

Chapter XI. Three Eras

The eras, classified according to the principles and practices of spiritual progress as laid down in the Hindu *dharma*, are three:

1. The *Vedic* era, during which great importance was laid on rituals (*karma*).
2. The *Upanishadic* era, when spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) was emphasized more than all else.
3. The *Puranic* era, when devotion (*bhakti*) was declared and described as all important.

The Vedic age

Vedic literature consists of hymns (*samhithas*), *Brahmanas*, forest texts (*Aranyakas*), and *Upanishads*. Of these, the first three deal with actions (*karma*) and are known as *Karma-kanda*, and the last, the *Upanishads*, are concerned with spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) and are therefore called wisdom texts (*Jnana-kanda*).

The groups of *mantras* in the *Vedic* texts (*samhithas*) are full of hymns (*stotras*) glorifying Gods like Indra, Agni, Varuna, Surya, and Rudra. The Aryans in ancient times earned peace and contentment and the fulfilment of their desires by sacrifices and rituals, which were addressed to these Gods through the *mantras*. They realized that the Absolute Principle, the *Paramatma*, is one and only one, and they also knew that it manifests nevertheless as varied and manifold, under different names and forms.

In many *Rig-vedic mantras* this is clearly announced:

There is only just One; those who have seen the truth praise it in many ways: Agni,
Yama, Mathariswan.

Ekam Sath vipraah bahudhaa vadanthi Agnim yamam mathariswaana maahuh.

This Brahman, the One without a second, is designated in the *Rig-veda* as *Hiranyagarbha*, *Prajapathi*, *Viswakarma*, and *Purusha*. The *Hiranyagarbha* hymn (*sukta*) and the *Purusha* hymn are classical examples of this vision. The way of living of the ancient Aryans is designated “*dharma*”. It can also be called “holy ritual (*yajna*)”. Their daily disciplines were marked by rituals, worship (*puja*), praise, surrender, and dedication. So, their life was full of devotion. The word *devotion* might not be used as such in the *Vedic* texts (*samhithas*), but isn't the word faith (*sraddha*) found there?

It is only through faith that the flame of the sacrificial fire is lit and fed. Through faith alone do the offerings reach the Gods who are called. Let us praise faith, which is the highest form of worship.

*Shraddayagnih samidhanthe sraddhaa- huuyathe havih, sraddhaam bhagasya muurdhani-
vachasaa Vedayaamasi).*

See how mighty the power of faith is!

The simple spontaneous disciplines of the *Vedic* Age gradually became complex and confused by the overgrowth of rituals and formal rules; with the passing of time, it was declared that *dharma* consisted of ritual (*yajna*) and oblation (*homa*) and that heaven could be gained only by the performance of such rites! Though the ritual was

really a method of worship of the gods, value was shifted from the gods to the ritual itself. “The gods were only the means; those who desired heaven must do rituals.” Such was the turn the declaration took.

The Upanishadic Age

Meanwhile, the *Upanishad* Age dawned. The *Upanishads* rejected material objectives as devoid of permanent value; they condemned them as inferior. In fact, the ritual portion (*Karma-kanda*) of the *Vedas* was transformed and revalued in the *Upanishads* as vehicles for the liberation of people from the bondage of birth and death and as vessels for crossing the ocean of worldly existence (*samsara*). The vision of the *Upanishadic* aspirant (*sadhaka*) breaks through this “external sensory objective world” and centres itself on the “inner world”. The *Upanishadic* sages (*rishis*) collectively confirm the nature of the highest Principle thus:

In the basic depth of this name-form world of change (*nama-rupa jagath*) there is the One eternal permanent being (*Sat*). That is the Absolute, the Highest Brahman (*Para-brahman*). The Highest can be grasped by means of the wisdom of *yoga* (*jnanayoga*).

Therefore,

Inquire into That; That is Brahman (*Thadhvijinaasvasva; thadh Brahma*).

This is knowledge of Brahman (*Brahma-vidya*) taught by the *Upanishads* (the *Vedanta*). Besides, the *Upanishads* also declare:

The *Vedas*, though mainly concerned with the human objective of attaining heaven, also provide the basic training for achieving liberation (*moksha*). The attainment of the Absolute does not depend entirely or solely on mastery of this knowledge of Brahman (*Brahma-vidya*). It is beyond the reach of study, scholarship, or intellectual conquest. Only by devotion (*upasana*) it can be realized.

If the scholar, with all the weight of learning, also gets immersed in devotion, his life is indeed sanctified!

Before such aspirants, the Lord will be manifest in His real glory. This is the meaning of the following declaration in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* about the bond between the individual and the Universal (*jivi* and the *Paramatma*):

The Universal is the individual’s highest goal, highest wealth, highest elevation, deepest joy.

Eshosya parama gathih-Eshosya paramaa sampath; Eshosya paramo lokah-Eshosya paramanandah.

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* proclaims thus:

The Highest *Atma* (*Paramatma*) is the source of contentment, for He is the embodiment of the purest emotion (*rasa*). Attaining Him, the individual (*jivi*) can be immersed in joy. If the Highest *Atma* is not shining in the firmament of the heart, who is to taste, who is to live? He feeds all, with bliss (*ananda*).

The Puranic age

The seeds of devotion found scattered in the *Vedic* texts sprout in the *Upanishads* and begin to grow with many a blossomful branch in the *Puranas*.

Well, many are yet confused when it comes to deciding what exactly devotion (*bhakti*) is, what the nature of the attitude called devotion is! It is impossible for anyone to demarcate what exactly devotion is and what it is not. Devotion has infinite facets. Only pure, tender, tolerant, calm and loving souls, the very cream of spiritual aspirants (*sadhus*), the swans (*hamsas*) sporting ever in the company of kindred devotees, can understand its purity and depth. Others will find it as difficult to discover devotion in a person as discovering softness in rock, coldness in fire, or sweetness in the margosa (*neem*) tree. Devotees hold the Lord dearer to themselves than life, and the Lord is attached to them in equal measure.

Some great people even declare that the devotee is superior to Bhagavan; the farmer loves the clouds more than the ocean, though the clouds only bring the ocean waters to their fields. The ocean does not come directly over their crops. This is how Tulsidas describes the relationship between the devotee and God: The clouds bring the mercy, the love, the grandeur of the ocean, and the fragrance of the atmosphere and shower them over the entire land; so, too, devotees carry these great traits wherever they go. Just as gold is dug out of mines, these virtues are part of the divinity in humanity.

The sage Durvasa arrived one day in the court of Ambarisha to test the efficacy of devotion to God. For this purpose, he created out of his anger a demoness, Krithya, for his destruction. But the Lord's discus (*chakra*), which demolishes the fear in the hearts of devotees, destroyed Krithya and started pursuing Durvasa to the ends of the earth. He fled over hill and dale, lake and stream, and leaped across the seven seas; he tried to take asylum in the heavens, but the foe of a devotee could get asylum nowhere. At last, he fell at the feet of God (Narayana) in Vaikunta, an exhausted penitent. However, the Lord declared that He was always on the side of His devotee and that He would never give up the devotee who relies on Him as his only refuge. "I follow the devotee as the calf follows the cow, for the devotee gives up for Me all that is considered desirable by the worldly-minded."

Once, Krishna told Uddhava thus: "Austerity, wisdom, renunciation (*tapas, jnana, vairagya*), *yoga* (communion), *dharma*, vow-keeping ritual (*vratha*), pilgrimage—the merit acquired by these is acquired by My devotees with even greater ease." Reflect how great true devotion is! By its means, an outcast can excel even a *brahmin*! A devotionless *brahmin* is inferior to an outcast endowed with devotion. This is elaborated in the *Puranas*. That which is described in the *Vedas* as simply, "Not this, not this (*nethi, nethi*)", that which is declared as "beyond the reach of the words, far out of the grasp of the mind", that which is unreachable by the senses, the mind, or the intellect—such an entity is capable of being felt and experienced by those immersed in meditation. Devotion brings it into the consciousness easily and fills the devotee with bliss.

The *Bhagavan* described in the epics (*Puranas*) is not only the quality-less, change-less One (*nir-guna-nirvikaraadwaitiya*) Brahman, the Thing-to-be-known, the origin of the universe, and pure consciousness (*chith-swarupa*). He is also the repository of all the noble, elevating, and attracting qualities. He is the reminder and refuge of all that is beautiful and loving. He lifts, energizes, and purifies. The unmanifested quality-less Brahman cognized at the climax of the path of spiritual wisdom (*jnana-marga*) cannot be grasped by the sense-centred individual without great travail and trouble. This is why the *Puranas* dwell so much more on the with-qualities (*sa-guna*) aspect than on the quality-less (*nir-guna*) aspect of Godhead.

First, aspirants have to practise the spiritual discipline related to the with-qualities aspect of God; this will

endow them with concentration and, later, according to the law of procedure from the gross to the subtle, they can merge their minds in the quality-less Brahman itself. The mirage leads the thirsty person far away from the tank; the person then turns away and returns to the place where water is available; reaching the tank, the person becomes competent to drink and slake the thirst (*sthula-souram-bhika-anyaya*). So too, aspirants after liberation (*moksha*) get the desire for meditation and worship of the formless Supreme (*nir-gunopaasana*); the Lord, who is attached to the devotees, takes up the forms that the aspirants and great souls seek. Out of His bounty, He grants all four goals of human life (*purusharthas*).