

Activities and Knowledge of Vedic Pandits

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Evident as it is that the Vedic schools first systematised and cultivated the six sciences which, on account of their close connection with the Veda, are called its Angas or limbs, it is no less apparent that, as the materials for each of these subjects accumulated and the method of their treatment was perfected, the enormous quantity of the matter to be learnt, and the difficulty of its acquisition depressed the Vedic schools from their high position as centres of the intellectual life of the Aryas, and caused the establishment of new special schools of science which, while they restricted the range of their teaching, taught their curriculum thoroughly and intelligently.

In the Vedic schools a full and accurate knowledge of the sacred texts was, of course, always the primary object. In order to gain that the pupils had to learn not only the Samhita text of the Mantras and Brahmanas, but also their Pada, Krama, and perhaps still more difficult pathas or modes of recitation. This task no doubt required a considerable time, and must have fully occupied the twelve terms of four and a half or five and a half months which the Smritis give as the average duration of the studentship for the acquisition of one Veda. As long as the Angas consisted of short simple treatises, it was also possible to commit them to memory and to master their contents in the twelve terms, consisting of the seven or eight dark fortnights from the month Pausha to Vaisakha. But when the Kalpa or ritual alone

reached dimensions as in the Sutras of the Baudhayaniyas and Apastambiyas, while the grammar developed into as artificial a system as that of Panini, it became a matter of sheer impossibility for one man to commit to memory and to fully understand the sacred texts together with the auxiliary sciences, especially as the number of the latter was increased in early times by the addition of the Nyaya or Purva Mimansa, the art of interpreting the rules of the Veda . The members of the Vedic schools were then placed before two alternatives. They might either commit to memory all the Vedic texts of their Sakhas together with the Angas, renouncing the attempt at understanding what they learnt, or they had to restrict the number of the treatises which they learnt by heart, while they thoroughly mastered those which they acquired. Those who adhered to the former course became living libraries, but were unable to make any real use of their learning. Those who adopted the second alternative might become great scholars in the science of the sacrifice, grammar, law or astronomy, but they could not rival with the others in the extent of the verbal knowledge of the sacred books. Thus the Vedic schools ceased to be the centres of intellectual, and were supplanted by the special, schools of science.

The present state of learning in India proves beyond doubt that this change actually took place in the manner described, and direct statements in the ancient text-books, as well as their condition, allow us to recognise the various stages which led up to it. The true modern representatives of the ancient Karanas are the so-called Vaidiks, men who, mostly living on charity, devote their energy exclusively to the acquisition of a verbal knowledge of the sacred texts and of the Angas of their Sakhas as well as of some other works, more or less closely connected with the Veda. A perfect Vaidik of the Asvalayana school

knows the Rig-veda according to the Samhita, Pada, Krama, Gata and Ghana Pathas, the Aitareya Brahmana and Aranyaka, the ritualistic Sutras of Asvalayana, Saunaka's Pratisakhya and the Siksha, Yaska's Nirukta, the grammar of Panini, the Vedic calendar or Gyotisha, the metrical treatise called the K handas, Yagnvalkya's Dharmasastra, portions of the Mahabharata, and the philosophical Sutras of Kanada, Gaimini, and Badarayana. Similarly the Vaidiks of the Yagus, Saman. and Atharvan schools are able to recite, more or less perfectly the whole of the works of their respective Sakhas as well as some other non-Vedic books.

But it would be in vain to expect from such men an explanation of the literary treasures which they possess. It is not the professional Vaidik who can perform the great sacrifices according to the Srauta-sutras, interpret the intricate system of Panini's grammar, or decide a knotty point of law according to the Dharma-sutra or the secondary Smriti which he knows by heart. For these purposes one must go to quite different classes of men. The performance of the great Srauta sacrifices lies in the hands of the Srotriya or Srauti, who unites with a thoroughly verbal knowledge of the sacred texts of his Sakha full acquaintance with the meaning of the Srauta-sutras and with the actual kriya or manual work, described in the Prayogas. The Srauti, as well as his humbler fellow-worker, the so called Yagnika or Bhattagi, who knows the Grihya-sutras and performs the rites prescribed for domestic occurrences, likewise both belong to the representatives of the Vedic schools. They make, however, no pretence to a knowledge of the whole range of the Angas, but content themselves with studying the Kalpa, or parts of it, and perhaps the Siksha. Real proficiency in the other still surviving Angas, grammar, law, and astronomy is to be found only with those

Pandits who fulfil their duty of studying the Veda by committing to memory a few particularly important sections, such as the Pavamani-hymns of the Rig-veda or the Satarudriya of the Yayur-veda, or by confining themselves to the few verses which occur in the Brahmayagna and the Samdhya - vandana .

Their chief aim is to be perfect in one or more of the special sciences which they study, without reference to a particular Vedic school. Thus, though a Pandit who chiefly devotes himself to the sacred law may belong to the Vedic school of Baudhayana or Apastamba, he will not make Baudhayana's or Apastamba's Dharma-sutra the starting-point of his studies. On the contrary, it will frequently happen that he possesses no knowledge of the Dharma-sutra of his school, except a few passages quoted in the commentaries and digests. If he has read the whole work, he will consult it only as one of the many utterances of the ancient sages. He will not attribute to it a higher authority than to other Smritis, but interpret it in accordance with the rules of the secondary Dharmasastras of Manu or Yagnavalkya. A good illustration of this state of things is furnished by Sayana-Madhava's treatment of Baudhayana in his Vyavaharamadhava, a treatise on civil and criminal law supplementing his commentary on Parasara's Smriti. Though he himself tells us, in the introduction to the Parasara -smriti- vyakhya that he belonged to the school of Baudhayana, and though he seems to have written a commentary on Baudhayana's Sutras, he relies, e.g. for the law of Inheritance, not on Baudhayana's Dharma- sutra, but on Vignanesvara's exposition of Yagnavalkya. He quotes Baudhayana only in three places. As far as the law is concerned, Sayana follows the theories of the special law school of his time and of his country, without particular reference to the teaching of his Vedic Karana.

This depression of the Vedic Karanas through special schools which took over the scientific cultivation of a most important portion of the Angas, is not of modern date. It goes back to a time which lies long before the beginning of the historical period of India.