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Importance of the Vedangas: An Analysis

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Abstract

Vedangas are six auxiliary disciplines associated with the study and understanding of the Vedas. Vedangas are additional limbs or chapters in the Vedas. The six Vedangas are – Shiksha (Phonetics), Kalpa (Ritual Canon), Vyakaran (Grammar), Nirukta (explanation), Chhanda (Vedic meter) and Jyotisha (Astrology). Shiksha and Chhandas are aids for pronouncing and reciting Vedic mantras correctly, Vyakarana and Nirukta are for understanding their meaning, and Jyotisha and Kalpa provide appropriate times and methods for performing the Vedic sacrificial rites and rituals. The Vedangas played an important role in maintaining the purity and integrity of the Vedic tradition. For centuries they taught and continue to teach Vedic students how to recite the Vedic hymns, understand their meaning and perform the various rituals and ceremonies strictly according the established procedures. The Vedangas greatly help us in proper understanding and application of the Vedas. In this article I have discussed elaborately importance of the Vedangas.

Key Words: Vedanga, Shiksha, Kalpa, Vyakaran. Nirukta, Chhanda.

Vedangas literally mean the limbs of the Vedas. Just like the limbs of the body, they perform various supportive and augmenting functions in the study, preservation and protection of the Vedas and the Vedic traditions. The Vedangas are six auxiliary disciplines in Hinduism that developed in ancient times, and has been connected with the study of the Vedas¹. The Vedangas are the last treatises of the Vedic literature. Paniniya Shiksha (41-42) narrates two verses on the importance of the Vedangas which describe Veda as a Purusha having six limbs as six Vedangas : Chhandas are his two feet, Kalpa are his two arms, Jyotisha are his eyes, Nirukta is his ears, Shiksha is his nose and Vyakarana is his mouth². They symbolically represent the organs of the Veda Purusha. Thus the Vedas are imagined to possess six limbs in the form of the six Vedangas as mentioned in the following Sanskrit verse :

“ Siksha Kalpo Vyakaranam Niruktam Chandasam Chayah
Jyotishamayanam Chaiva Vedangani Shaddevatu.”

To understand Vedas, 6 disciplines have to be studied. Those subjects are treated in Sutra literature dating from the end of the vedic period to Mauryan times, Seeing the transition from late Vedic Sanskrit to Classical Sanskrit. These subjects were an integral and essential part of ancient Vedic education System, aimed to promote an all-round development of the students with a better understanding of the Vedas and Vedic practices.

Vedangas follow the full progression of language, self-expression, going through phonetics to words to sentences, and returning to the Rishi Value in total self-expression. To make the spiritual and ritual concepts of the Vedas easily understandable, the Rishis developed the Vedangas- “limbs of the Vedas”. The six Vedangas (organs of the Vedas) are glorified as an essential subset of the 14 vidyasthanas – the abode of true knowledge and wisdom. They help to understand Veda mantras completely and in depth. In case there is a difference between the two, Vedas will always prevail over the Vedangas. Vedangas help us read, write, Chant and understand Veda mantras or Vedic hymns (slokas). It was believed that proper understanding of the vedic texts is possible only when all these organs are strictly followed. A student wanting to understand and realize the inner meaning of the Vedas is required to first master these six Vedangas before attempting to study the actual Vedas. Ceremonial religion is a matter of correct pronunciation, correct grammar and correct accents the subjects which form the core of the Vedangas and hence they are considered sacred.

Manduka Upanisad mentions six Vedangas as follows:

The six Vedangas are –

1. Shiksha or phonetics or pronunciation – language teaching, rules on accents (there are 60 Shikshas, the most important originating from Panini and Manduki)
2. Kalpa or ritual –Ceremonies, rules of Ceremonial.
3. Vyakarana or grammar.
4. Nirukta or etymology – explanations of words, written by Yaskacharya.
5. Chhandas or meter –Chants, Verses.
6. Jyotisha or astronomy.

The Character of Vedangas has roots in ancient times, and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad mentions it as an integral part of the Brahmanas layer of the Vedic texts. The Vedangas likely developed towards the end of the Vedic period, around of after the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, These auxiliary fields of Vedic studies emerged because the language of the Vedic texts composed centuries earlier grew to archaic to the people of that time. Now we shall briefly study about the Vedangas.

1. Shiksha: This auxiliary discipline has focussed on the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, accent, quantity, stress, melody and rules of euphonic combination of words during a Vedic recitation³. It intends to train the students in the art and science of articulation of words and syllables so that they can chant the Vedic hymns perfectly, producing the desired sound vibrations and maintain the ritual purity and efficacy of the ceremonies they perform. Shiksha really means instruction, then in particular ‘instruction in reciting ‘i.e., in correct

pronunciation, accentuation etc. of the samhita texts. Later, it was a name given to works containing rules regarding the proper pronunciation of Vedic texts. Thus, the Shiksha-sutras are treatises on phonetics. Phonetics is most important in the case of the Vedic language, because we see that change in sound leads to change in results and effect. The vibrations generated by sounds are considered to possess immense power in Hindu mysticism (“Akshara Brahma”) – sound is the supreme spirit. The teachings of the Shiksha are contained in the ancient texts known as Pratisakhya, each attached to a particular Samhita, providing instructions for the recitation of the hymns contained in it. Hence, Shiksha which is Vedic phonetics has been regarded as the most important of the six Angas (organs) of the Veda Purusha. Some important Pratisakhya are:

- (i) Rigveda –Pratisakhya of Rigveda.
- (ii) Taittiriya –Pratisakhya of Krishna Yajurveda.
- (iii) Vajasaneyi Pratisakhya of Shukla Yajurveda.
- (iv) Atharvaveda –Pratisakhya of Atharvaveda.

The Pratisakhya was probably composed by many grammarians like Saunaka before Panini and revised from time to time.

Shiksha played an important role in Vedic India at a time when there was no written script and the knowledge of the Vedas had to be transmitted from one person to another orally. By establishing the ground rules of proper pronunciation, it minimized the changes of distortion that would usually accompany verbal communication. A lot of importance was attached in ancient India to correct pronunciation of the Vedic hymns because of the belief that the Vedas were inviolable and divine in origin. Shiksha developed into a separate branch of study to preserve the integrity and purity of the divine words and save the dharma from human fallibility.

Every veda has its own peculiar pronunciation of certain letters and each one of them has its specific modes and speed of recitation. The most important among the books relating to shiksha is the famous Paniniya Shiksha. Another important book is Yaajnavalkya Shiksha. In Vasishthi Shiksha we have a detailed account of the differences between the mantras of Rigveda and Yajur Veda. Both Yaajnavalkya Shiksha and Vasishthi Shiksha are related to the Vajasaneyi Samhita. The other important works are : Katyaayani Shiksha, Paaraashari Shiksha, Maadhyandini Shiksha, Keshavi Shiksha and Manduki Shiksha. In Naaradiya Shiksha, which is related to the Sama-veda. The development of Shiksha as a Vedanga and as a Science demonstrates the profundity and vast scope of research that was undertaken in respect of pronunciation in ancient India. It is because of this Vedanga that the system of Vedic recitation has remained intact right from the ancient times to the present day.

2. Kalpa: The second Vedanga is Kalpa (ritual which is called the arms of the veda Purusha. Kalpa literally means sacred rule or law or ordinance and sutra means a thread. Sutras are threads of knowledge or short statements used as memorial rules. In the absence of written language, the sutras acted as mental hooks and helped the students remember the intricacies of performing Vedic sacrifices and observing the daily rituals Kalpa deals with

the practical ceremonial, sacrificial and ritual aspect of the Vedas. Technically it is the applied science of the Vedas. The field focused on standardizing procedures for Vedic rituals, rites of passage rituals associated with major life events such as birth, wedding and death in family, as well as discussing the personal conduct and proper duties of an individual in different stages of his life.⁴

The oldest Kalpa sutras are those which in their contents are directly connected with the Brahmanas and Aranyakas. It was the ritual (Kalpa), the chief contents of the Brahmanas, which first received systematic treatment in the manuals called the Kalpasutras. They are more practical than the Brahmanas which for the most part are taken up with mystical, historical, mythological, etymological and theological discussions. They are also considered significant for the study of Vedic culture and society.

Kalpa Sutras are usually divided into Srauta Sutras and Smartha sutras. Srauta Sutras prescribe rules for the performance of different types of sacrifices and rituals, the amount of fees to be paid to the priests and the type of penances to be practiced in case of violation. The Srauta Sutras were probably composed around the 6th century BC, the same time during which some of the smartha sutras were composed. The latter are divided into Grihya sutras and Dharma sutras. The Grihya sutras prescribe domestic rites and rituals for the three upper castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas), in additions to the duties and responsibilities meant for them as house holders so that they can uphold the dharma and lead an ideal life in harmony with truths expounded in the Vedas. The Grihya sutras are basically treating the rites of passage, such as marriage, birth, name giving, etc., connected with simple offerings into the domestic fire.

The Dharmasutras are the first four texts of the Dharmasastra tradition and they focus on the idea of dharma, the principal guide by which Hindus strive to live their lives. The Dharma sutras are written in concise prose, leaving much upto the educated reader to interpret. The Dharma sutras can be called the guide books of dharma as they contain the rules of conduct and rites as practiced in the Vedic schools. They discuss about the duties of people at different stages of life like studenthood, householdership, retirement and renunciation. These stages are also called ashramas. They also discuss about the rites and duties of kings, judicial matters, and even personal practices like the regulations in diet, offenses and expiations, daily oblations, and funerary practice. They also suggest the norms for appropriate social and religious behavior for both men and women, norms of marriage, study and sexual union and punishments in case of violation. Of the many Dharma Shastras that existed during the Vedic period, only a few have survived, such as the Baudhayana, the Apasthamba, the Goutama and the Vashistha. Of these the first three are associated with different schools of Yajurveda, while the Vashistha is associated with the Rigveda. The first three texts were composed probably around 6th century BC and the last around the 1st century AD. Other important law books of ancient times were Manusmriti, Vishnusmriti, Yagnavalkya Smriti and Narad Smriti.

3. Vyakarana: The third Vedanga is Vyakarana or grammar, which is necessary for the understanding of the Veda. It is called the mouth of the veda Purusha. The word, Vyakarana, is formed by prefixing 'vi' and 'aa' to the root 'Kri', to do. Vyakarana deals with Sanskrit grammar or the analysis and decomposition of words, word formation, root words and complex sentence structures, providing useful insights into the usage of words and sentences leading to the mastery of the language⁵. The old Vedanga texts on Vyakarana are entirely lost today. In the Aranyakas, we find some technical terms of grammar. The only representative of this Vedanga is the Ashtadhyayi of Panini, which belongs to a later period. It is indeed the most celebrated text-book of grammar. It is not associated with any Vedic school. Due to its great merits, this may be assumed that Panini superseded all his predecessors, whose works have consequently perished.

Formation of the word is the main subject of grammar. It discusses root (Prakriti) and suffix (Pratyaya) of a word to study its meaning. Panini's Vyakarana is in the form of sutras or aphorisms. The fourteen sutras are referred to here, as Maheswara sutras. They were originated from Nataraja's damuru sound. They are considered the foundation of grammar. Vararuci has written an elaborate commentary or Vartika. Sage Patanjali wrote commentary or Bhashya on it.

The Ashtadhyayi is probably a representative work summarizing the prevailing traditions and preserving them for posterity. It assumed so much importance over a period of time that most of the works on Sanskrit grammar preceding it lost their significance and were considered not worth preserving. The Ashtadhyayi contains about 4000 sutras or aphorisms divided into four parts.

Shiva sutras deal with phonetics or the accent and intonation of distinctive units of sound that form part of the word and letter sounds.

Ashtadhyayi deal with the structure of words and sentences and their construction.

Dhatupata deals with list of root words (words that give rise to other words).

Ganapatha deals with groups of nominal words (nouns or noun phrases).

4. Nirukta: Nirukta Vedanga is called the ears of the veda Purusha. 'Nirukta' means 'etymology' and it explains the reason why a particular word has been used i.e., the meaning of usage. Nirukta is the science of etymologies. It explains the word-roots and derivation of meaning of words in different context. Nirukta deals with the etymological interpretations or explanations of obscure words especially those found in the Vedas⁶. Technically it deals with the difficult and obscure words of a dictionary, whose analysis and interpretation is vital to the study and understanding of the Vedas which are replete with mysterious symbolism not usually understood by all. The most authoritative exponent of this branch of study is Yaska, a Sanskrit grammarian and master of Sanskrit etymology, who lived before Panini. He is remembered for his monumental work called Nirukta, which is an excellent commentary of the obscure words found in the Nighantu (dictionary) of his time. Tradition ascribes the Nighantu also to Yaska. The Nighantus are five lists of words, which are again divided into three sections. The first section consists of three lists, in which

Vedic words are collected under certain main ideas. The second section contains a list of ambiguous and particularly difficult words of the Veda, while the third section gives a classification of the deities according to the three regions, earth, sky and heaven. Yaska explained these lists in the twelve books followed. The most interesting portion of the Nirukta is the discussion which covers the whole of the first book and a part of the second, as well as the seventh book, which was as an admirable introduction to the study of the Veda. Nirukta deals with the interpretation and analysis of difficult words and provides insight into the hidden content of the Vedas. Since many Sanskrit words can be split into more than one way and the Vedas contain many obscure and unknown words, an in-depth study of Nirukta will help students discover the latent or hidden meaning of the Vedas and understand their linguistic and philosophic significance.

Yasaka has mentioned a considerable number of important grammarians as his predecessors in the Nirukta such as Galave, Shakapuni, Katthakya.

Nirukta is very important for several reasons. Firstly, it represents the type of the earliest classical style and in this respect stands by itself. Secondly, it is the oldest known attempt in the field of Vedic etymology. As regards the importance of the etymology Yaska himself says that without it the precise meanings of the Vedic stanzas cannot be understood.

5. Chhanda: Chhanda is the science of metres. Chhanda deals with the analysis of the types of meter used in the construction of various Vedic hymns. In Sanskrit, the word “ Pada” is used as the metrical unit. The measurement is made depending on the number of syllables used. Syllables are classified into two categories, Guru and Laghu. A string of Guru – Laghu sequence of a particular length is called a meter⁷. The chhandas of a mantra determines its usage, such as its purpose and context. But it acts more as an error-correcting mechanism. Since the Veda is an oral tradition, any aberration in the chhandas because of error in text or the swara, can be easily identified and corrected.

Rig and Sama Vedas are fully in the form of verses, whereas, Yajur Veda has prose and poetry. A Sloka or Vedamantra is generally a quartet with four quarters or Paada. Depending on the number of syllables in each of the paadas, We have different meters – Anushtup (8 syllables), Brihati (9), Pankti (10), Trishtup (11), Ushnik (4 Paadas of 7 syllable each = 28 syllables) – like that up to even 26 syllables to a Paada. (Any meter beyond 26 syllables to a Paada, is called dandakam. Chhanda helps us to ensure the form of the Mantra (by meter count). No alteration to this can be attempted since it would disturb the spiritual significance of the mantra itself. Chhanda Shastra of Pingalanaga is considered to be the oldest text available on the subject. It was probably composed between 6th and 5th century BC. In Sanskrit, the metrical unit is known as pada (foot). The knowledge of the Chhanda proved useful in the composition of the smriti literature. It also played an important role in the emergence of classical Indian music and Sanskrit poetry besides providing a frame work of reference for compositions languages.

6. **Jyotisha:** The last Vedanga Jyotisha is called eye the organ of sight, of the Veda purusha. Jyotisha deals with the astronomical and astrological aspects of fixing auspicious date and time to perform various Vedic rites and rituals including the sacraments or rites of passage. The auspicious time is usually determined based on the position of the luminous bodies (Jyotisha) namely the Sun, the Moon, the Stars and other heavenly bodies⁸. According to tradition, Sage Bhrigu is said to be the first person who perfected the knowledge of Jyotisha and built a record of the natal charts of every human being who was to be born earth.

According to some historians, much of our knowledge of Jyotisha came from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia and Greece through traders, sailors and travelers and subsequently from the Islamic world through contact and conquest.

In the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, we find frequent allusions to astronomical subjects, and even in the hymns we find traces which indicate a certain advance in the observation of the Moon. It is unfortunate that there is no work available at present dealing with ancient Vedic astronomy (Jyotisha) in the sutra style. Only we have a small text –book called Jyotisha of Vedic astronomy in verses in two recessions. Generally, Maharshi Lagadha is regarded Author of this Vedanga Jyotisha. This is a very difficult text and, therefore, is not clear on several points to Scholars even today. Some of the earliest works on the subject are considered to be Jyotisha Vedanga (400 BC) and the Siddhanta. Later, we find many Sanskrit treatises on astronomy and mathematical calculations. Bhaskaracharya, Varahamihira and Aryabhatta are known ancient scholars conversant with these scientific subjects⁹.

The Jyotisha of the Vedic world played an important role in the development of Vedic calendar, in the preparation astrological charts for the purpose of performing various sacraments or rites of passage and determining the date, time and place for the performance of the sacrificial ceremonies and daily rituals. Study of the movement of the Sun, the Moon, the Star and planets helped determine the time of the day and night, the day of the week and fortnight, the period of the seasons, the month and the year, besides the influence of each heavenly object on the events of the world and the lives of the people.

The Vedangas played an important role in preserving and protecting the Vedic tradition over a long period of time. They formalized the procedures and techniques of performing various Vedic rites and rituals and established authoritative sources of reference for succeeding generations to practice the Vedic ceremonies and rituals with little ambiguity and fear of transgression. The Vedangas were sciences that focused on helping understand and interpret the Vedas that had been composed many centuries earlier. Individually, these auxiliary disciplines of study are traceable to the 2nd millennium BCE, and the 5th century BCE Scholar Yaska quotes the Vedangas. However, it is unclear when and where a list of six Vedangas were first conceptualized. Vedangas developed as ancillary studies for the Vedas, but its insights into meters, structure of sound and language, grammar, linguistic analysis and other subjects influenced post-Vedic studies, arts, Culture and various schools

of Hindu Philosophy. The Kalpa Vedangas studies, for example, gave rise to the Dharma-Sutras, which later expanded into Dharma-Shastras. Although they have lost of much of their ancient significance, they continue to occupy an important place in the academic study of the Vedas. Their study inculcates among its students a sense of discipline and respect for tradition and helps them conduct themselves in society as upholders of the Vedic dharma and traditional family values.

To a certain extent the Vedangas were responsible for the popularity of Sanskrit as the main language of communication in ancient India and for its emergence as the language of the elite through such works as those of Kalidasa and Kalhana. They also played an influential role in the development of native languages, education system and vernacular literature of the Indian subcontinent by providing the basic frame work on which they could grow. The Vedangas ensured the purity of language and expression, defined and enforced, through moral fear, the social and religious conduct expected of men belonging to different social strata, and established well defined ground rules for moral, ritual and spiritual behavior of men involved in the performance of rituals. Many principles and practices of the Vedangas were taken up by other religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism which relied upon Sanskrit as their medium of communication and included in their education systems and religious practices. Through them they also extended their sway to other parts of the world such as China, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Tibet and Ceylon where they were used in the study of Buddhism and Buddhist literature and preservation of its traditions.

While the combined knowledge of the Vedas and the Vedangas is still a desirable prospect, with the decline of Sanskrit as the language of the elite and the emergence of new methods of devotional worship and agamic temple traditions which took precedence over the Vedic traditions in many parts of India, the Vedangas have lost of much of their priestly relevance. However they continue to attract the attention of Indological Scholars and serious students of the Vedas, because of their literary and historical value in our understanding of the development of human languages and linguistic and literary Sophistication among the diverse socio religious and linguistic groups of the Indian subcontinent. The Vedangas highlighted the importance of academic excellence and physical, mental and moral discipline in upholding the Vedic dharma and most important of all, at the limbs of the Vedas, they truly served the body of the Vedic tradition by moving it forward through succeeding generations of men of superior vision and wisdom who could adapt themselves successfully to the changing circumstances without sacrificing their faith in the core values up held by the Vedas. The Vedangas provide vitality to the Vedas just as the limbs of the human body¹⁰.

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