



Vedanta Letters

by Sanjiv R. Malkan, Ph.D.

Intro Vedic Literature, Part II



MultiMedia Communications, Inc.

© 1993-2009, All Rights Reserved

Introduction to Vedic Literature, Part II

by Sanjiv R. Malkan

Smṛti (स्मृति)

The Secondary literature is called Smṛti (स्मृति), which simply means 'remembered' or 'recalled' and handed down by tradition. Smṛti basically deals with practical application of eternal principles. Smṛti includes five principal subjects—Upavedas (उपवेद); Vedāṅgas (वेदअंग); Sutras and Sastras (सूत्र, शास्त्र); Puranas (पुराण); and Itihasas (इतिहास). The following is a description on each of these five subjects.

Upavedas (उपवेद). Upavedas are minor or subordinate Vedas, which have no connection with the 'revealed' Veda. Here *Upa*, a preposition or prefix to verbs and nouns denotes position, i.e. 'near to', as opposed to *apa*, 'away from'. *Upa* is thus relative and denotes contiguity in space, time, number, degree, resemblance, but always in the sense of inferiority or subordination to the idea of the noun or verb to which it is attached. The Upavedas are four in numbers, namely—the Ayurveda, which deals with the science of medicine; the Gandharvaveda, which deals music; the Dhanurveda, which deals with military and archery sciences; and the Sthapatyaveda, which deals with architecture and mechanical arts. The following is a brief description on each of these Upavedas.

Ayurveda (आयुर्वेद) is also sometimes known as Vaidya-Sastra. The word *ayu* means life or vitality or health or longevity. Ayurveda is a traditional and naturalistic system of medicine, which in its early stages largely depended on the use of water, herbs, minerals, and formic acid of ant-hills for the cure of the disease. Some of these remedies had a therapeutic value, but others relied mainly on sympathetic magic. The origin of the Ayurveda was ascribed to the gods and its methodology to the Atharvaveda, which despite its limitations, is generally recognized as the basis of Vedic medicine. According to the Susruta, the lord Indra revealed the Ayurveda to Dhanvantari in his incarnate form of Divodasa, king of Kasi. The Ayurvedic philosophies were studied rationally after the sixth century B.C. and true Ayurvedic texts were written after this date.

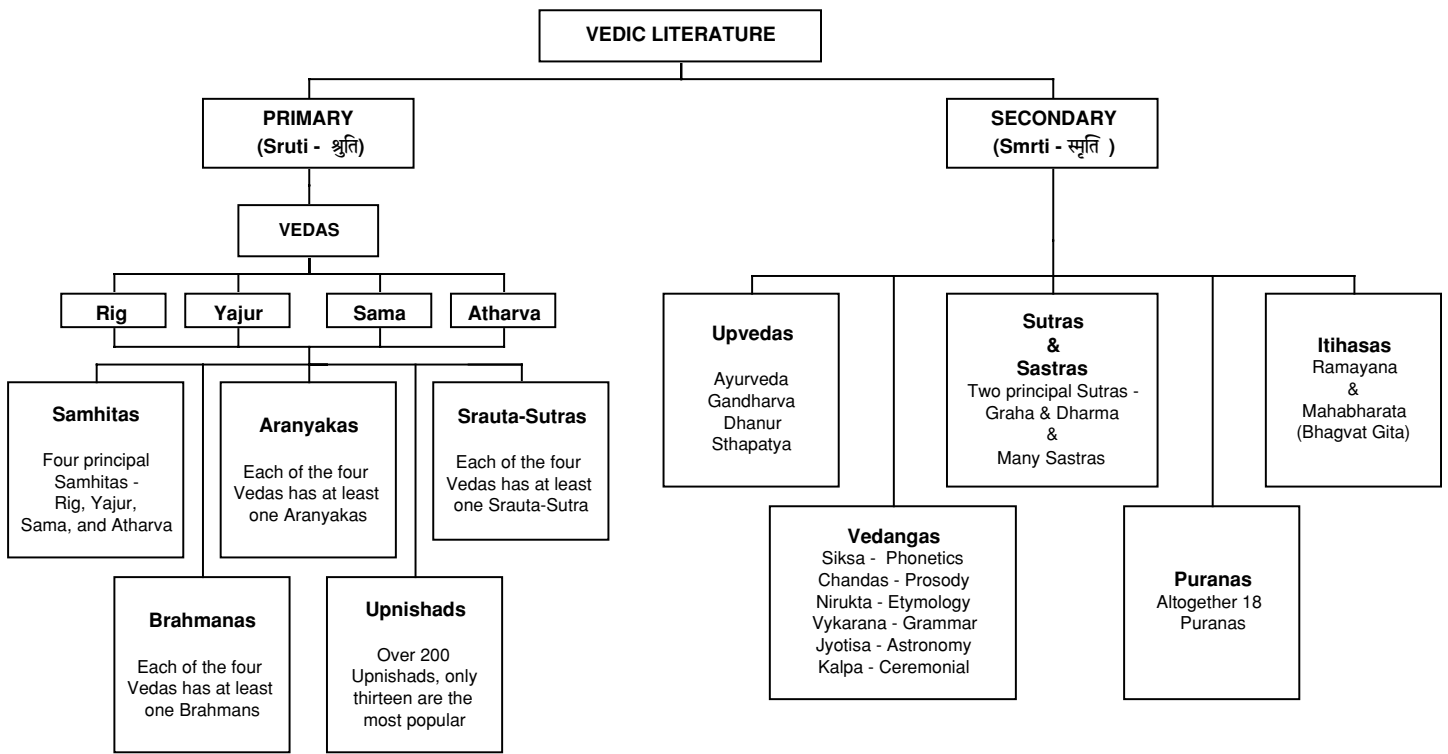
The most important Ayurvedic texts are the Caraka and Susruta Samhitas, attributed, respectively, to the physician Caraka and Susruta. Both of these texts represent the first successful attempt to distinguish between magico-religious treatments and rational therapeutics based upon *yukti*, i.e., rational connection of observed facts. The Caraka Samhita is in eight chapters, written in the epic verse form or sloka, with certain prose sections. It deals categorically with eight subjects into which the medical art was at this time divided: (1) major surgery; (2) minor surgery; (3) healing of disease; (4) demonology; (5) children's diseases; (6) toxicology; (7) elixirs; and (8) aphrodisiacs. The Susruta Samhita is a work in six chapters, in mixed prose and verse. It sets forth a high standard of ethics, maintaining that the physician must serve his patients even to the risking of his own life, and must preserve the secrets of those who consult him.

Gandharvaveda (गार्धववेद) is also called the Samgita. It is the authoritative text for the science of music. This Upaveda is based on the words of divine revelation experienced by the rishis. The Samaveda is considered to be source of this upaveda, it was because divine beings like the Gandharvas, who prepare the soma for the gods, the Apsaras, and Nagas were the minstrels of heaven. It is believed that the god revealed sacred art of music to the king Bharata, the son of the nymph *Shakuntala*, who first taught men the celestial art. In the Veda the references to music are numerous, and in the epics we have frequent mention of the councches and war drums. There are two main modern treaties on music, namely—the *Samgita-ratnakara* or "jewel mine of music" by Carnadeva, and the *Samgita-darpanan* or "mirror of music." Each of these works is in seven parts, which treat respectively of (1) sounds and musical notes; (2) melodies; (3) vocal music; (4) musical composition; (5) time and measure; (6) instrumental music; and (7) dancing and acting.

Each musical verse has the following elements: Nada (Sound), Cruti (Interval), Svāra (Scale), raga (Motif), and Gita (Song). Actually these elements go in sequence, meaning—from sound arises cruti; from cruti arises svāra; from svāra arises raga; and from raga arises gita. Each of these elements is very important in making a Song or Gita.

The Sound is the most fundamental element of a song and has great sacredness, since it is believed that the vibrations caused by the voice alter the whole atomic structure of the universe. The least audible interval of sound, an interval smaller than semitone, is called cruti or "hearing," and in the scale, or svāra, there are twenty-two cruti, or "intervals." The seven notes of the svāra are named after the sounds characteristics of certain animals and birds. The highest is that of the peacock, and the lowest that of the elephant, while between are placed the notes of the goat, the cow, the heron, the kokila, and the horse.

The arbitrary sequences of these seven notes, placed, however, in a specially recognized order are called Ragas or fundamental melodies. Each raga represents a special element, such as fire or water. There are six ragas, namely—bhairava, kausika, hindola, dipaka, sriraga, and megha. Each of the six chief ragas is personified and wedded to one of the six raginis, their union resulting in further sub-ragas. The ragas are classified according to the time of day or night for which they are appropriate. Thus bhairava is suitable for a dawn performance, megha for morning, dipaka and sriraga for afternoon, and kausika and hindola for night. They are also associated with different emotions, bhairava with fear; kausika with joy; hindola, dipaka, and sriraga with love; and megha with peace and calm.



Dhanurveda (धनुर्वेद) deals with the science of war and especially of archery. The study of Dhanurveda was very important to khatriyas or those who took part in wars. In fact, the study of Dhanurveda was a normal part of life from the very beginning. The knowledge derived or gained from Dhanurveda is called *Dhanurvediya*. Dhanurvediya was considered to be sacred and was taught mainly to prince by Rajgurus.. The most spectacular use of Dhanurvediya was seen in the Mahabharata war.

Sthapatyaveda (स्थाप यवेद) also sometimes known as silpasastra. It deals with architecture and mechanical arts. There are references to building, and particularly to the construction of alters in the Veda, but the use of Sthapatyaveda was promoted by the King Ashoka, to erect temples, monasteries, and stupas to spread Buddhism. There are two main works of some importance based on the Sthapatyaveda, namely—Vastu-vidya and the Manasara. The later is a treatise on architecture in fifty-eight chapters.

Vedangas (वेदांग). It means the limbs of the Vedas. Vedangas are regarded as auxiliary to or part of the Vedas. Vedangas specifically deal with the following six subjects:

- Siksha*, Science of pronunciation and phonetics;
- Chandas*, Science of verse and metre;
- Nirukta*, Science of etymology and lexicography;
- Vyakrana*, Science of grammar;
- Jyotisa*, Science of astronomy and astrology; and
- Kalpa*, rules governing the sacrificial ceremonies.

The first two Vedangas are basically to aid reading, the next two are to assist the understanding, and the last two are to facilitate the using. They extend in time all the way from the age of the Vedas down to about 200 B.C. They are basically based on the Brahmanas portion of the Vedas. A brief explanation on each of these subjects is as follows:

Siksha Vedanga deals with the science of phonetics and pronunciation. The emphasis on language ability and development was a part of life during vedic period. In fact, the worship of Vacha (वाच), or Sarasvati, the goddess of speech, was a routine. For the textual study of the Vedas, the study of Siksha Vedanga is of considerable importance. There are numerous works on Siksha Vedanga, but only a few works have been preserved. The best known work is the Paniniya-siksha.

Chandas Vedanga deals with the science of prosody. It means the study of Verses or metrical structure. The best known treatise on this subject is the Chanda-Sutra of Pingala. This treatise is supposed to have written about two centuries before Christ. Only a part of this treatise deals with the Vedic meters, but the fact that a hundred and sixty other meters are described makes the treatise of great importance.

Nirukta Vedanga deals with the science of etymology and lexicography. It is basically a commentary on an old list of Vedic words. These lists of words were known as Nighantus. The word lists were used by ancient rishis while committing the Vedas to

memory. The *Nirukta Vedanga* does not carry any scientific values, but very important to the student of Vedic literature. The well known treatise on this subject is the *Nirukta* of Yaska. It deals with Vedic etymologies and explanations. It describes: (1) synonymous words; (2) words purely or chiefly Vedic; and (3) names of deities in the triple world of earth, air, and heavens.

Vyakrana Vedanga deals with the science of grammar. This is perhaps the most significant of all the Vedangas. The term *Vyakrana* means undoing, and is applied primarily to linguistic analysis and then generally to grammar. The famous grammar book of Panini, the *Ashtadyayi* or book of eight lectures is generally known as the *Vedanga par excellence*. *Ashtadyayi* is regarded as one of the most remarkable literary works that the world has seen. Many philosophers believe that no other country can produce any grammatical systems at all comparable to Panini Grammar, either for originality of plan or for analytical subtlety.

Panini's great work consists of eight lectures, each of four chapters, the whole consisting of nearly 4,000 aphorisms or sutras. The work enumerates the technical terms used in grammar, the rules for their interpretation and application.

Jyotisa Vedanga deals with the science of astronomy and astrology. Though there is no Vedic text on this subject, there is ample evidence in the Vedas of knowledge of stars and astronomy, and selection of appropriate days for the rituals based on astrology. The first treatise on this subject was *Jyotisavedanga*, compiled between 300 and 200 B.C. This treatise introduced the use of mathematics and also provided the a basis for the subsequent five astronomical treatises called *Siddhantas*, of which the only surviving one is the *Surya Siddhanta*. In 499 A.D., astronomer Aryabhata produced his great work called the *Aryabhatiya*, describing the rotation of the earth and the theory of epicycles. In 550 A.D., astronomer Varhamihira wrote several treatises on astrology and divination, the most important being the *Brhat-Samhita* describing the motions and conjunctions of celestial bodies and their divinatory significance. These treatises also inferred a close association of astronomy with astrology.

Kalpa Vedanga deals with the ritual and rules for sacrificial performance. It is the completest Vedanga of all and includes a large number of treatises. It is primarily intended for the use of the priests who required instruction in the proper technic of the various Vedic sacrifices. *Kalpa Vedanga* is divided into two: *Srauta* and *Smarta*. These two divisions of *Kalpa Vedanga* are treated separately. The *Sruata-Sutras*, which belongs to *Sruti* portion of the Vedas were discussed in the March issue; and the *Smarta-Sutras*, which belongs to the *Smrti* portion of the literature will be discussed in the June 1994 issue under the heading of *Sutras and Sastras*.

Sutras (सूत्र). *Sutra* in Sanskrit means 'thread.' The term *Sutra* has been applied to compositions written in an aphoristic style. The term may have been derived from the Sanskrit word *siv*, 'to sew', applied to the stitching together of the leaves of manuscripts. The sutras are regarded as the first step in the evolution of legal literature.

There are two *Sutras* under the *Smrti* portion of the Vedic literature, namely—*Grihya* and *Dharma* (the *Sutras* under the *Sruti* portion of the Vedic literature were discussed in the March 1994 issue). The *Grihya sutras* deal with the rites and procedures for domestic rituals, and *Dharma Sutras* deal with the modes of life and codes of conduct to regulate a person's activities as an individual and as a member of society. The *Sutras* were compiled by individual priestly schools during a period dating from the sixth or seventh centuries B.C. to the second century A.D. The values of these two *Sutras* were proved to be inadequate in post-vedic era and were gradually superseded by more comprehensive *Dharma-sastras*, which culminated in the *Manu-smrti*, written in an expanded and memorizable form.

Grihyasutras are very interesting and give an insight on the daily life of the post-vedic society in India. The rituals described in the *Grihyasutras* are of prehistoric times. The domestic rules are contained in a considerable number of manuals, each of which is related to one of the four Vedas. Everything is prescribed for a person, from birth to the cremation. At every point, the life of the householder is fenced and fortified by the use of religious customs and rituals. The philosophy and significance behind these *Grihya sutras* are very high, but unfortunately most of the people these days do not follow these customs and rituals.

According to the *Grihyasutras*, a person must observe forty *samskaras* or sacraments, of which eighteen are called 'bodily' sacraments, and the remaining twenty-two are sacrifices of one sort or another. The word *Samskara* means, "making perfect or fit for a certain purpose." The *samskaras* are to consecrate an individual and to enable him/her to overcome the risks of a new stage in his/her life. The main bodily sacraments are as follows:

- sacrament for obtaining a son;
- name giving sacrament for a child;
- sacrament for the first hair cut for a boy;
- sacrament for the fist shaving of the beard;
- sacrament of *upanayana* or threading ceremony; and
- ceremonies connected with death, the disposal of the dead, and the offering of a *Shraddha*.

Dharmasutras were one of the most important developments in the entire Brahminical tradition. The word *Dharma* has been derived from the Sanskrit word *dhar*, which means 'to hold'; which forms a foundation and upholds, or constitutes law and custom. The *Dharmasutras* established Brahminical rules for the social as well as ritual activities of every member of society. To uphold the goals and values for all aspects of life, consistent standards of *Dharma* were assigned to all men.

The systematic development and presentation of *Dharma* for society formed a class of texts called *Dharmasastras* or treatises of *dharma*. The *Dharmasastras* concentrated on particulars of social duty and the arrangement of life within the social system. The basic principle of this arrangement was summarized in the term,

varnasrama-dharma in accordance with varna ("class") and asrama ("stage of life"). Each combination of varna and asrama defined a specific set of duties and responsibilities, and hence dharma for a person in that particular situation. The most important early Dharmasastras—the Manusmṛti (The Laws of Manu) and the Yajñavalkyasmṛti, were the starting point of an independent tradition that emphasized dharma itself and not its Vedic origins.

Dharmasastra in general provides the necessary guidance for each householder in accord with his/her place in society and stages of life, his/her individual karmic needs, ritual purity and dietary laws, punishments and penances, as well as various allied subjects. The main purpose of this text is twofold: to improve one's present life within the limits set by birth and ability (limits determined by one's previous karmic condition), and to improve one's karmic state and thus one's opportunities in the next rebirth.

Pṛitmedha rites which are to be performed by a son or a near relative for the benefit of the deceased are in some Vedic Schools expounded in independent Sūtra works, in other included either in the Śrautasūtras or in the domestic manual like Dharmasastra. I have considered the Pṛitmedha rites as a part of the Dharmasastra.

Sastras (शास्त्र). *Sastra* means a 'rule', 'treatise' or 'law-book'. *Sastras* are a class of literature belonging to the post-vedic period, and which superseded priestly Sūtra manuals. The Sastra is the formal exposition of particular subjects, which may resemble that of sūtras like the Grihya and Dharma, or include grammatical treatise, or works like Arthasastra of Kautilya, the Kamasāstra of Vatsyāna, and the Nītiśāstra—a manual of logic. There are many other sastras based on the scientific and art treatises.

Arthasastra is a treatise on political science traditionally ascribed to Kautilya. The fifteen adhikāraṇas comprising the Artha survey the whole field of government; the routine duties of the ruler, the training of princes, the qualifications of ministers of state, the Home and Foreign Office, Civil Service, Defence, the Judiciary, civil and criminal law, corporation and guilds. The main purpose of the Arthasastra was to establish a social relationship both social and economic between the various groups comprising the State, and between the State and its neighbors.

Kamasāstra is a manual of the art of love, attributed to Vatsyāna. The text comprehensively describes different techniques of sensual indulgence and also how to prevent disharmony between husband and wife. It also gives practical advice about marriage.

Nītiśāstra is a class of ethical and didactic writings of all kinds, including collections of fables and moral perceptions.

Puranas (पुराण). Puranas are collection of tales of ancient times. In post-vedic times, Puranas became the medium to promulgate the vedic teaching to the illiterate, who comprised women and lower caste people. The earlier Puranas mainly concerned with Vishnu and Śiva.

A Purana, by definition, should expound five subjects (*pañcalakṣaṇa*), namely: the creation of the world, destruction and recreation, the genealogy of the gods and patriarchs, the reigns and periods of the Manus, and the history of Solar and Lunar royal dynasties. Only a very few of the early versions of the Puranas followed to this rule, which suggests that the later versions include many accretions, including astrology, geography, chronology, anatomy, medicine, as well as on the use of military weapons.

Much of the information in Puranas is in the form of dialogues, in some of which an alleged divinely inspired sage is the principal narrator who answers the questions of a disciple or pupil. Puranas are very long and mainly in the form poetry; prose coming in only very rarely. The metre employed in the works is the Vedic metre called the *Anuṣṭubh*, with four lines in a verse, each containing eight syllables. Longer metres with eleven syllables and with other lengths also appear occasionally.

All the Puranas were composed by the great poets and later written in the final form by the great sage Veda Vyasa, also known as Kṛṣṇa Dvāipayana and as Bādarāyana. Puranas have been mentioned twice in the Svargarohanaparvan of the Mahābhārata. They are also mentioned in Harivamśa and numerous Puranas. As an example, a list of main Puranas is given in the Bhagvatapurana's 12th Canto, Chapter 13, Śloka 4 to 8.

The Puranic literature forms two groups: the **Mahapuranas** or primary Puranas and **Upapuranas** or secondary Puranas. Each group consisting of eighteen works. Each of the Puranas relates in varying degrees to its respective deity, however some Puranas do extol other deities.

Mahapuranas have been classified in different ways. The Padma Puranas divides the **Mahapuranas** into three categories: those relating to Brahma are called Rājasa Puranas, with the guṇa rajas (passion) prevailing; those relating to Vishnu called Sattvika, with the guṇa sattva (purity) prevailing; those relating to Śiva, called Tamasa, with guṇa tamas (darkness) prevailing. The Rājasa Puranas are: Brahma (also Adipurana and Saurapurana); Brahmaṇḍa; Brahma-vaivarta; Markandeya; Bhaviṣya; and Vamana. The Sattvika Puranas are: Vishnu; Bhāgavata; Nārada or Nāradiya; Garuda; Padma; and Varaha. The Tamasa Puranas are: Śiva; Liṅga; Skanda; Agni; Matsya; and Kurma. It is believed that the Rājasa Puranas lead to secure heaven or svarga; the Sattvika Puranas lead to salvation or mukti.; and the Tamasa Puranas lead to hell or narka (not in a literal sense).

The eighteen **Upapuranas** are: Sanatkumara; Nārasiṃha; Nāradiya or Vṛhannāradiya; Śiva; Durvasa; Kapila; Manava; Ausanasa; Varuṇa; Kālīka; Samba; Nandi; Saura; Parasara; Aditya; Mahesvara; Bhāgavata; and Vasistha.

Brahmapurana is the first in all the lists hence it is also called the Adipuranas. It is a teaching given by Brahma to Dakṣa and so it has acquired this name. The work contains a large number of Mahātmyas. The 1000 verses of this Purana is divided into 245

chapters. The Brahmapurana deals with the traditional subjects of sarga, vamsa, manvantara, vamsanucaria, and pratisarga. There are chapters on the geography of the earth, hell, karmavipaka, funeral sacrifices, duties of varnas and asramas, impurity due to births and deaths etc. The text ends with a discussion of Samkhya and Yoga.

Brahmandapurana is divided into three bhagas, four padas, and 156 adhyayas and the content of this Purana is somewhat identical to Vayupurana. The Purana basically contains a large number of stories. The first part of the Purana describes a story on Siva's anger and its appeasement in the Devadaru forest. The middle portion deals with the legend of Parasurama, and the last part forms the Lalitopakhyana. The Lalitopakhyana describes the origin of the goddess: her emergence out of fire, during a sacrifice offered by Indra to the Devi. The Adhyatmaramayana is undoubtedly the most important text connected to this Purana. The Adhyatmaramayana is the "philosophical Ramayana," recited by the Lord Siva in answer to Parvati's question about Vishnu's incarnation as Rama.

Brahmavaivartapurana is also a Vishnu epic. It is divided into four books and contains 18000 verses. The first book tells that the world is Vivarta (transformation) of Brahma in the form of Krsna. The second book gives description of the Prakrati transformed into some goddesses. The third and fourth books relate to Ganesa and Krsna.

Agnipurana contains 15400 verses. This is an encyclopedia containing descriptions of a variety of subjects and also contains the subjects found in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata along with the Harivamsa. The chapters deal specifically with Dhanurveda, Ayurveda, Arthasastra, Vyakrana, Alamkara, and the various Darshanas. Because of a variety of subject matter, this Purana has a great importance. This Purana is mentioned in all the Puranas.

Bhavisyapurana contains 14500 verses. It deals with various cults and their rituals. It has nothing to do with the future as the name suggests.

Bhagvatapurana is perhaps the most popular among the Puranas, being the Text for the Bhakti School. It is also the most famous Purana, which has influenced the Indian thought and religion more strongly than any other composition of this genre. The success of this Purana is mainly due to its number of translations and adaptations, both of the entire text and of the more popular parts, in the vernaculars. It is believed by many that this Purana is meant for the entire humanity irrespective of caste, creed, and nationality, and that it is the most enchanting poem ever written. It is composed of twelve sections, called skandhas, with a total of 18000 verses divided into 335 adhyayas. The first skandha gives an introduction to the entire Bhagvatapurana. The second skandha forms the main body of the Purana. It conveys that one can be free from all fear of death by simply abandoning attachments to pleasure, family, and concentrating on the syllable OM. The skandhas three to nine give

different stories related to Krsna and his avatars. The tenth skandha describes the life of Krsna, more elaborately than in the Harivamsa and the Vishnupurana. The eleventh skandha deals with a variety of religious and philosophical topics. The twelfth skandha is in the form of a prophesy. It gives a list of dynasties and also describes the evils of the Kaliyuga.

Garudapurana has 19000 verses. It contains glorification of Vishnu worship and also gives the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata along with the Harivamsa. It also treats astronomy and other subjects, including metres and grammar and other sciences.

Kurmapurana contains 17000 verses. This is taught by Vishnu to Indradyumna as a Kurmavatrara and hence the name. Though taught by Vishnu, it is a saivapurana glorifying the worship of Siva.

Lingapurana contains 11000 verses. This is not pertaining to the worship of the Linga as the name may suggest. It is full of mystic matter. It deals with the various Avatars of Siva.

Matsyapurana contains 14000 verses. It contains many Mahatmyas and rituals. It was narrated by Vishnu as Matsya Avatara. It mainly deals with raja Dharma and other subjects.

Markandeyapurana has 9000 verses. This Purana is in the form of replies given by Markandeya to questions put to him, like, the Avatars, Draupadi's five husbands and the fate of her children. This also contains the famous Saptasati or Devi Mahatmya describing the exploits of the Goddess.

Naradiyapurana is fairly big one with 25000 verses. It teaches mainly the doctrine of Devotion to Vishnu and contains practically nothing of the contents of the Puranas. The significance of Ekadesi fast is described in this Purana.

Padmapurana is one of the longest of the Puranas, containing 55000 verses. It is divided into five Books about Srsti, Bhumi, Svarga, Patala, and Uttara Kanda. There are various Mahatmyas in this and also various stories. This is a Vishnu epic and yet it is Siva who glorifies Vishnu.

Vamanapurana contains 10000 verses. It gives description of the various Avatars of Vishnu. It also glorifies Siva and the pilgrimages to Siva temples.

The **Varahapurana** contains 24000 verses. This is taught to the Earth by Vishnu as Varaha Avatara and hence the name.

Vishnupurana contains 23000 verses. It is perhaps the oldest and really the most important Purana. It contains various stories of ancient heroes. It is a great Purana from the history and dynastic list points of view.

Sivapurana is also called as Vayupurana. It deals with the glories of Siva. There are also some Mahatmyas like Gaya and

Triveni.

The *Skandapurana* is the biggest of the Puranas, containing 81000 verses. It deals with the various places in India that are of great importance from the Siva point of view. It is more or less a collection of Sthala Mahatmyas. The famous Satyanarayankatha is from the Revakhanda of this Purana.

Itihasas (पुराण). The etymology of the term Itihasas gives that: Iti means thus, ha means verily, and asa means was. Putting all the three terms together, it means that the Itihasas are ancient tales about the great heroes or so indeed it was. In all itihisas, there is the central story about a great hero, and that all materials relating to religion, philosophy, sciences, law, and other subjects come in only incidentally introduced into the narration of the story of the great hero in various contexts. Like Puranas, Itihasas are very long, running on to the many tens of thousands of lines.

There are mainly two Itihasas, namely the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Ramayana is the work of the great sage Valmiki, and the Mahabharata is the work of the great sage Veda Vyasa. Both are more or less contemporaneous. The exact date cannot be determined. It is believed that during the beginning of the Kaliyuga, many great poets appeared who started the Vedic civilization, at that time also, many great poets made their appearance for the preservation of Vedic culture, and one of them was Valmiki, the other being Veda Vyasa. It is during this reappearance, Valmiki wrote the Ramayana, and Veda Vyasa wrote the Mahabharata and Vedas. The following is a brief explanation on each of the Itihasas.

Ramayana (रामायण). The Ramayana, by tradition, is the first secular poetry in Sanskrit. Therefore, it is also known as the "First Poem" or "Adi Kavya." It was composed in Sanskrit, probably not before 300 BC by the poet Valmiki, and in its present form consists of some 24,000 slokas divided into seven books. The Ramayana is a pure narration. Statements like "Thus said Rama" and "Thus said Vasistha" do not appear between verses; they are all included in the poetic narration. Yet the dramatic touch and the realistic color are there. For one thing, the proportion of external matter to the main story is never missed from the reader's view on account of such external matter. Further, there are always the characters introduced, and the story moves through dialogue between the characters.

The poem is homogeneous in nature, but the critical examination now suggests that it must have passed through many stages of development, and also that it contains numerous interpolations and addition of Books I and VII (the main story is given in Books II-VI). Moreover, the passages representing Rama as an avatar of Vishnu must also be regarded as additions, hardly consistent with the very human terms in which he is generally portrayed in the original poem. Thus in its present form it is a combination of loosely related elements, comprising romantic and allegorical legends and stories, half-mythical, half-historical, and

some scanty descriptions of the aboriginal inhabitants and the country of the southern India. The epic was first recited by two disciples of the author in the presence of the hero himself.

The poem enjoys immense popularity in India, where its recitation is considered an act of great merit. Throughout India, the events of the poem are enacted in an annual pageant, the Rama-Lila. The Ramayana was popular even during the Mughal period, and it was a favorite subject of Rajasthani and Pahari painters of the 17th and 18th centuries. The story also spread in various forms throughout Southeast Asia, especially Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The characters of the poem were the heroes of traditional Javanese-Balinese theatre, dance, and shadow plays. Incidents from the Ramayana are carved in bas-relief on many Indonesian monuments, as for example at Pnataran, in eastern Java.

The Ramayana basically depicts life of Maryada Puroshotam Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The poem describes the royal birth of Rama in the kingdom of Ayodhya, his tutelage under the sage Visvamitra, and his success in bending Siva's mighty bow at the bridegroom tournament of Sita (Sita is considered to be an incarnation of Lakshmi), the daughter of King Janaka, thus winning her for his wife. After he is banished from his position as heir by an intrigue, he retreats to the forest with his wife and his favorite half brother, Lakshmana, to spend 14 years in exile. In the forest, Ravana—the demon king of Lanka, carries off Sita to his capital, while her two protectors are busy pursuing a golden deer sent to the forest to mislead them. Sita rejects Ravana's attentions, and Rama and his brother set about to rescue her. After numerous adventures they enter into alliance with Sugriva, king of monkeys; and with the assistance of the monkey-general Hanumana and Ravana's own brother, Vibhisana, they attack Lanka. Rama slays Ravana and rescues Sita, who in later version undergoes an ordeal by fire (*agni pariksha*) in order to clear herself of the suspicions of infidelity. When they return to Ayodhya, however, Rama learns that the people still question the Queen's chastity, and he banishes her to the forest. There she meets the sage Valmiki and at his hermitage gives birth to Rama's two sons. The family is reunited when the sons become of age, but Sita, after again protesting her innocence, asks to be received by the earth, which swallows her up. It is to be noted here that the original Ramayana ends when Rama comes home after defeating Ravana. Sita's *agni pariksha* and the birth of Luv and Kush have been added by contemporary poets.

The original Valmiki's Ramayana has been translated into many Indian languages. The most widely read translation of the Ramayana throughout India is the Hindi version, Ramcharitamanas, of Tulsidas.

The Ramayana is just a story but it indirectly conveys many religious and spiritual concepts. For example, how one must live a life within the restrictions of a society. It basically conveys that one must adopt and practice Rama's way of life.

Mahabharata (महाभारत). Mahabharata is a poem based on the Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty. It is one of the two major epics of India, valued both for its high

literary merit and its religious inspiration. The poem is made up of almost 100,000 slokas divided into 18 parvans, or sections, or books.. The names of the eighteen books are as follows, The Book of : the Beginning, the Assembly Hall, the Forest, of Virata, of the Effort, of Bhishma, of Drona, of Karna, of Salya, of the Sleeping Warriors, of the Women, of the Peace, of the Instructions, of the Horse Sacrifice, of the Hermitage, of the Clubs, of the Great Journey, and of the Ascent to Heaven. A supplement entitled Harivamsa ("Genealogy of the God Hari," i.e. Krishna-Vishnu) was added to the Mahabharata at a later date. The Harivamsa describes birth and life of Krishna as the avatar of Vishnu, written in the style of a Purana. Contained within the Mahabharata is the Bhagavadgita ("Song of the Lord"), the single most important religious text of present day Hinduism. The Mahabharata is believed to be written in its final form by the great sage Veda Vyasa during his reappearance sometime between 200 BC and 200 AD. The epic is believed to be based on actual events presumed to be have taken place at the end of Dwapara Yuga—about 6000 to 8000 years ago.

The Mahabharata is unique among the literary specimens of the world on account of its size. In the whole world there are very few epics, and if all of them are put together, they may not be much bigger than this one epic. It is an artistic unit, well planned and well executed by a true and great poet. It is in the form of a dialogue. There is the dialogue between the Bard and the Sages in the Naimisa Forest and when the Bard starts his recitation of what he had heard recited by Veda Vyasa's disciple Vaisampayana in the presence of king Janamejaya, the recitation by the Bard takes the form of a dialogue between the king and the original poet's disciple. Within this narration too, whenever stories are narrated, then the whole conversations between characters are given in the form of direct dialogues; there are no such statements like "such and such a person said" within the poetry, and such statements are given outside of the narration in poetic form. This form of writing style gives a dramatic touch to the epic. When a reader reads this epic, he or she takes a part in the events that are narrated, in other words, he or she is transported to the events.

The Story. Because of his blindness, Dhrtarastra, the elder of two princes, was passed over as king on his father's death in favor of his brother Pandu. Dhrtarastra later assumed power when Pandu renounced the kingship to become a religious hermit. The sons of Pandu, the five Pandava brothers—Yudhistira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, grew up in the court along with their cousins, the Kauravas (descendents of Kuru, a name applicable to both families, but applied for distinction to the sons of Dhrtarastra). Because of the enmity and jealousy that developed, the Pandavas were forced to leave the kingdom at the time of their father's death. During their exile they met their cousin Krishna, who remained their friend and companion thereafter. They returned to some years of prosperity in a divided kingdom, but were again forced to retire to the forest for 12 years when the eldest brother, Yudhistira, lost everything in a game of dice with Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas. The feud culminated in a great series of battles on the field of Kuruksetra. All the Kauravas were annihilated, and on the

vicitorious side, only the five Pandava brothers and Krishna survived. After the accidental death of Krishna, the five brothers and their wife Draupadi set out for Indra's heaven. One by one they fell on the way, and Yudhistira alone reached the gate of heaven. After further tests of his faithfulness and constancy, he was finally reunited with his brothers and Draupadi to enjoy perpetual bliss.

The Mahabharata story, like the Ramayana, also enjoys immense popularity in India. It has been retold in written and oral vernacular versions throughout India and Southeast Asia. Its various incidents have been portrayed in stone, notably in reliefs at Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, in Cambodia, and by Indian painters. Like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata is also a story but it indirectly conveys many religious and spiritual concepts. Philosophically and educationally, the Mahabharata is considered exposition on Dharma or code of conduct. It teaches us – the proper conduct of a king, of a warrior, of a man living in times of calamity, and of a person seeking to attain emancipation from rebirth (moksa dharma). In the Mahabharata we see an attempt to revive the doctrines of the equality of men and their equal opportunities. Women came into active life, with their own wisdom and with their own abilities, without being compelled to be dependent on men and without being condemned by men. The epic introduced a spirit of revolt against the hereditary caste system that was taking root in the social organization at that time. Persons with the heredity of learning and wisdom became great warriors. The Brahmins became great warriors and servants became the best counsellors of the kings. Basically, the learning—being the common property of the people—was revived in this grand epic. A large number of works have been written on different aspects of the Mahabharata. The original Mahabharata has been translated into many Indian as well as foreign languages.

Sources:

1. Stutley, M. and Stutley, J. : Harper's Dictionary of Hinduism, Harper & Row, New York, USA, 1977.
2. Weber, Albrecht : The History of Indian Literature, Trubner & Co., London England, 1882.
3. Santucci, J. A. : An Outline of Vedic Literature, Scholars Press, Missoula, Montana, USA, 1976.
4. Raja, C. K. : Survey of Sanskrit Literature, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay India, 1962.
5. Hopkins, T. J. : The Hindu Religious Tradition, Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., Encino, California, USA, 1971.
6. Radhakrishnan, S. : The Principal Upanishads, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, USA, 1953.
7. Gowen, H. H. : A History of Indian Literature, Greenwood Press Publishers, New York, USA, 1968.
8. Comte, F. : Mythology, W & R Chmabers Ltd., New York, USA, 1991.
9. Raja, C. K. : Survey of Sanskrit Literature, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, India, 1962.
10. Anonymous : The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago, USA, 1985.
11. Buitenen, J. A. B. Editor : The Mahabharata, Volume 1–3, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA, 1973.