RIDDLE NO. 4

WHY SUDDENLY THE BRAHMINS DECLARE THE VEDAS TO BE INFALLIBLE AND NOT TO BE QUESTIONED?

To say that the Vedas occupy a very high position in the Religious literature of the Hindus is to make an understatement. To say that the Vedas form the sacred literature of the Hindus will also be an inadequate statement. For the Vedas besides being a sacred literature of the Hindus is a book whose authority cannot be questioned. The Vedas are infallible. Any argument based on the Vedas is final and conclusive. There is no appeal against it. This is the theory of the Vedic Brahmins and is accepted by the generality of the Hindus.

I

On what does this theory rest? The theory rests on the view that the Vedas are *Apaurusheya.* When the Vedic Brahmins say that the Vedas are *Apaurusheya* what they mean is that they were not made by man. Not being made by man, they are free from the failings, faults and frailties to which every man is subject and are therefore infallible.

II

It is difficult to understand how such a theory came to be propounded by the Vedic Brahmins. For there was a time when the Vedic Brahmins themselves thought quite differently on the question of the authority of the Vedas as being final and conclusive. These *Vaidik* Brahmins are no other than the authors of the various Dharma Sutras.

The following are the views expressed by the Dharma Sutras on question of the authority of the Vedas:

To begin with the Gautama Dharma Sutra.

It lays down the following rule on the question of the infallibility of the Vedas.

> "The Veda is the source of the sacred law" I-1.

"And the tradition and practice of those who know the Veda" I-2.

"If authorities of equal force are conflicting, (either may be followed at) pleasure" I-4.

The Vashishta Dharma Sutra propounds the following view:

"The sacred law has been settled by the revealed texts i.e., Vedas and by the tradition of the sages" I-4.

"On the failure of (rules given in) these (two sources) the practice of Shishtas (has) authority". I-5.

The views of Baudhayana are given below:

Prasna I, Adhyaya I, Kandika I.

(1) The sacred law is taught in each Veda.

(2) We will explain (it) in accordance with that.

(3) (The sacred law), taught in the tradition (Smriti) stands second.

(4) The practice of the Sishtas (stands) third.

(5) On failure of them an Assembly consisting at least of ten members (shall decide disputed points of law).

The view taken by the Apastamba Dharma Sutra is clear from the following extract from that Sutra:

"Now, therefore, we will declare the acts productive of merit which form part of the customs of daily life" I-1.

"The authority (for these duties) is the agreement (samaya) of those who know the law". I-2.

"And (the authorities for the latter are) the Vedas alone" I-3.

With regard to the *Shishtas* both the Vashishtha Dharma Sutra and also the Baudhayana Dharma Sutra have taken particular care to define who can be regarded as *Shishtas*.

The Vashishta Dharma Sutra says:

"He whose heart is free from desire (is called) a Shishta". I-6.

Baudhayana goes into much greater details about the qualification of the Shishtas. This is what he says:

"5. Shishtas, forsooth, (are those) who are free from envy, free from pride, contented with a store of grain sufficient for ten days, free from covetousness, and free from hypocrisy, arrogance, greed, perplexity and anger."

"6. Those are called Shishtas who, in accordance with the sacred law, have studied the Veda together with its appendages, know how to draw inferences from that (and) are able to adduce proofs perceptible by the senses from the revealed texts."

Baudhayana has also something very interesting to say about the assembly whom he authorises to decide. The following are his views on the matter:

"8. Now they quote also (the following verses): 'Four men, who each know one of the four Vedas, a Mimansaka, one who knows the Angas, one who recites (the works on) the sacred law, and three Brahmanas belonging to (three different) orders, constitute an assembly consisting at least of ten members."

"9. There may be five, or there may be three, or there may be one blameless man, who decides (questions regarding) the sacred law. But a thousand fools (can) not do it)."

"As an elephant made of wood, as an antelope made of leather, such an unlearned Brahmana; those three having nothing but the name (of their kind)".

This review of Dharma Sutras[1] shows that the (1) Veda, (2) Tradition (Smriti), (3) Practice of Shishta and (4) Agreement in an assembly were the four different authorities which were required to be referred to in the decision of an issue which was in controversy. It also shows that there was a time when the Vedas were not the sole infallible authorities. That was the time represented by the Dharma Sutras of Vashishta and Baudhayana. Apastambha does not invest the Vedas with any authority at all. Knowledge of Vedas is made by him as an electoral qualification for membership of the Assembly whose agreed decision is the law and the only law. The Veda was not at all regarded as a book of authority and when the only recognized source of authority was an agreement arrived at in an Assembly of the learned. It is only in the time of Gautama that the Vedas came to be regarded as the only authority. There was a time when an agreed decision of the Assembly was admitted as one source of authority. That is the period represented by Baudhayana.

This conclusion is reinforced by the following quotation from the Satapatha Brahmana. It says:

[*Left incomplete. Quotation and further discussion not given.*]

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[1] According to Max Muller the period of the Dharma Sutras was sometime between 600 and 200 B.C.