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## THE PANDIT: THE EMBODIMENT OF ORAL TRADITION

This study investigates the structure of oral tradition by defining the role of the transmitter in Hinduism, the *pandit*. Every scriptural tradition has its antecedent oral tradition, but some traditions place such great emphasis upon oral transmission that the scriptural canon itself takes oral form. For instance, the Druids of ancient Gaul never committed their wisdom to writing. The Celtic world, likewise, taught by a metrical and rhythmic oral transmission. Orthodox history, myth and ritual in classical Shinto were passed on orally by a hereditary priesthood of the Imperial Court. In fact, the prayers and rituals of Shinto were not set down in writing until the 10th century A.D., even though the Japanese immediately placed Buddhist literature into written form.<sup>1</sup> In the history of Judaism there were two Torahs, one written and the other oral. The Hindu wisdom tradition has consistently valued oral transmission more than written transmission. Hindu scripture did not take written form for a millennium or longer after its canon was constituted.

### **Ancient Indian Education**

There is no reference to writing in the whole of Vedic literature because it was transmitted entirely orally. Controversy still exists over the origins of writing in India. An undeciphered script has been found on seals from the ancient civilization of Mohenjo-daro and Harappā, and writing became common throughout India by 800 B.C., but the Sanskrit alphabet and grammatical principles were not fully in practice in written form until 500 B.C. Writing was reserved for commerce and trading in the beginning, and no prejudice existed against its use except for scriptural literature. The non-Vedic literary tradition began to develop the art of writing in the early years of the common era. Palm leaves were used by 200 A.D., and extant leaves are dated

1. Hajime Nakamura, *Parallel Developments: A Comparative History of Ideas* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1975), p. 24.

from 600 A.D.<sup>2</sup> A vast written literature developed in classical India, encompassing astronomy, grammar, etymology and even religious topics. But scripture itself was reserved for oral transmission.

It was the special role of the *brāhmaṇ* class to teach. By creating a hereditary class of teachers, Indian civilization made great strides in education. The early teachers were usually householders who took no fees for their task. Settlements of teachers in the country and forests became the foundation of an education system, and assemblies of teachers gathered to insure the integrity of transmission. It was left to the discretion of the teacher to determine the capacity of each pupil in order to set out a personalized course of study. The primary level of education consisted basically in phonetics and grammar which impressed upon youth the importance of method, order and principles, expressed in a linguistic system. Although pupils spent much of their time in rote recitation and imitating the intonation, accent and pronunciation of the teacher, they also received instruction in the etymology of words and interpretation of texts. Oral instruction began with phonetics and metre by simple recitation; grammar and etymology, also transmitted orally, initiated understanding; astronomy and ceremonial, completing the primary curriculum, were applied in practical ritual.<sup>3</sup> From this core curriculum other subjects evolved.

Listening to the teacher was the foundation of the oral tradition. Teachers who transmitted the classical Sanskrit heritage were called *paṇḍit-s*. Even in modern India, the *paṇḍit* belongs to a class of *brāhmaṇ-s* who specialize in Sanskrit learning and whose memory and mastery of texts are proven. In ancient India, there were three principal modes of transmitting knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The first was an oral-observational method which concerned itself with the practical knowledge of people, transmitted from one generation to another by word of mouth. This body of learning was uncodified in memory. Instruction in this

2. See Radhakumund Mookerji, *Ancient Indian Education, Brahmanical and Buddhist* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 3rd edn., 1960).

3. See A. S. Altekar, *Education in Ancient India* (Benares: Indian Book Shop, 1934); G. S. Ghurye, *Preservation of Learned Tradition in India* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1950); F. E. Keay, *Ancient Indian Education* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1918); Santosh Kumar Das, *The Educational System of the Ancient Hindus* (Calcutta: Mitra Press, 1930); Veda Mitra, *Education in Ancient India* (Delhi: Arya Book Depot, 1964).

4. Baidyanath Saraswati, 'Study of Specialists in Traditional Learning: The Pandits of Kashi,' *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* 10 (1975), 103-116.

knowledge consisted especially in the arts and crafts. The second mode transmitted transcendental knowledge of higher religious wisdom (*parāvidyā*). It was the role of the ascetic and *guru* to transmit this wisdom, which had as its goal spiritual liberation. The third mode of transmission carried general religious and secular knowledge (*aparāvidyā*) and the *paṇḍit* was its transmitter. The textual tradition of the *paṇḍit* was both written and oral ; the oral tradition he preserved was fully codified, recorded and textualized in memory.

P. V. Kane observes that oral instruction was both the cheapest method of transmission and the one way which assured the greatest accuracy.<sup>5</sup> To make a mistake in memorizing and reciting a sacred text is regarded as an offence by a *paṇḍit*. When Western scholars first published critical editions of Indian literature, they frequently consulted *paṇḍit*-s, whose memories were considered more accurate than extant manuscripts. Hajime Nakamura, reflecting on the role of the *paṇḍit*, comments that 'the written text can at most be used as an aid to memory, but it has not authority.'<sup>6</sup>

The teacher in classical India was neither an independent thinker nor a private researcher, but fundamentally the transmitter of an authoritative tradition. The spoken word carried authority which the written word lacked ; this explains why such emphasis was placed on oral tradition in India. A *paṇḍit* descended from a family line of teachers whose particular function was to transmit a legacy. The *paṇḍit*'s authority was grounded in the lineage of teachers who gave continuity to tradition.

The oral law in early Jewish history resembles the oral tradition in India. Oral law was the basis of the Talmudic Torah, which included both oral and written law. Tradition is the term applied to the unwritten code of law given to Moses. Torah could not be understood without oral law ; it not only preceded written law but also determined its meaning. Moreover, the Talmud was understood not as a perfect rendition of oral law in writing but rather as notes on the oral law. In Rabbinic Judaism the teaching of the great masters was binding and carried authority. As in ancient India, the authority of the teacher was based upon a tradition that had been orally transmitted.<sup>7</sup>

5. P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra* (Poona : Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Government Oriental Series, 1930-62), Vol. 2, Part 2, 347.

6. Nakamura, *Parallel Developments*, p. 23.

7. Zvi Cahn, *The Philosophy of Judaism* (New York : Macmillan Company, 1962), 171 ff. Also David R. Blumenthal, 'Where Does Jewish Studies Belong?' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976), 536-539.

### Transmission of Scripture

The Hindus differentiate religious literature which is revealed from that which is merely revered. Scripture, the revealed literature, is termed *śruti*, namely, that which has been heard. The revered religious literature is termed *smṛti*, namely, that which has been remembered. Scriptural literature (*śruti*), it is believed, does not originate from the wisdom of the sages but it is the eternal wisdom heard by the sages as it resonates throughout time. It has no personal origination. In this particular age, it is heard by ancient Indian seers who codify it in a body of wisdom called the Veda. An ancient text reads : ' All Vedas are committed to memory by word of mouth.'<sup>8</sup> To let the Veda slip from memory is a grave offence comparable to murder or drinking intoxicants.<sup>9</sup>

The whole Veda had to be committed to memory in order to guarantee its transmission. It took from 12 to 24 years to completely master one of the four major portions of the Veda. Scriptural education, consequently, consisted in recitation and repetition. The *Rgveda* speaks of that monotonous repetition and compares it to the croaking frogs excited by an approaching rain.<sup>10</sup> Since recitation was regulated by metre and modulation of the voice, the early seers placed value on the sounds of syllables, words and phrases. I-Tsing, one of the first Chinese intellectuals to visit India in classical times, wrote : ' There are two traditional ways in India of attaining to intellectual power : committing to memory ; and the alphabet fixes one's ideas.'<sup>11</sup>

The hymns of the *Rgveda*, the earliest of the four sections of the Veda, are now classified according to families of authors. Homogeneity of style and vocabulary characterize each *Manḍala* or unit of the *Rgveda* authored by a particular family. Although no system of a single teacher can be identified, the poets and seers of India's earliest scripture were markedly individualistic. Mention of cult deities and ritual prayer peculiarities betray the religious preferences of each family of authors.<sup>12</sup> Each family wrapped its oral tradition in great secrecy and guarded it as a family inheritance. Fathers transmitted scripture

8. *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.31.

9. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, p. 358.

10. *Rgveda* VII, p. 103.

11. I-Tsing 183, quoted in Keay, *Ancient Indian Education*, p. 101.

12. See V. G. Rahurkar, *The Seers of the Rgveda* (Poona : Poona University, 1964) ; also C. Kunhan Raja, *Poet-Philosophers of the Rgveda, Vedic and Pre-Vedic* (Madras : Ganesh, 1963).

to sons, and frequently young men were sent to more advanced teachers. Some of the Vedic authors were domestic priests (*purohita*-s), and in their families especially the transmission from generation to generation was established. Although 407 authors of the *R̥gveda* have been traced, all the collections were brought together by 1100 B.C.<sup>13</sup>

Scriptural education by means of the written word was wholly condemned. Reliance on manuscripts was considered one of the six hindrances to learning, along with gambling, dramatic arts, women, lethargy and sleeping.<sup>14</sup> The *Mahābhārata* condemned to hell anyone who would write the Veda; the *Nārada Smṛti* explicitly claims that it was utterly worthless to learn the Veda from a book.<sup>15</sup> Nārada writes : 'What is learnt from reliance on books and is not learnt from a teacher does not shine in an assembly'.<sup>16</sup> He also condemned to hell those who sell the Veda, those who ridicule it, and those who write it down. Sāyana quotes the adage that the text must be learnt from the lips of a teacher and not from a manuscript because scriptural education must be through hearing sacred wisdom. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa described the writing of the Veda as sacrilege.<sup>17</sup> One test condemns the person who learns the Veda from a manuscript as the worst among learners.<sup>18</sup> To learn the Veda from a manuscript meant not to comprehend it. It is believed that Vāsukra, a Kashmiri, first wrote out the Veda in the 8th or 9th century A.D., although oral transmission continued as late as the 11th and 12th centuries A.D., when the texts were commonly committed to writing.

The study of the Veda and the teaching of the Veda have been regarded as a religious duty throughout the ages. Even in the present century *brāhmaṇ*-s who memorize the Veda and other large bodies of Sanskrit literature consider doing so a religious act, and *paṇḍit*-s carry on *brāhmaṇ*-ic Sanskrit education today. In classical times, oral learning and teaching were compulsory religious duties. Not only the *brāhmaṇ* class but all twice-born Hindus shared the obligation to perpetuate the oral transmission of scripture. It was just as meritorious a sacrifice (*yajña*) to transmit the Veda as to perform ritual or meditation. In fact, study of the Veda was essential for the performance of sacrifice, whether sacrifice meant ritual or meditation. This sacred

13. Keay, *Ancient Indian Education*, pp. 12-14.

14. Mookerji, *Indian Education*, p. 197.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

16. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, pp. 348-49.

17. Bhaṭṭa is an 8th century A.D. writer.

18. *Pañiniyaśikṣā* 32, quoted in Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, p. 347.

duty was taken so seriously in classical times that it structured Indian civilization, facilitated the spread of ancient wisdom and also preserved it intact. It produced both a sense of responsibility and a sense of fulfilment of religious duty. It advanced education in the home as well as a more public system of education. Above all, it produced specialists in religious wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

A diversified method of study was developed. After the scripture was committed to memory, reflection upon the text and determination of meaning followed. Scripture was often repeated in order to keep it fresh in memory and understanding. It was also used for *japa*, an inaudible repetition of the text as prayer.<sup>20</sup> Finally, it was imparted to others. But the cornerstone of Vedic learning, as of all classical Indian instruction, was listening to the recitation of the text. The student of scripture must hear the text as the ancient seers heard eternal wisdom. Hearing (*Śravaṇa*), in the Indian sense, involves two powers; the audial function, which is ephemeral, and a deeper and more subjective hearing, which resonates with the self (*ātman*). The general Indian conviction is that hearing is a proximate cause of insight, a notion similar to that found in Ch'an Buddhism.<sup>21</sup> *Śravaṇa* is the term that denotes the activity by which the text is heard, memorized, learned and controlled. It has six components: (a) the topic is discovered at the beginning and end of each passage; (b) the topic is then discussed through repetition and variations on the theme; (c) the originality of the passage is found; (d) the result of the passage is uncovered; (e) the value of the study is indicated; (f) and, finally, the argument demonstrating its validity is grasped.<sup>22</sup> Hearing the text, consequently, is not a passive operation but a rigorous analysis.

### Oral Tradition and Scripture

Early Indian epistemology considered sense perception, inference and testimony to be the bases of knowledge. Both sense perception and inference, however, were deemed defective because they were liable to personal error and to the imperfection of the external and internal senses. Verbal testimony (*śabda*), on the other hand, was believed to be without error because it imparted knowledge through hearing from

19. Mookerji, *Indian Education*, p. 215.

20. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, p. 357.

21. Richard H. Robinson, *The Buddhist Religion* (Encino: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1973), p. 91.

22. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophy of India*, edit. by Joseph Campbell (New York: Pantheon Books, 1951), p. 431.

a higher authority. Hearing (*śravaṇa*) is to accept wisdom from a higher authority, oral tradition. In later Indian epistemology, verbal testimony became one of the six means of knowledge, along with perception, inference, comparison, postulation and intuition, and some schools of philosophy even raised verbal testimony above the other means. There is more to verbal testimony than simply listening to the words of another. Verbal testimony entails the grasp of the meaning of words ; it embraces reasoning, confirmation of meaning by another and application of meaning. Thus, oral transmission of scripture is initiated by an external authority, but it is completed by internal authority when one makes it a part of his own analysis.<sup>23</sup>

There is efficacy to the recitation of a text by a teacher and the repetition of it by a pupil, according to Hindu belief. The sound of the sacred word has its own power apart from the sense. The dimensions of sound, its rhythm and vibrations, were important in oral transmission. The great respect which word and sound elicit in India may be due to the various interpretations of the *śphoṭa* theory. One common understanding of the *śphoṭa* theory is that a word or an individual phoneme is an entity other than sound, and this entity itself bears meaning. The meaning of a word, as an entity, pre-exists in the individual and when one speaks and is heard, an identical meaning is awakened in the hearer. Some Vedantins argue that the meaning of words and the meaning of sounds are rooted in the self (*ātman*).<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the influence of the *śphoṭa* theory, it is classical belief that Vedic sounds possess eternity. This may explain why exactness is expected in reciting and transmitting a text. It may also explain the efficacy and power attributed to the sound of the text as it is orally transmitted.

Even a cursory study of classical Indian philosophy discovers the importance of memory. Memory is more frequently mentioned among the internal faculties than any other intellectual operation. The *paṇḍit* represented the living memory of a scriptural tradition. Yet memory without understanding was universally disvalued. Those who knew the meaning of scripture were considered superior to those who merely memorized it, and those who put its meaning into life were superior to those who merely knew its meaning.<sup>25</sup> Indian history,

23. M. Hiriyanna, 'The Training of the Vedantin,' *Popular Essays in Indian Philosophy* (Mysore : Kavyalaya Publishers, 1952), p. 14.

24. K. A. Subramania Iyer (trans.), *Sphoṭasiddha of Mandana Misra* (Poona : Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1966), 8 ff.

25. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, p. 357.

nonetheless, testifies that many *paṇḍit*-s memorized the Veda without understanding and generally stressed memory more than understanding.<sup>26</sup> Even in India today, *brāhmaṇ*-s frequently say that the meaning of the Veda is hidden and cannot be known. This view is also shared by an equal number from the *paṇḍit* community.

Classical Indian education was geared toward the transformation of the human person. The goal of scriptural education was a thorough spiritual transformation. Vedic wisdom is eternal ; but because human history is always in process, wisdom needs re-assertion.<sup>27</sup> The re-assertion of scriptural wisdom takes place in memory. The educational goal of spiritual transformation is attainable to the degree that Vedic wisdom is re-asserted in the memory of a community or an individual. In short, knowledge lives in memory. This was the principle behind the exclusion of written texts in the Vedic tradition. If knowledge is to be heard, it must live in the memory. Yet memory is not necessarily raised above other operations in education. Although hearing, reflection (*manana*) and even concentration (*nīḍhyāsana*) employ memory, the Upaniṣads do not elevate memory above other sources of understanding. For example, while the Vedānta defines meditation as constant remembrance, it views rational discrimination as a far superior operation.

Nyāya, one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu thought, makes a perceptive distinction between recollection and recognition. Education in scripture is not mere recollection but entails recognition as well. Recollection is an operation of memory for the Nyāya system, including neither perception nor cognition. Recognition, on the other hand, originates from past impressions (the operation of memory) in close association with a direct perception. Recognition in oral transmission is brought forth by an impression orally communicated and through which perception takes place.<sup>28</sup> Thus, new perception and original knowledge result from oral transmission. However, the *paṇḍit* who has merely memorized a text still fulfils a significant role when he recites it to his pupil. The recognition of wisdom is only initiated by the *paṇḍit* ; the student must perceive the wisdom of what is heard very much on his own. To demand any more from the

26. *Ibid.*, p. 358.

27. Satsvarupa dasa Gosvami, *Readings in Vedic Literature* (Los Angeles : The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1977), p. 4.

28. C. N. Mishra, 'The Nature and Status of Recollection (Smṛti) in the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Philosophy,' *Journal of the Bihar Research Society* 48 (1962), 69-76.



paṇḍit is to confuse him with the guru, who is more assertive and directive.

Again, there is a counterpart in Rabbinic Judaism and its two sources, the Mishnah and the Torah. Mishnah was transmitted through memorization and consequently called the 'Oral Torah,' while the Pentateuch was called the 'Written Torah.' Mishnah was actually constructed to facilitate memorization. Saul Lieberman writes :

A regular oral *ekdosis*, edition of the Mishnah, was in existence, a fixed text recited by the Tannaim or the college. The *Tanna* ("repeater," reciter) committed to memory the text or certain portions of the Mishnah which he subsequently recited in the college in the presence of the greater masters of the Law. Those Tannaim were pupils chosen for their extraordinary memory, although they were not always endowed with due intelligence... When the Mishnah was committed to memory and the Tannaim recited it in the college, it was thereby published and possessed all traits and features of a written *ekdosis*.<sup>29</sup>

The *tanna*, reciter, in Rabbinic Judaism is much like the paṇḍit in Sanskritic Hinduism. He is the memory of the people, the living memory of the tradition. Just as in Judaism the rabbis, the masters of the Law, were the spiritual teachers, so in Hinduism the guru-s were the spiritual teachers of scripture.

### The Guru Tradition

The scriptural tradition possessed three sorts of teachers in ancient India : *guru*, *ācārya* and *upādhyāya*. The *guru* is the one who, having performed all rites, gives instructions in the Veda. Jan Gonda states: 'The cumulative function of the *guru* consisted in imparting to the young member of the Aryan community the "sacraments," teaching him a portion of the Veda, and educating him with particular regard to *ācāra* (traditionally right behaviour) and *dharma* (socio-religious duties).<sup>30</sup> The role combined teaching, advising, initiating, and magical and officiating functions.<sup>31</sup> The *ācārya*, another comprehensive

29. Saul Lieberman, 'The Publication of the Mishnah,' *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York : Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 87, as quoted in Jacob Neuser, 'Form and Meaning in Mishnah,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (1977), 31.

30. Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (The Hague : Mouton and Company, 1965), p. 241.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

term, also initiated a student through the *upanayana* rite (twice-born) and gave instructions in one portion or possibly all of the Veda. The, *upādhyāya* taught only part of the Veda and, unlike other teachers took a fee for his instruction.<sup>32</sup> Because of this, he was considered a lesser type of teacher, even though he was frequently called the first-teacher (*ādi-guru*) along with a youth's father and mother. Regardless of the term used, the teacher was primarily an educational leader at the inception of India's classical history. But among the seers of the Upaniṣads, the final portion of the Veda, the teacher became both an intellectual and a spiritual figure. From this moment onward, the *guru* was distinguished from other teachers, especially the *paṇḍit*, as the prime religious teacher. The Upaniṣadic literature and the later Vedānta defined the teacher as both an intellectual and a spiritual figure while the parallel revered literature (*smṛti*) emphasized the spiritual dimension of the teacher almost exclusively.

This double aspect of the teaching role is expressed in the Upaniṣadic definition of the teacher. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* defines the teacher as one who is versed in scripture and absorbed in Brahman.<sup>33</sup> He who heard the meaning and import of the Veda fulfilled the spiritual aspect. A teacher, according to the Upaniṣads, is a spiritually liberated person whose realization has come through the wisdom of scriptural tradition. Although early Indian literature reveals a brilliant lineage of individual teachers, little is known of their personal histories. The esteem given to the *guru* in Hinduism reflects this initial conception of the teacher as a learned and realized individual. Moreover, the role of the spiritual teacher became absolutized by the end of the scriptural period. Since everyone admitted the difficulty of attaining Brahman in self-realization, the teacher became a necessity. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* speaks of the teacher as one who can remove the bandages from the eyes and give direction.<sup>34</sup> While symbols of the Absolute in the early Upaniṣads are ritualistic, the later Upaniṣads speak of the Absolute more in negative terms, following the suggestive and somewhat inadequate formulations of the sages. The scriptural

32. Mitra, *Education*, pp. 16-17. An *upādhyāya* was one who taught for a living; a female preceptor or the wife of a teacher are also covered by this term. The tradition abounds in other terms: *adhyāpaka* is a preceptor or instructor in sacred knowledge; *prādhyāpaka* is a seasoned teacher who instructs advanced students and other teachers; *pravaktā* is a generic term for teacher; *prācārya* is a retired teacher.

33. *Muṇḍaka* 1.11.12.

34. *Chāndogya* 6.14, pp. 1-2.

tradition concludes that liberation is virtually impossible without the knowledge and favour of the *guru*.<sup>35</sup>

The *guru* is thus differentiated from the *paṇḍit*, although both share in transmitting an oral scriptural tradition. Knowledge transmitted through a succession of teachers (*guru-paramparā*) by passing on (*sampradāya*) ancient wisdom is the common heritage of both *guru* and *paṇḍit*. Yet a substantial distinction remains. The quality of the knowledge received differs, because one teacher is basically a spiritual guide and the other is a transmitter of an intellectual heritage. The former is admittedly rare.

Although the study, preservation and transmission of scripture in unaltered form was the work of the *brāhmaṇ* class, it is non-Vedic to expect spiritual teachers to arise from a social class in which membership is determined by birth. The *guru* does not come by his ability to enlighten others by virtue of his birth or social class. Instead, authority comes from the chain of masters through whom a particular *guru* hears and speaks the wisdom of the ages. The chain of disciplic succession is the source out of which the *guru* transmits tradition. It is believed that the insight and power of all the previous teachers is present in the teaching of a living *guru*.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the duty of *paṇḍit* families to transmit the heritage is established by their birth into a definite social class.

To preserve in memory and to transmit the knowledge which leads to self-realization is the meaning of lineage. Throughout all the scriptural commentaries written by Hindu sage-philosophers, the beginning and end of each treatise offer salutation and praise to the teachers of a particular lineage. Śaṅkara, the medieval Vedāntin, writes : ' I bow down to my teacher, a knower of Brahman, who has collected for us the nectar of knowledge from the Vedāntas like a bee collecting the best honey from flowers.'<sup>37</sup> Repeating the names of the line of teachers serves as a sort of *mantra* which heightens consciousness and becomes, it is believed, a source of power. Some commentators use lineage to enhance doctrine itself; lineage refines, strengthens and clarifies understanding. Lineage increases the value of doctrine as it passes through the memory of the ages.<sup>38</sup> Initiation into knowledge

35. S. K. Belvalkar and R. D. Ranade, *History of Indian Philosophy, The Creative Period* (Poona : Bilvakunja Publishing House, 1927), p. 441.

36. Gosvami, *Readings in Vedic Literature*, p. 8.

37. Śaṅkara, *Upadeśasāhasri* VII, p. 233.

38. Śaṅkara, *Chāndogyabhāṣya* 111.XI.4.

is a familiar point of departure in Indian religion, and in the *guru* tradition initiation becomes a life-long process of bringing to mind the line of past teachers. The transmission of spiritual knowledge, which is the function of the *guru*, is accomplished only with the help of traditional authority, and such authority is harnessed in the present teaching situation by sustaining in consciousness the lineage of teachers. The memory of the past is gathered, as it were, through a *mantra* of teachers, and the impact of accumulated wisdom is brought to bear in the instruction given by the living teacher.

Scriptural wisdom is thus based upon the external authority of a line of teachers, but it is also established on the internal authority of the teacher who has personalized wisdom. The identity which exists between a teacher and his lineage is usually an identity in wisdom and personality. Previous teachers are present in the consciousness of the living teacher. One of the more significant contributions of Śaṅkara is the identification he makes between *guru* and scripture. Whenever he refers to scripture as a source of knowledge, he invariably includes the teacher. In his commentaries on the Upaniṣads, he consistently employs the couplet of teacher and scripture; for example, 'Those who follow both scripture and teacher transcend ignorance.'<sup>39</sup> Scripture and teacher function as a unitive cause in Śaṅkara's articulation. They operate as a unit because the latter embodies the former and the former is a verbalization of the latter. The *guru* dwells in Brahman because he is versed in scripture, and he is knowledgeable in scripture because he dwells in Brahman. The *guru* embodies the highest truths of the sages because he is one with Brahman. As embodiment of scripture, he is both the exemplar and the authentic transmitter of tradition.

Some Indian teachers believe the *guru* to be superior to scripture, for meaning does not necessarily subsist in the word but in the embodiment of the teacher. The oral scripture must be embodied to be transmitted at all, and even the written text is not embodied in a way that gives meaning. The text lives within the particular embodiment of the teacher, where meaning is also present.

A *guru*, as understood here, is a catalyst for religious understanding. He contains within himself tradition with all its complexity and growth. Hinduism saw that stressing oral tradition afforded greater possibility of achieving the meaning of past wisdom in present-day life. Oral

39. Śaṅkara, *Bṛhadāraṇyakabhāṣya* 11.V, 15; also IV-IV-21,

tradition is capable of embodiment in ways which are not open to written tradition. The reason for this is the living teacher, the link between the past and present actualization. Because of his personal assimilation of the meaning of scripture, the teacher is a more effective communicator than the written word.

The contrast with Rabbinic Judaism is still relevant at this point. Mnemonic literature, of which oral law is the best example, did not stay the same throughout Israel's history but rather developed. Judaism perceived that law must be adjusted to the human person, as the history of Jewish law attests. Oral tradition, nevertheless, maintained a spiritual continuity in the reciters and rabbis of the law.<sup>40</sup> Mishnah alone was committed to memory and transmitted through 'living books,' *tannaim*, to future generations. Jacob Neusner, analysing the form and meaning of Mishnah, writes :

The way to shape and educate minds is to impart into the ear, thence into the mind, perpetual awareness that what happens recurs, and what recurs is pattern and order and, through them, wholeness. How better than to fill the mind with formalized sentences, generative of meaning for themselves and of significance beyond themselves, in which meaning rests upon the perception of relationship ?<sup>41</sup>

The roles of reciter and rabbi of Mishnah are not exactly the same as those of *paṇḍit* and *guru* in India, but the similarity does point to an element of oral tradition which is not present in written tradition: the sacral act of transmission.

### Understanding and Oral Tradition

Transmission of tradition renews and transforms human existence. It not only hands over a legacy but also gives access to new modes of being.<sup>42</sup> As tradition emerges from a particular social and cultural milieu, it gives expression to the major perceptions of a people. Tradition delivers the culture's principal ways of looking at the basic problems of human existence along with possible response to those problems. It passes from generation to generation especially the symbolic and institutional way of dealing with the human condition.

40. Cahn, *The Philosophy of Judaism*, pp 184, 190.

41. Neusner, 'Form and Meaning in Mishna,' pp. 49-50.

42. Joseph Rupert Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York : Herder and Herder, 1966), pp. 94-95.

Tradition, in its oral and written expressions, is the bearer of social memory. It is more important to remember than to be merely informed of tradition, as was seen above. Information about tradition neither renews nor transforms human existence, whereas transmission as an act of social memory does both. Social memory renews and transforms human existence as it becomes embodied; social memory cannot affect human existence without becoming embodied in particular human beings. This is the thesis of this discussion. Memory requires a form of embodiment. Both written and oral transmission offer the possibility, yet the written word which calls forth embodiment frequently misses the mark. The *paṇḍit* tradition guarantees an intellectual embodiment as it transmits the oral word, but only an authentic *guru* tradition guarantees both an intellectual and spiritual embodiment of social memory. It is also suggested that the *tanna* and the *rabbi* in Jewish history can be differentiated along these lines.

It is with the structures of memory that an understanding of transmission is discovered. Repetition, it seems, explicitly transmits a heritage. Repetition, moreover, leads to an intimacy with tradition which may even achieve communion with it.<sup>43</sup> For example, the recounting of a mythic narrative and the performance of ritual entail a repetitive structure which bears meaning in itself. Repetition is far more than historical recollection passing through the social memory of the ages. Recollection renders the past present; it brings the past to life and gives it transformative possibilities.<sup>44</sup> The distinction in Nyāya logic between recollection and recognition, discussed above, is pertinent. Recognition is not merely to live upon past impressions but to achieve new perceptions by means of social memory. Recognition personalizes tradition and achieves intimacy with it; thus, human existence is renewed through recognition. This is the climatic moment of transmission.

Social memory is borne either by written word or by oral word. Continuity of memory and recollection is established by that bearer of tradition. Through continuity the tradition becomes personalized.<sup>45</sup> Continuity rests on lineage, but the problem of lineage permeates the oral word more than the written word, because the continuity of social memory operates more clearly in the former than in the latter.

43. B. R. Brinkman, 'On Sacramental Man: The Way of Intimacy,' *The Heythrop Journal* 14 (1973), 5-34.

44. Geiselman, *The Meaning of Tradition*, p. 93.

45. Theodore Kisiel, 'The Happening of Tradition: The Hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger,' *Man and World* 2, 3 (1969), p. 366.

Understanding, of course, comes through language. A linguistic tradition delivers meaning to human life.<sup>46</sup> But whether a written tradition fully achieves this goal is problematic. An oral tradition has far greater capacity to deliver meaning. H. G. Gadamer believes that 'understanding is not so much a method...as a standing within a happening of tradition.'<sup>47</sup> Transmission is the happening of which Gadamer speaks. Understanding is not primarily an act of subjectivity but 'an entering into an occurrence of transmission in which past and present are being mediated.'<sup>48</sup> Such an occurrence requires an embodied word and not an empty word. Meaning is thus elicited from the historical process of transmission.

Transmission pushes back the limits of language and extends its horizon. A written or oral tradition disembodied is caught within the limits of language ; even the Hindu *paṇḍit* does not escape this danger. But an embodied tradition, of which the *guru* is an example, bears within it the power to extend the limited range of language, if not to mediate beyond it. The written word can only supplement the spoken word in tradition. Spoken words live. They are infallibly heard when they are communicated through the truth of the personality.<sup>49</sup>

46. *Ibid.*, p. 358.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

49. The educational theory and praxis of Rabindranath Tagore exemplifies this ; see William Cenkner, *The Hindu Personality in Education : Tagore, Gandhi, Aurobindo* (Delhi : Manohar, 1976)