

CHAPTER 3

THE SCOPE OF SCRIPTURES

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Hinduism is defined by a search for the universal and timeless Truth and specific guidance on how to connect with a Supreme Being that is beyond comprehension by the human mind. The direct experience of numerous sages is recorded in scriptures that unfold a variety of paths to the Truth. Thus, “Scripture” in Hinduism refers to a large body of literature rather than a single text. Since spiritual seekers have varying levels of understanding, scriptural messages are presented in a variety of ways to provide direct access to all seekers. The scriptures inspire and support the efforts of all seekers to evolve spiritually. Thus while some scriptures emphasize philosophy, others are replete with stories, while yet others emphasize techniques for spiritual practice. Besides dealing with the transcendental, the scriptures’ emphasis on integrating spiritual practice with daily life leads to their reflections on morals, sciences, and the arts. Not surprisingly, Hindus revere and study numerous texts as scripture.

Hindu scriptures are classified broadly into two categories: *Shruti* and *Smriti*. The word *Shruti* literally means “heard,” and consists of truths that ancient sages realized in their meditation. For many centuries they were transmitted orally, which is another reason why they are known as “heard.” The term *Shruti* is applied to the *Vedas*, including the *Upanishads* that constitute the fourth and final part of the *Vedas*. These texts are revered as “revealed” and are the foundation of all of Hinduism. Rigorous disciplines were devised for chanting of the *Shruti* texts to ensure their accurate preservation in the oral tradition. The second category of scripture is *Smriti* that literally means “memory,” i.e. texts that are designed to help us “remember” the teachings of *Shruti*. Other than *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, all scriptural texts are loosely classified as *Smriti*. Teachings in *Smriti* texts are meant to be read and interpreted in the light of changing circumstances over time. The specific statements in *Smriti* texts do not carry the same weight as *Shruti*. Any conflict in teachings between *Smriti* and *Shruti* is to be resolved in favor of *Shruti*.³

While there is general agreement that the *Vedas* are over three thousand years old, there is little agreement on just how old they are. Evidence is scarce and estimates of their age vary widely, from 1200 bce to some thousands of years earlier. Similar disagreements are found on dating other ancient scriptures, which were preserved orally for a long time before they were written.

The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* are composed in an ancient form of Sanskrit; the *Puranas* and most of the other older scriptures are in classical Sanskrit; and texts composed in the last millennium are sometimes in the various regional languages.

³ See *Manu Smriti* 4.176 and *Vyasa Smriti* 1-V-4.

Vedas: The word *veda* means “knowledge.” There are four *Vedas*: *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*, of which the *Rig (Rk, Rg) Veda* is the oldest. It has over 10,000 *mantras* that deal with a wide range of topics. Superficially, they are seen as hymns to the forces of nature and liturgy for ceremonial rituals; but a deeper study reveals teachings on metaphysical and philosophical issues.

Upanishads: contain extensive exploration of transcendental truths and methods of Self-Realization. There are more than a hundred *Upanishads* of which between ten and fourteen are regarded as major. No individuals claim to have authored the *Upanishads*. Although there are differences in detail among the *Upanishads*, their philosophical content is remarkably consistent and forms the basis of *Vedanta*. The *Upanishads*, along with the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Brahma Sutras*, constitute the primary basis for the practice of *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge.

Vedangas: there are a number of auxiliary texts known collectively as *Vedanga* and classified as *Smriti*. They cover a range of topics: oral chanting of scripture (*Shiksha*), grammar (*vyakarana*), prosody (*chhandas*), etymology (*nirukta*), astronomy (*jyotisha*), and obligatory rituals (*kalpa*).

Puranas: Stories in texts known as the *Puranas* bridge the gap between the ancient *Shruti* scriptures and common people. The teachings in the *Puranas* are completely in harmony with the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads but are greatly simplified and made more interesting. There are eighteen major *Puranas* and many minor ones that have compiled stories and narratives over many centuries, mainly during the first millennium CE. Each *Purana* tells stories around a principal character, either a God or a Sage. They cover a wide range of topics, both sacred and secular such as the manifestations of God, including the *avatars* i.e. the forms in which God has appeared on earth, teachings on dharma, karma, death and rebirth, the use of *mantras* and other religious observances, the significance of sacred sites for pilgrimages, the importance of service, genealogies of kings and sages, cosmology, ayurveda and astrology. Modern Hindu beliefs and religious practices are derived mainly from the *Puranas*. Many consider *Srimad Bhagavatam* as being the most important *Purana*. It deals with the many *avatars* of Vishnu and provides a philosophical basis for the *Vaishnava* devotional traditions in Hinduism, particularly those centering on the worship of Lord Krishna. *Puranas* contain two of the more important scriptures in the *Shakti* tradition: the *Durga Saptashati*, also known as *Devi Mahatmyam*, extols the Divine Mother’s victories over evil forces; and *Lalita Sahasranama*, the thousand names of the Divine Mother, provides an esoteric understanding of the Supreme Being in Her feminine form.

Ramayana is the single most popular scripture in all of Hinduism and has had an enormous impact in many dimensions of life in India and parts of Southeast Asia. It is traditionally classed as an *Itihasa*, history, and tells the life story of a noble prince, Lord Rama, who is an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu. He suffers exile and many hardships while destroying powerful demons before returning to rule his kingdom for a very long time. This epic story portrays several characters who embody ideal qualities and conduct. Among them are Rama himself as the ideal in every

way: as prince, as king, as son, as husband, as brother, as friend and as enemy; Sita as the ideal wife and emblem of strong womanhood; Hanuman as the ideal friend and servant of Rama; Lakshmana and Bharata as devoted brothers. There are numerous versions of the *Ramayana*, of which the most well-known are those by the original author, the Sage Valmiki, and the poet-saint Tulsidas. These texts are recited by devoted Hindus at home and in devotional gatherings; are consulted for guidance on life; form the basis for dances and dramatic presentations; and are popular children's stories. *Aditya Hridaya Stotram* is a popular prayer that originates in the *Ramayana*.

Mahabharata is also a historical epic. It is the longest text the world has known, seven times the combined length of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Against the background of an extended conflict between two branches of the Kaurava family, the *Mahabharata* is a treasure house of stories and discourses on the practice of Dharma. As a scripture, its primary messages are the importance of always upholding Dharma, the need for complete devotion to God and the utter futility of war. Embedded in the *Mahabharata* are two texts of special scriptural significance: the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Vishnu Sahasranama*. The ***Vishnu Sahasranama***, the thousand names of Lord Vishnu, is one of the most important prayers used in the *Vaishnava* tradition.

The ***Bhagavad Gita*** is a primary scripture for all Hindus in modern times. Although it is a tiny part of the *Mahabharata* and hence technically classed as a *Smriti* text, it is traditionally accorded the rank of an *Upanishad*. It presents Lord Krishna's teachings to the warrior Arjuna and is a profound guide to living a spiritual life while being engaged in the world. The text outlines the various paths of *Yoga*, summarizes Upanishadic teachings on spiritual topics and offers succinct advice on how to lead a spiritually fulfilling life.

DharmaShastras are a class of texts that explain how Dharma is maintained in daily life. They deal in great detail with a wide range of topics: responsibilities of each *varna*, temperament, and *ashrama*, stage of life; rituals; civil and criminal law; dietary rules, injunctions on festivals, pilgrimages, charity, forbidden actions; types of sinful actions and required expiation; design of temples etc. Since these texts are part of the *Smriti*, not *Shruti*, their teachings are subject to re-interpretation to suit differences in time and place. Hence there are numerous texts composed by various authors over many centuries. The *Manu Smriti* is one of earliest texts but is still regarded as most authoritative.

DarshanaShastras are philosophical texts that are studied as part of Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge. The subject matter of these texts is the relationship between God, the individual and the phenomenal world, including theories of creation. There are six schools of philosophy in Hinduism with differing views on these subjects. Each of them has a primary text, generally in the form of *Sutras*, aphorisms. Two of these are still widely studied by Hindus: the ***Brahma Sutras*** by Sage Vyasa and ***Yoga Sutras*** by Sage Patanjali.

Agama Shastras are ancient and numerous, including many that have been lost over the centuries. They deal with practical aspects of devotion and worship, including personal and temple rituals, purificatory injunctions and esoteric practices such as the use of *mantras*, *yantras* and *nyasas*.⁴ They define many of the common practices now followed by observant Hindus in the worship of Vishnu, Shiva or Shakti, the Divine Mother. *Tantric* texts are part of this category. Some texts such as *Rama Raksha Stotram*, *Saundaryalahari*, and *Shiva Mahimna Stotram* are popular and used widely in the worship of Rama, Shakti and Shiva respectively.

Bhakti Texts: From popular saints known as *Alvars* and *Nayanars* in the 7th BCE into contemporary times, the teachings, poems and songs composed by many saints in regional languages have been a major source of inspiration. Their messages of devotion, dharma and spiritual practice were conveyed in simple language by innumerable teachers and singers to all parts of India and beyond.

The plethora of scriptures is not as bewildering as might appear at first sight. Most Hindus receive their religious education from family traditions and discourses by spiritual leaders. Individual Hindus follow the prayers and teachings of the denomination to which they belong and possibly the more specific oral instructions of a *Guru*. Few access directly the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* that provide the foundation for all other scriptures in Hinduism. The stories from the *Puranas* and epics and songs composed by saints are the voice of the scriptures for all.

⁴ *Mantra* is a sacred word or phrase; *Yantra* is a geometric design with esoteric significance; *nyasa* invokes the presence of God in each of various parts of the body to 'divinize' the body prior to worship.