vedas. The whole life of a Hindu from conception up to the last funeral rites has to be sanctified by the recitation of the Vedic *mantras*. From these facts, it may be easily conceived, how profound has been the influence of the Vedas upon this great and most ancient of the civilized nations of the world.¹ According to Yajñavalkya, it enlightens one on the knowledge of the supra-sensible matters which lie beyond the domain of perception and inference, hence it is called Veda. Manu speaks of the Vedas as the repository or fountain-head of all religions and duties.²

The term Veda implies three classes of literary works enumerated as follows: 1. *Mantras* or *Samhitas* which are collections of hymns, prayers, benedictions, incantations, sacrificial formulae called *Nivids* or *litanees*. 2. *Brahmanas*, representing a huge mass of prose texts which contain speculations on the *mantras*, precepts for the application of *mantras* in different sacrifices, details of sacrificial paraphernalia and theological, philosophical, grammatical, etymological and metrical speculations. 3. *Aranyakas* (Forest texts) and *Upanishads* which are partly included in the *Brahmanas* themselves but are partly also reckoned as independent works. They contain the meditations of forest ascetics on God, creation of the universe and on mankind. The philosophy of ancient India is embedded in these works.

2. Origin of Caste System:

The present day Hindu Society is divided into so many castes and subcastes. Let us first examine this phenomenon from the historical point of view. The study of the Vedas gives us no evidence of the hereditary system of caste. Many Vedic scholars have come to this conclusion. Prof. Max Muller says, "If then with all the documents before us, we ask the question, Does caste as we find it in Manu, and the present day, form part of the most ancient religious teaching of the Vedas, we can answer with a decided No."³ Again, "there are no castes as yet, the people are still one united whole and bear out one name, that of Visas."⁴ R.C. Dutt also says that in the entire range of the

1. Bhattacharya, H., -*The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. I. P. 182.

2. Buhler, G., -*The Laws of Manu*. SBE Vo. XXV.

3. Prof. Max Muller, -*Chips from a German Workshop*, Vol. II. P. 807.

4. Weber, *Indian Literature*. P. 38.

Vedas we do not have one single passage to show that the community was cut up into hereditary castes.⁵

At the same time we find an allegorical explanation for the origin of the caste system in the Vedas. It is present in the *Rg. Veda* in a *sukta* called the *Puruṣa Sukta*. This *Sukta* is known as the song about the supreme person, the hymn of man or the hymn of creation. It is the 90th hymn of the 10th book of *Rg. Veda*. This hymn clearly contemplates the division of mankind into four classes. The four classes are mentioned by their technical names as follows: The Brahmana sprang from the mouth, the Kṣatriya from the arms, the Vaiśya from the thighs and the Śudra from the feet of the creator. The *Śatapatha Brahmana* mentions four castes. 'There are four castes, Brahmana, Kṣatriya, Vaisya and *Śudra-catvaro vai varnah brahmano, rajanyo, vaishyah, sudrasca.*'⁶ Apart from this the Brahaspati hymn of the *Rg. Veda* mentions two castes, viz, the Brahmana and Kṣatriya. These are the only references to the caste system in the Vedas.

In addition to this explanation, we can look at the problem with reference to the social, political and religious compulsions of the Aryans on their arrival in the land of the five rivers. The Aryan tribes came to India as strangers from the north-west. They occupied the fertile territory of northern Punjab. They called the original inhabitants *Dasyus*, meaning enemies or slaves. To them these aboriginals were a strange, uncouth people who differed greatly from themselves in colour, language, religion and customs. Hence we find throughout the *Rg. Veda*, instances of contrasts between the Aryans and the *Dasyus*. The natives offered opposition to the advance of the conquerors in their areas by fortifying their cities and fighting with weapons. But the greater physical strength and superior skill of the Aryans made the natives submit to their dictates. And here we find the first distinction of caste, a distinction both ethnical and political, a distinction between foreigners and natives between the conquerors and the conquered. Several passages in the *Rg. Veda* testify to the fact that this distinction was intensified by the difference in colour between the two races, the former being 'white' and the latter 'black'.⁷ Thus the term *varṇa*, colour came to be accepted as a mark of difference for making a caste distinction in the later Hindu Society.

5. P.T. Ganga Prasad, The Caste system. P. 4.

6. S.B. 5-5-4-9.

7. R.V. i, 100, 18; ii, 20, 7, iii, 34, 9, ii, 20, 7.

Of the native original inhabitants, a section submitted peacefully to the Aryan invasion. They were designated as *Śudras* or serfs. These constituted the first set of people conquered by the Aryans who claimed to be the nobles. The Aryans had to face strong opposition from the native. Thus it became necessary for the Aryans to set apart a large number of the community to provide defence as well as to extend and consolidate their dominion. This group came to be known as the *Kṣatriyas*, the powerful ones. In course of time the profession of arms became hereditary and the warriors, a caste. Then the need was felt for another class of people to till the land and supply the necessaries of life. These were designated *Vaiśyas* or house-holders, a professional set of people. At this period of time, there grew up another class of people, the Brahmanical or priestly class. They assumed the most awesome prerogatives and exercised the most tyrannical powers within the reach of man. The growth of Aryan literature and the fact that the language of the Veda ceased to be understood by the multitude made it necessary to have a class of men, who were half-poets and half-priests, whose function was to teach, inspire and lead the people. Thus arose the *Brahmanas* as a separate class.

3. Duties of Castes

In the hierarchy of castes the Brahmins and *Kṣatriyas* occupy the upper strata of society and the *Vaiśyas* and *Śudras* constitute the lower strata of Hindu society. Certain duties are common to these four castes such as harmlessness, truthfulness, non-stealing and self-restraint. The members of all castes are expected to practise these basic virtues. Besides, they have their special duties also. The Brahmins have their special duty of studying the Vedas. They have to devote most of their time to intellectual pursuits, they are the scholars in the society. They have to perform sacrifices for themselves. It is their special obligation to impart knowledge to the children and youth in the society. The *Kṣatriyas* are the warriors of the society. They are men with great physical strength and courage. It is their duty to rule over the society and also protect the state from external aggression. The King is a *Kṣatriya*. He has political power to rule over the society. He runs the administration with the assistance of his ministers and soldiers. The *Vaiśyas* are the traders, financiers and agriculturists of the society. They are possessive by nature. They carry on trade and various types of commercial transactions for increasing their wealth. The *Sudras* belong to the lowest caste of the society, the menials of the society. It is their duty to serve the members of the three upper classes. They

are the slaves and serfs of the society. The original Sanskrit Texts of Muir gives a beautiful account of the different castes and their functions: "For the sake of the growth of the worlds the Lord created from his mouth, arm, thigh and foot (respectively) the Brahmanas, Kṣatriyas, Vaisyas and Śudras. The Lord ordained also the occupations of these castes. For the sake of the preservation of this whole creation, the Great and Glorious i.e. Brahma ordained separate occupations for those born from his mouth, arm, thigh and foot. As the occupations and duties of the Brahmins he ordained teaching the Veda etc. studying, making sacrifices for himself and sacrificing for others, giving to others and receiving from others. He ordained as occupations and duties of the Kṣatriya protection of the people, giving to others, the sacrifice, studying and avoidance of the sensual passions. As those of the Vaisyas he ordained the protection of cattle, giving to others, sacrifice, studying, trading, lending at interest and agriculture. One occupation the Lord ordained for the Sudra—to serve without discontent and with complete obedience to these other castes."⁸ The *Aitareya Brāhmana* treats of the different castes and their inter-relationships. It states that the "Brahmana is a receiver of gifts, a drinker of Soma, a seeker of food, and liable to be removed at will. The Vaisya is tributary to another, to be lived on by another and to be oppressed at will. The Sudra is the servant of another, to be expelled at will and to be slain at pleasure. It adds the point that the Rajanya can control even the Brahmana. Vaisya is his inferior and tributary whom he can remove without cause from his land, but who is still free and whom he cannot maim or slay without due process. The Sudra has no rights of property or life against the noble especially the King."⁹

4. Position of Brahmanas in the Vedic Society

As we are aware, the Brahmana was produced from the mouth of the Supreme Lord or Creator. This fact places the Brahmana above all other castes since head is the best part of the human organism, towering above other limbs. The Brahmana was regarded as superior to all other castes since he came out of the seat of intelligence. The following texts repeat this information "Brahma is prior to Kṣatra. The Brahma is yoked before the Kṣatra for the Brahma comes before the Kṣatra." "Here the term Brahma refers to Brahmana and Kṣatra to Kṣatriya."¹⁰ "The Brahmana was not only superior to the Kṣatriya

8. Muir, Original Sanskrit Texts, Vol. I. P. 35-43.

9. A.B. Vii 29-4 (See P. 8).

10. *Panca Vimsa Brahmana* (P. B.), 11-1-2.

but in fact the Kṣatriya was subservient to the Brahmana just as the Vaisya was subservient to the Kṣatriya."¹¹ The *Aitereya Brahmana* speaks of the reasons why the Brahmana should precede the Kṣatriya: "If Brahmana precedes Kṣatra, the kingdom of that Kṣatriya Yajamana will grow strong and ward off invaders." Again, "That kingdom become prosperous and teems with heroes where the king is submissive to the Brahmana; such a king is blessed with valiant sons."¹²

In the social and political sphere, the Brahmanas occupied a supreme position. They were the chief advisers to the King. The Brahmanas constituted the priestly class while the Kṣatriyas, the military or ruling class or nobility. The *Sathapatha Brahmana* goes even to the extent of saying that the Brahmana should be without a king whereas a king should never be without a Brahmana. These two categories of people in the society together maintained the balance of power in the socio-political sphere. In social status also the Brahmana was superior to all the rest. Brahmins are the gods amongst men, they are the veritable gods amongst men. *Taittiriya Brahmana* enjoins: "the Brahmins are a divine caste. Every king had his royal priest or *Purohita* who functioned just like a prime minister who counselled the king in matters both spiritual and temporal. In fact the administrative machinery consisted of both the king and his Brahmana *Purohita*. That is the reason why the *Aitereya Brahmana* regards the Brahmin as half Kṣatriya. The *Purohita* is one-half of Kṣatriya's soul."¹³ The *Sathapatha Brahmana* makes another observation. There are two kinds of gods. One kind comprises the celestial or divine deities whereas the learned Brahmin well-versed in the sacred lore are human gods or gods amongst men. Such is the position of the Brahmana in the society. And because of this, the Brahmanas enjoyed certain privileges. Four main privileges are mentioned: people should protect the Brahmanas by performing four duties – by showing him respect and liberty, acknowledging his individuality and by granting him security against capital punishment.¹⁴

5. Vedic Concept of Sacrifice

Sacrifices are of great significance in the Vedic life. They are the soul of the Vedas. Many passages in the *Rg.Veda* define the place

11. A.B. 20-10-1.

12. *Ibid.* 8. 37-5.

13. *Ibid.* T-34-8.

14. S.B. 11-5-7, 1.

and enjoin the necessity of *Yajnas*. R.V. vii, 99, 4 reads, "Vishnu and Indra made the spacious world for the sake of the sacrifice. The universe is created because of sacrifice. Hence the statement: Sacrifice is the axle and world's wheel and the fecundating power of all things."¹⁵ "Again it is eternal and universal, offered by gods as well as men."¹⁶ "By sacrifice the gods created all things."¹⁷ Further more, by sacrifice they became immortal. By sacrifice the ancient Fathers, the first sacrificers delivered the world from chaos, gave birth to the sun, kindled the stars and became equal to the greatest of the gods."¹⁸

Sacrifices fall into two divisions. One is household sacrifices and the other, greater sacrifices. The household sacrifices were performed by the father of the family and were simple and homely attempts to propitiate the heavenly powers. The greater sacrifices were offered on special occasions by kings or sages to gain extraordinary ends. They are costly and elaborate in nature. At first the father of the family offered sacrifice for his own household. Hence he was called *Yajamāna*, the sacrificer. But soon when the primitive family worship grew more complex, when the family grew into a tribe, and the tribe a nation, the head of the family relinquished all the functions connected with sacrifice. As a result the assistants, the *purohitas* became established as the supreme authority in matters related to sacrifice. One reason for the growth of priesthood was that if a hymn was rightly sung or chanted and if a sacrifice was duly performed, it was an infallible means of securing the object of the sacrificer. It was thus of utmost importance that the sacrifice should be performed by one who knew every detail of the ritual. Hence the man skilled in the performance of the sacrifice came to be a person of importance. Thus priests came to acquire a social value, and hence a professional priesthood and a regular priest-craft came into existence. The implied truth is the acceptance of the idea that a rightly performed sacrifice and the rightly sung hymn has the power to produce, control and direct the might of god. This marked the beginnings of sacerdotalism which grew in proportion as the Brahmanas became a distinct priestly class.

Simple domestic rites were performed without the help of the priest. But in all greater sacrifices the Brahmin operated as he is the priest. If

15. R.V. i. 164, 34, 5.

16. *Ibid.* X. 82, 90, 130.

17. *Ibid.* X. 90.

18. *Ibid.* X. 88, X. 135, 154.

properly performed, sacrifices ensured *primarily* the *benefits due to the sacrificer (Yajamana)*. But the priest shared the profit besides securing his *Dakshina*. The priestly class was made up of Brahmanas. Brahman denotes the priestly class as opposed to the warrior class and the people. The term is first found in the *Atharva Veda*¹⁹ and frequently else where later on. *Rg. Veda* also refers to the term. To quote an instance, Brahman seems to designate a "priest by profession." The word Brahman appears to have had at first the sense of 'sage,' 'poet,' next that of officiating priest and ultimately that of the special class of priest.²⁰ Every king had his family priest or royal chaplain (*purohita*) whose function was that of a prime minister. Generally speaking, the term *purohita* means priest but it carried a deeper significance in the Vedic age. In the Vedic age, the office of the *purohita* was an important office held by the Brahmins. The *purohita* was the chief advisor of the king in matters both temporal and spiritual. He used to precede the king on all occasions. *Rg. Veda* gives the example of *Brhaspati*, the priest and guide of Indra preceding Indra. He went before the king. "*Yasmin Brahma rājāni purvameti.*" He used to advise the king on important social, political and religious issues and show him the way. The priest surrounded and protected the king with his powers just like the ocean which girdles the earth. The *Aitereya Brahmana* testifies : The subjects of that king live in perfect harmony and are devoted to him who is guided by a wise priest.²¹

A hymn in the *Atharva Veda* sets forth the power of the priest to secure the prosperity of those who are his friends and the destruction of his enemies: "May this prayer of mine be successful, may the vigour and strength of mine be complete, may power be perfect, undecaying and victorious of those of which I am the *Purohita*."

I fortify their kingdom and augment their energy, valour and force.
I break the arms of their enemies with this oblation.

May all those who fight against our wise and prosperous prince sink downwards and be prostrated. With my prayer I destroy his enemies and raise up his friends.

May those of whom I am the *Purohita* be sharper than an axe, sharper than fire, sharper than Indra's thunderbolt.

19. A.V. ii. 15, 4.

20. Rv. i. 108, 7, vii. 7. 20.

21. A.B. 8, 40. 20.

I strengthen their weapons, I propose their kingdom rich in heroes. May their power be undecaying and victorious. May all the gods foster their designs.²²

So in all walks of life, the spiritual and temporal, the priests played a vital role. The Kṣatriyas who represented the nobility could not do without a priest or Brahmana who was then the spiritual guide and chief adviser. The king and his Brahmana priest together made up the administrative machinery. Hence the *purohita* was regarded as one half of Kṣatriya, i.e. the king's soul. This fact points to one important aspect, viz., the point that any and every Brahmin was not fit to be allowed to be a *purohita*. *Aitereya Brahmana* specifically mentions the two attributes of the *purohita*, viz., learned (*Vidwan*) and protector of the state (*Rāstra gōpa*). These two qualities separate out the fit *purohitas* from the common run of Brahmanas. Furthermore, every priest was required to be whole in body and blameless in life. He must be an *anyunvanga*, not having too few limbs, *anatiriktanga*, not having too many limbs, *dvesata*, regularly shaped, *anatikrishna*, not being too old and *anatisveta*, not being too young. He must above all be, *sadhucarana*, a man who leads a proper life.²³

6. Kinds of Priests

In the Vedic literature *Purohita* is the name of a priest. His primary function was that of a domestic priest of a king or that of a great noble. *Rg. Veda* gives the example of Viswamitra²⁴ as the *purohita* of King Bharata. In all religious matters he was the *alter ego* of the king. Hence it is only natural to conclude that in the growth of Priesthood *purohita* played a significant part. Originally, he was the adviser to the king in matters both spiritual and secular. Besides the regular ones there were other priests whom the king invited on occasions like when important sacrifices were performed. In the early Vedic age rituals were very simple. The number of priests was also small. But when the rituals swelled in bulk and the sacrifices increased in number and became complicated in form, the number of priests who attended the sacrifice also increased. For the smooth functioning of the sacrificial machinery priests became an indispensable part of sacrifices, not only to gods and men but

22. A.V. iii. 19.

23. Maurice Phillips. *Teaching of the Vedas*, P. 216.

24. R.V. iii. 33. 53.

also to *asuras* and demons. The names of Asura priests are mentioned in the *Sathapatha Brahmana*.

Traditionally, it has been accepted that four priests are necessary for performing a sacrifice. They are named Hotr, Adhvaryu, Udgatr and Brahman. Their duties may be summarized as follows.

1. *Hotr*: This is the priest of the *Rg. Veda*. He recited hymns during the sacrifice in praise of the gods to whom the particular act of sacrifice was addressed. He is a priest who at sacrifice invokes the gods or recites the prayers of the *Rg. Veda*. It was the Hotr who used to invoke the gods by reciting the hymns and making offerings to them. The Hotrs as a class were the most highly educated class of priests. They were supposed to know the correct pronunciation and the meaning of the hymns. The word 'hotr' is derived from 'her' which means 'pour on the fire.' He was given an important position in the entire sacrificial system.

2. *Adhvaryu*: The priests of the Yajur Veda are called Adhvaryus. This is the 'working priests' who is entrusted with the material performance of the sacrifice. Generally speaking his activities are confined to manual work in sacrificial ceremonies. He is the priest in charge of the material performance of the various sacrificial rites. For example, he has to measure the ground, to build the altar, to prepare the sacrificial vessels, to fetch wood and water, to light the fire, to bring the victim and slay it. The *Rg. Veda* elaborates: he presses the soma plant in the pressing stones, mixes it with water and milk, purifies it, strews the grass by the side of the sacrificial fire and thus prepares the seat for the gods, kindles fire and finally pours the soma juice into the fire for the gods.²⁵

3. *Udgatr*: The Sama Vedic priest is the Udgatr. It is his duty to chant hymns from the *Samaveda* to praise and please the gods. The word 'Udgai' means 'sing' and hence the 'Udgatr' stands for singer. According to ancient custom, some parts of the sacrifice had to be accompanied by songs. Therefore there arose another class of priests whose particular office was to act as the chorus. The Brahmana texts hold that the *udgatr* is a prominent priest entrusted with the duty of *soma* singing. They took part only in the most solemn sacrifices.

25. *Ibid.*, vii, 37. 2, V. 43. 3, IV. 6. 4.

4. *Brahman*: This is the fourth priest who is well-versed in all the three Vedas, *Rg.*, *Sama* and *Yajur*. During the period of Brahmanas, the Brahman priest was exalted to a very lofty position. The *Aitareya Brahmana* says, "it is on Brahman that sacrifice is based."²⁶ Also the Brahman is conceived as the entire sacrifice and sacrifice is incomplete without the Brahman priest. He is responsible for the smooth conduct and safe completion of the sacrifice without any flaw. The *Sathapatha Brahmana* says, "he safeguards the sacrifice."²⁷ He is called the physician of the sacrifice because he rectifies the sacrifice whenever it goes wrong. He mends the flaws of the rites to make the function flawless.²⁸

Thus we find that several persons were involved in the Vedic sacrifice. It included the *Yajamāna*, *Purohita* and the priests. In course of time, in the Brahmanical period, sacrifices became more and more complicated. Hence it became impossible for the four priests to perform all the rites. Naturally the number of priests increased with three priests acting as assistants to each priest. Thus we find four Yajur Vedic priests, four Rg. Vedic priests, four Sama-Vedic priests and four Brahman priests making the number in sixteen all. The word *Rtvik* is a regular descriptive term for a sacrificial priest. It covers all the different priests employed at the sacrifice. *Rtvik* refers to a functionary in general.

7. Conclusion

The priests enjoyed a unique position in the Vedic age. The major reason for this was the supreme importance given to sacrifices. Sacrifices promised both material prosperity and spiritual merit; not only rewards in the other world and heavenly bliss but also worldly gains. Even monarchs relied on sacrifices like *Aswamedha* and *Rajasuya*. None could do without priests. Hence the priests were held in awe and veneration. But in the later Brahmanical era when the sacrifices came to be underrated, the priests began to lose their hold on the king and the people. The reasons for this were many: the dawn of the Upaniṣadic age with its emphasis on the supremacy of knowledge over action, the emergence of popular religious cults like Viṣṇu cult, Śiva cult etc. and the beginnings of the *Bhakti* cult. Upaniṣads sing the glory of knowledge *par excellence*.

26. A.B. VII. 26.

27. S.B. i. 7. 4. 18

28. A.B. 5. 25. 9.

This eulogy of knowledge affected the rituals negatively. In the later Vedic age meditation rather than performance was the accepted rule. The development of the monistic trend of thought in the Upaniṣads marked a shift of interest from the objective to the subjective level. The Upaniṣadic teachings expressed in *mahavakyas* like "aham brahma asmi" and "tat tvam asi" left no scope for sacrificial performances. The distinction between the higher and lower knowledge and the acceptance of the higher knowledge of the Supreme Brahman as that which liberates man is the characteristic teaching of the Upaniṣads. This again affected the efficacy of sacrifices and contributed to the gradual decline of priesthood.