

RIDDLE NO. 7

THE TURN OF THE TIDE OR HOW DID THE BRAHMINS DECLARE THE VEDAS TO BE LOWER THAN THE LOWEST OF THEIR SHASTRAS ?

I

The religious literature of the Hindus includes (1) The Vedas, (2) The Brahmanas, (3) The Aranyakas, (4) Upanishads, (5) Sutras, (6) Itihas, (7) Smritis and (8) Puranas.

As has been pointed out there was a time when they occupied the same status. There was no distinction of superior or inferior, sacred or profane, fallible or infallible.

Later on as we have shown the Vedic Brahmins felt that they must make a distinction between the Vedas and other classes of their religious literature. They made the Vedas not only superior to other classes of literature but they made them sacred and infallible. In evolving their dogma of the infallibility of the Vedas they made a distinction and divided their sacred writings in two classes (1) Shruti and (2) Non-Shruti. In the first division they placed only two of the eight classes of literature spoken of above namely—(1) Samhitas and (2) the Brahmanas. The rest they declared as Non-Shruti.

II

When this distinction was first made it is not possible to say. The more important question, however, is on what basis was this division made? Why were Itihas and Puranas excluded? Why were Aranyakas and Upanishads excluded? Why were the Sutras excluded? One can well understand why Itihas and Puranas were excluded from Shruti. At the time when the division took place they were too elementary and too undeveloped and in all probability included in the Brahmanas. Similarly one can well understand why the Aranyakas are not

This is a 21-page typed MS originally entitled 'The Supersession of the Vedas', with several corrections and modifications by the author himself. This chapter seems complete as the last para of this chapter is concluded in the handwriting of the author.—Ed.

specifically mentioned as a part of the Shruti. They are a part of the Brahmanas and for that reason it was probably unnecessary to say expressly that they are part of the Shruti. The question of the Upanishads and the Sutras remains a puzzle. Why were they excluded from the Shruti? The question regarding the Upanishads is the subject matter of another chapter. Here it is proposed to deal with the question of the Sutras. Because the reasons for the exclusion of the Sutras it is not possible to comprehend. If there were good reasons for including the Brahmanas in the category of Shruti the same reasons could not fail to justify the inclusion of the Sutras. As Prof. Max Muller observes :

“We can understand how a nation might be led to ascribe a superhuman origin to their ancient national poetry, particularly if that poetry consisted chiefly of prayers and hymns addressed to their gods. But it is different with the prose compositions of the Brahmanas. The reasons why the Brahmanas which are evidently so much more modern than the Mantras, were allowed to participate in the name of Sruti, could only have been because it was from these theological compositions, and not from the simple old poetry of the hymns, that a supposed divine authority could be derived for the greater number of the ambitious claims of the Brahmanas. But, although we need not ascribe any weight to the arguments by which the Brahmanas endeavoured to establish the contemporaneous origin of the Mantras and Brahmanas there seems to be no reason why we should reject as equally worthless the general opinion with regard to the more ancient date of both the Brahmanas and Mantras, if contrasted with the Sutras and the profane literature of India. It may easily happen, where there is a canon of sacred books, that later compositions become incorporated together with more ancient works, as was the case with the Brahmanas. But we can hardly imagine that old and genuine parts should ever have been excluded from a body of sacred writings, and a more modern date ascribed to them, unless it be in the interest of a party to deny the authority of certain doctrines contained in these rejected documents. There is nothing in the later literature of the Sutras to warrant a supposition of this kind. We can find no reason why the Sutras should not have been ranked as Sruti, except the lateness of their date, if compared with the Brahmanas, and still more with the Mantras. Whether the Brahmanas themselves were aware that ages must have elapsed between the period during which most of the poems of their Rishis were composed, and the times which gave rise to the Brahmanas, is a question which we need hardly hesitate to

answer in the affirmative. But the recklessness with which Indian theologians claim for these Brahmanas the same title and the same age as for the Mantras, shows that the reason must have been peculiarly strong which deterred them from claiming the same divine authority for the Sutras."

The exclusion of the Sutras from the category of Shruti is a riddle that calls for explanation.

There are other riddles which strike the student who cares to investigate into the subject. They relate to the changes in the content of the literature comprised in the term Shruti and their relative authority.

One such riddle relates to the class of literature called the Brahmanas. At one time the Brahmanas were included in the term Shruti. But later on they seem to have lost this position. For Manu¹ seems to exclude the "Brahmanas" from the category of Shruti as may be seen from the following extract from his Smriti :

"By Shruti is meant the Veda, and by Smriti the institutes of law ; the contents of these are not to be questioned by reason, since from them (a knowledge of) duty has shown forth. The Brahman who, relying on rationalistic treatises, shall condemn these two primary sources of knowledge must be excommunicated by the virtuous as a sceptic and reviler of the Vedas.... To those who are seeking a knowledge of duty, the Sruti is the supreme authority."

Why were the Brahmanas excluded from Shruti ?

III

We may now turn to the class of literature called the Smritis, the most important of which are the Manu Smriti and the Yajnavalkya Smriti. The number of Smritis was ever on the increase and the composing of Smritis went on up to the advent of the British. Mitramistra refers to 57 Smritis, Nilakanta to 97 and Kamalakar to 131. The Smriti literature is bigger than any other class of religious literature regarded as sacred by the Hindus.

There are several points regarding the relation of the Smritis to the Vedas.

The first is that the Smriti was not recognized² as part of the Dharma Shastra literature represented by the Dharma Sutras such as that of Baudhayana, Gautama or Apastambha. A Smriti originally

¹ Some may depute this on the ground that the word Veda includes "Brahmana" also. This of course is a fact. But it seems to me that Manu uses the term Shruti in a restricted sense so as to exclude the Brahmanas. This is supported by the fact that there is in the Manu Smriti no reference to the Brahmanas except in one place (iv. 100) where he says that only the Mantra portion need be studied.

² On this subject see the illuminating article by Prof. Altekar on "The position of Smritis as a source of Dharma, in the Kane Memorial Volume, pp. 18-25.

dealt with social customs and conventions that were approved of and recommended by the learned leaders of society. As Prof. Altekar observes :

“In the beginning, Smritis were identical in nature and contents with *Sadacara* and were based upon it. When Smritis came into existence, the scope of *Sadacara* became naturally reduced, as much of it was codified by Smritis. It began to denote those old practices which happened not to be codified in Smritis, or those new ones, which had acquired social approval at a period subsequent to the codification of the early *Dharmasastras* or Smritis.”

The second point to note is that the Smritis were treated as quite different from the Vedas or the Srutis. So far as their sanction and their authority were concerned they stood on absolutely different footing. The sanction behind the Sruti was divine. The sanction behind the Smriti was social. In the matter of their authority the *Purva Mimamsa* lays down two rules. The first rule is that if there is a conflict between two texts of Sruti then both are authoritative and the presumption will be that the Vedas have given an option to follow one or the other. The second rule is that the text of a Smriti should be summarily rejected if it was opposed to the text of the Sruti. These rules were rigorously applied with the result that the Smritis could not acquire either the status or the authority of the Vedas.

Surprising as it may appear a time came when Brahmins took a summersault and gave the Smritis a status superior to that of the Vedas. As Prof. Altekar points out :

“The Smritis have actually overruled some of the specific dicta of Srutis that were not in consonance with the spirit of the age, or were coming into direct conflict with it. The Vedic practice was to perform *daiva karma* in the morning and the *pitr karma* in the afternoon. In later times the modern *pitr tarpana* came into vogue and it began to be offered in the morning, as the morning bath became the order of the day. Now this procedure is in direct conflict with the Vedic practice prescribed in the above-mentioned rule. *Devamabhatta*, the author of the *Smrticandrika*, however says that there is nothing wrong in this : the Sruti rule must be presumed to be referring to *pitr karman* other than *tarpana*. The Sruti literature shows that *Visvamitra* adopted *Sunassepa*, though he had a hundred sons living ; this would thus permit a person to adopt a son even when he had a number of his own sons living. But *Mitramisra* says that such a deduction would be wrong ; we shall have to assume that the Smriti practice is also based upon a Sruti text, which is not now available but the existence of which will have to be assumed.”

“The Vedic passage, *na seso 'gne' nyajata masti* certainly disapproves of the practice of the adoption of a son, which is clearly recommended in later times by the Smṛiti literature. This is a clear example of a Sruti being thrown overboard by a Smṛiti. But Mitramisra says that there is nothing wrong about the procedure. The Sruti passage is a mere *arthavada*; it does not lay down any injunction. The Smṛitis on the other hand prescribe adoption so that *homās* etc. should be properly performed. *Arthavada Sruti* is thus being fittingly overruled by a Smṛiti text, which has a *vidhi* for its purport.”

“The custom of the Sati of the later age is in direct conflict with the vedic injunction prohibiting suicide. Apararka, however, argues that the conflict with Sruti should not invalidate the custom. For the Sruti passage lays down a general principle disapproving suicide, while the Smṛitis lay down a special exception in the case of a widow.”

Whether the customs of a Sati and adoption are good or not is a different question. Somehow or other society had come to approve of them. Smṛitis gave canonical sanction to them and sought to defend them even against the authority of the Vedas.

The question is why did the Brahmins after having struggled so hard for establishing the supremacy of the Vedas degrade the Vedas and invest the Smṛitis with authority superior to that of the Vedas? They did so much to raise the authority of the Vedas above the divine. Why did they drag them below the Smṛitis which had nothing but social sanction?

The steps they adopted were so ingenious and artificial that one cannot help feeling that there must have been some definite motive which led the Brahmins to give the Smṛitis a status superior to that of the Vedas.

To give some idea as to how artificial, ingenious and desperate these arguments were it might be useful to give just a brief outline of them.

As an illustration of an artificial argument, one may refer to the view propounded by Brahaspati. According to him, Sruti and Smṛiti are the two eyes of the Brahmana, if he is void of one of them he becomes a one-eyed person.

As an illustration of an ingenious argument one may refer to the argument of Kumarila Bhatt. His argument is founded on the theory of lost Sruti. It was argued on behalf of the Smṛitis that their views cannot be set aside even when they are in direct conflict with the Srutis for they may quite possibly have been based upon a lost text of Sruti, and so the conflict is not a conflict between a text of Sruti and that of

a Smriti. It is really a conflict between an existing and lost text of Sruti. Smriti therefore came to be represented as lost Sruti.

There is a third means adopted by the Brahmins to make the Smritis equal if not superior to the Vedas. It is to be found in the Atri Smriti. Atri says that those who do not respect the Smritis will be subject to curse. Atri's argument is that *Brahmanyam* arises only as a result of a joint study of the Sruti and Smriti and if a person studies the Vedas only but holds the Smriti in contempt he would be immediately condemned to be born as a beast for 21 generations.

Why did the Brahmins adopt such desperate means to place the Smritis on the same footing as the Sruti? What was their purpose? What was their motive?

Prof. Altekar's argument that the Smritis were given supremacy over the Vedas because they gave legal justification to customary law which was of later growth, cannot be accepted as adequate. If the case was that, there was law in the Vedic period and custom had grown later on; and if there was a conflict between the two, one could have understood the argument that the Smritis were given predominance because they set right the conflict by recognizing the progressive doctrines of the custom. This is not the case. There was no such thing as law in the Vedas. As Professor Kane points out :

"All law was customary and there was no necessity to give recognition to the customs because they were recognized by the people. Secondly the Smritis cannot be said to be more progressive than the Vedas. Barring the Chaturvarna doctrine which everybody knows the Vedas except in the matter of forms of worship left Society quite free to develop. What the Smritis have done is, take out the unprogressive element in the Vedas namely the Chaturvarna theory and to propagandize it and hammer it into the heads of the people."

Therefore there must be some other reason why the Brahmins gave supremacy to the Smritis over the Vedas.

The Brahmins were not content with their first acrobatics. They performed another.

The Smritis were followed in point of time by the Puranas. There are 18 Puranas and 18 Up-Puranas altogether 36. In one sense the subject matter of the Puranas is the same. They deal with the creation, preservation and destruction of the world. But in the rest of their contents they differ altogether. Some propagate the cult of Brahma, some the cult of Shiva, some the cult of Vishnu, some the cult of Vayu, some the cult of Agni, some the cult of Surya and some the cult of Goddesses and other deities.

As has been noted there was a time when the Puranas were not included in the Shruti. In later times however a striking change seems to have taken place. The Puranas which were considered as too profane to be included in the Shruti were given a superiority over the Vedas.

The Vayu Purana says¹:

“First, of all the Shastras, the Purana was uttered by Brahma, Subsequently the Vedas issued from his mouth.”

The Matsya Purana not only claims priority of creation for the Puranas as against the Vedas, but also the qualities of eternity and identity with sound, which was once predicated of the Vedas alone.

It says²:

“Pitamaha (Brahma), first of all the immortals, took shape ; then the Vedas with their Angas and Upangas (appendages and minor appendages), and the various modes of their textual arrangements, were manifested. The Purana, eternal, formed of sound, pure, extending to the length of a hundred crores of verses, was the first of the Sastras which Brahma uttered ; and afterwards the Vedas, issued from his mouth ; and also the Mimansa and the Nyaya with its eightfold system of proofs.

The Bhagawat Purana claims equality of authority with the Vedas. It says³:

“(Bramharatra) declared the Purana called the Bhagavata, which stands on an equality with the Veda.”

The Brahma-Vaivartta Purana has the audacity to claim superiority over the Vedas. It says⁴:

“That about which venerable sage, you have inquired, and which you desire, is all known to me, the essence of the Puranas, the pre-eminent Brahma-Vaivartta, which refutes the errors of the Puranas and Upapuranas, and the Vedas.”

This is the second acrobatic performed by the Brahmins in assigning priority, precedence, and authority to their sacred books.

This does not complete the story of the suppression of the Vedas. The worse is yet to come. The Puranas were followed by another class of literature called the *Tantras*.^{*5} Their number is also quite formidable. Shankaracharya refers to 64 Tantras. There might be many more.

¹ Muir Sanskrit Texts, Vol. III. p. 27.

² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³ & ⁴ Quoted by Muir, Vol. III.

^{*5} For further discussion on Smarth Dharma and Tantrik Dharma, please see Appendices IV & V of this Part.—Editors.

Traditionally the authorship of these works is attributed to Dattatreya, who was an incarnation of the Hindu trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. They are therefore to be regarded as equally the revelation of the three supreme divinities. In form, however, they are dependent on Shiva alone, who in dialogue with his wife Durga, or Kali, reveals the mystical doctrines and observances which are to be received and practised by his worshippers. This authoritative or 'higher tradition' is further said to have been delivered from his central or fifth mouth. As such it is pre-eminently sacred and secret and may not be revealed to the uninitiated. They are also called by the name Agamas, and as such are sometimes distinguished from Nigama, the text of the Vedas, Dharmashastras, and other sacred books.

The Tantras are regarded specially as the religious text-books of the Saktas and of their various sects. There are different Tantrik schools, with variant traditions, the distinctions between which are little understood outside of their immediate circle of adherents. The ritual of the Tantras of the Dakshinacharins, however, is said to be pure and in harmony with the Vedas, while that of the Vamacharins is intended only for Shudras.

The teaching of the Tantras, as of the Puranas is essentially based on the Bhakti-Marga which is regarded by them as superior to the Karma-Marga and Jnana-Marga of the Brahmanas and Upanishads. Adoration of a personal deity is inculcated, especially of the wife of Shiva, who is worshipped as the source of all regenerative power. In all these writings the female principle is personified and made prominent, to the almost total exclusion of the male.

What is the relation of the Tantras to the Vedas? Kalluka Bhatta the well known commentator of Manu Smriti has no hesitation in asserting that Shruti is two-fold- *Vaidik* and *Tantrik*—which means that the Vedas and the Tantras stand on equal footing. While the Vaidik Brahmins like Kalluka Bhatta admitted the equality of the Tantras to the Vedas, the authors of the Tantras went much beyond. They claimed that the Vedas, the Shastras, and the Puranas are alike a common woman, but the Tantras are like a highborn woman conveying thereby that the Tantras are superior to the Vedas.

From this survey one thing is clear. The Brahmins have not been very steadfast in their belief regarding the sacred character of what they called their books of religion. They fought to maintain the thesis that the Vedas were not only sacred but that they were infallible. Not only they maintained that the Vedas were infallible but they spent their ingenuity to invent strange arguments to support the doctrine of infallibility. Yet they had not the slightest compunction to overthrow

the position of the Vedas and to subordinate them first to the Smritis, then to the Puranas and lastly to the Tantras. The question of all questions is what made the Brahmins degrade the Vedas and supersede them by Smritis, Puranas and the Tantras if they regarded their Vedas as the most sacred ?

