

# *Aṣṭādaśa-vidyāsthāna*

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The hoary Indian tradition, whose origins are shrouded in a distant past, has presented all of its knowledge under eighteen heads, labelled *aṣṭādaśa-vidyāsthāna*. Even though the *vidyāsthāna*-s are sometimes presented as 4, or 14, or even 32 or 64 in number, the number 18 seems to have a special significance in the Indian tradition in general.

## **The number 18**

We have 18 Purāṇa-s and 18 Upa-purāṇa-s. We also have 18 Smṛti-s. The *Bhagavadgītā* has 18 chapters (*adhyāya*-s), and the *Mahābhārata* text has 18 sections (*parvan*-s). The *Mahābhārata* war took place for 18 days. Post-war, the Pāṇḍava-s ruled for 36 years (= 18 multiplied by 2), and at the midpoint of 18 years, the remaining leaders of the previous generation passed away.

We may also recall the few other sets of 18 such as the 18 *vivāda-pada*-s (suits in a court of law), 18 *dhānya*-s (set of grains), or 18 *upacāra*-s (services offered to the divinities as an act of worship).

## **What concerns humans**

The Indian tradition indeed presents the quintessence of human accomplishments. For, while the West has made varied accomplishments in realms where our gaze is turned outwards (in the material realm, to wit), it is only Hindus who have achieved in both realms viz. the outward and the inward.

Bereft of a benevolent outlook towards fellow-beings and towards Nature, the West has only brought a series of ruinations – of all other cultures, mostly, and of Nature itself in general. The cataclysmic climatic jeopardy that we encounter today is an example of the latter, and the forceful conversion and conquest of over a hundred countries across the globe, is an example of the former. In vivid contrast, Hindus have always sought the welfare of all, as reflected in the famed verse:

*sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu nirāmayāḥ, |*  
*sarve bhadraṇi paśyantū, mā kaścid duḥkhabhāg bhavet ||*

This should indeed be the natural concern of human beings in general: to be concerned about the well-being of all; or else, we are worse than animals, after all.

Proper education should enable us to reach this ideal.

### **What marks off man**

A famous verse in Sanskrit says that four things viz. food and sleep, and fear and intercourse, are common to all animals and humans; only one thing, however, marks humans off from animals, and that characteristic is *dharma*.

The verse runs like this (*Mahābhārata* 12.294.29):

*āhāra-nidrā-bhaya-maithunam ca*  
*sāmānyam etat paśubhir narāṇām |*  
*dharmo narāṇām adhiko viśeṣaḥ*  
*dharmeṇa hīnaḥ paśubhis samānaḥ ||*

An appreciation of the import of the verse necessarily involves a proper understanding of *dharma* – which, on the one hand, is impossible to translate into a single word of any non-Indian language, and too, on the other hand, is by itself, too fine to define.

### **What is *dharma*?**

The word *dharma* is loaded with several overlapping (and derivative) senses, which is why it is not easy to translate into European languages, for example. In a way, *dharma* is what makes things what they are. For any system to work well, the components must all function as they should; for the society to remain healthy, the various sections must act their role well: in other words, they should all hold on to their *dharma*, “own nature”.

*Dharma* is also the primary means of spiritual evolution, sometimes figuratively represented as “upward mobility” (not in the trivial materialistic sense of modern usage) - as the *Sāṅkhya-kārikā* (44) puts it: *dharmeṇa gamanam ūrdhvam*.

Spiritual evolution is not something discernible, much less measurable, by the naked senses or mere common sense. It is technical – comparable, therefore, to healthy living or legal safety, where medical and legal experts have an important say, but the niceties of which a layman may fail to appreciate, as they are complex enough to confuse him.

## ***Dharma and Vidyā***

In essence *dharma* may be described as the original nature of something, or as an act that restores the thing to its original nature – fully, or at least partially. This may be discerned from the statement of Yājñavalkya, who says that the supreme *dharma* consists in beholding one's own self by means of Yoga. Says *Yājñavalkya-smṛti* 1.8 :

*ayam tu paramo dharmo yad yogenātma-darśanam |*

The true nature of every being is immortality, and the knowledge that leads one towards the same is called *vidyā*. Says Manu:

*vidyayā'mṛtam aśnute (Manu-smṛti 12.104)*

Given the complexity of life, the codification of such knowledge as leads one to (or towards) spiritual evolution, but at the same time without any hindrance to worldly prosperity in general, is also bound to be complex and extensive. As Śrīraṅgamahāguru, a great yogin of Karnataka of our own times (1913-1969) stated succinctly, “The generation of the knowledge of *Dharma* is the goal of the *Vidyāsthāna*-s.” (*Śrīraṅgavacanāmṛta*, p.177).

The Upaniṣad-s show the division of *Vidyā* into two, viz. *Parā* and *Aparā*.

While it is only understandable to consider a knowledge of the Vedic lore as the supreme knowledge, the Upaniṣad says that the Knowers of *Brahman* declare that the knowledge of the Veda-s and the Vedāṅga-s is indeed a “lower knowledge (*Aparā*)”, whereas that which leads one to the acquisition of the Imperishable (*Akṣara*) is the “higher one (*Parā*)”. Says *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* 1.1.5: “*tatrāparā ṛgvedo yajurvedassāmavedo 'tharvavedaśśikṣā kalpo vyākaraṇam niruktaṁ chando jyotiṣamiti | atha parā yaya tadakṣaramadhigamyate |*”. As the Upaniṣad itself clarifies shortly after, the *Akṣara* is that from which the universe is generated (1.1.7: “*akṣarāt sambhavatīha viśvam*”).

## **Retention and Transmission of Knowledge**

While the indifferent laymen remain content to be ignorant, only some endeavour to possess knowledge as codified in texts; even among them, a few commit the same to memory; fewer still strive to comprehend the same. But the best of all are those who apply the knowledge to their life. So says Manu.

*Manu-smṛti* 12.103: *ajñebhyo granthinah śreṣṭhā granthibhyo dhāriṇo varāḥ | dhāribhyo jñāninaḥ śreṣṭhā jñānibhyo vyavasāyinaḥ ||*

In his commentary on *Yājñavalkya-smṛti* 3.310, Vijñāneśvara cites Dakṣa, who says knowledge is cultivated in five ways, *svīkaraṇa*, *vicāra*, *abhyasana*, *japa* and *dāna* - i.e., reception, reflection, practice, recounting and imparting.

*Taittirīya*, the ancient Upaniṣad, underscores *svādhyāya* and *pravacana* (1.11). This spiritual injunction was implemented with all seriousness, for the Upaniṣad calls this the common factor of all spiritual practices, and declares that this constitutes *tapas* in its essence.

## Ramification of knowledge

We get numerous references to the codification of knowledge and cultivation of disciplines even in very ancient times. To cite one example, *Gopatha-brāhmaṇa* refers to ten lores (2.10). Double these figures in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (7.1.2), which includes: the 4 Veda-s, the Itihāsa and the Purāṇa, *pitrya* and *daiva*, *kṣatra-vidyā* and *nakṣatra vidyā*, which we will not dwell on here.

## Fourteen Branches of knowledge

Yājñavalkya lists in his *Smṛti*, 14 disciplines. There is a reference to the fourteen even in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa* (5.21), where Kautsa, the disciple of Sage Varatantu, mastered fourteen lores from his master. Even in a 6th century CE inscription, we have reference to these fourteen.

The list furnished by Yājñavalkya runs thus: (*Yājñavalkya-smṛti* 1.3):  
*purāṇa-nyāya-mīmāṃsā-dharmaśāstrāṅga-miśritāḥ |*  
*vedā sthānāni vidyānām dharmasya ca caturdaśa ||*

Vijñāneśvara, the famous commentator on *Yājñavalkya-smṛti* explains these in his *Mitākṣarā* thus:

1. Purāṇa = such Purāṇa-s as *Brāhma*
2. Nyāya = Logic (*tarka-vidyā*)
3. Mīmāṃsā = Vedic exegesis
4. Dharmaśāstra = Such works as of Manu
- 5-10. Aṅga-s = the six limbs, commencing with *Vyākaraṇa* (grammar).
- 11-14. Veda-s = 4 Veda-s

He glosses *sthāna* as *hetu* (cause). It is these fourteen that constitute the *hetu*-s of *dharma*.

## Four More

In another text called *Hemādri*, we get four more disciplines enumerated. He adds these, thus making a list of 18 lores:

15. Āyurveda
16. Dhanurveda
17. Gāndharva-veda, and
18. Arthaśāstra.

These four actually constitute what are called the Upaveda-s.

## A Brief Overview

It remains now to take a brief look at these 18 branches. We will take up these in a sequence of our own choice.

### 1. The four Veda-s (1-4)

The word Veda literally means knowledge. Apart from being a noun, the word also occurs as a verb in numerous passages in the Vedic and classical Sanskrit literature, as in "*ya evaṃ veda*" (*passim* e.g. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 5.7.1, *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad* 17.1) meaning "[he who] knows [thus]". It is an ancient maxim in our country that the attainment of the Summum Bonum derives from *tattva-jñāna* - true knowledge or essential understanding: *tattva-jñānāt niśśreyasādhigamaḥ* (*Nyāyasūtra* 1.1).

A slightly elaborative explanation is often adduced. In his introduction to his commentary (*bhāṣya*) on *Taittirīya-saṃhitā*, Sāyaṇa, the celebrated commentator on the Vedic literature says:  
*iṣṭaprāpti-aniṣṭaparihārayor alaukikam upāyaṃ yo grantho vedayati, sa vedah.*

The text that communicates an extraordinary means for the attainment of what we [ought to] desire, and warding off of what we do not [ought not to], constitutes the Veda.

The means that Veda-s indicate is the performance of certain sacrifices. As pointed out by *Vedāṅga-jyauṭiṣa* (1.3), “*vedā hi yajñārtham abhipravṛttāḥ*”.

The performance of a *yajña* involves four roles, one corresponding to each Veda. The *Hotṛ*, the *Adhvaryu*, the *Udgāṭṛ*, and the *Brahman* are the four roles respectively, of the masters of the *Ṛgveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*. Uttering incantations, making the offerings, rendering the chants musically, and overseeing the performance of the entire sacrifice - are all aspects of the performance of any sacrifice.

Each Veda has four divisions viz *saṁhitā*, *brāhmaṇa*, *āraṇyaka*, and *upaniṣad*, wherein the first two focus on *karman* or the sacrificial act, and the last two on the *jñāna* or the intellection behind the same. The two portions respectively constitute thus the *karmakāṇḍa* and the *jñānakāṇḍa*, together completing the picture.

## 2. The Four Upaveda-s (5-8)

We may next pass on to the four Upaveda-s. Each of the Veda has its own Upaveda. *Āyurveda* is the Upaveda of *Ṛgveda* (though sometimes it is described as the Upaveda of *Atharvaveda*).

**Āyurveda** concerns itself with the *āyus* or the lifespan of beings. The origins of illness, and their proper medication constitute its chief concerns. This science deals with attunement of life to Nature, and the consequent attainment of *dhātu-sāmya* or the balance among the various *dhātu-s*, the elements that constitute our body – culminating thereby in our spiritual wellbeing.

**Dhanurveda** deals with the handling of weapons and missiles, *śāstra-s* and *astra-s*, as also the formation of *vyūha-s* or patterned arrays in the battlefield, and the varied strategies of war. Dhanurveda is considered the Upaveda of *Yajurveda*.

The Upaveda of *Sāmaveda* is **Gāndharvaveda** or music. Vocal and instrumental music aimed at conveying appropriate sentiments and set to proper beats - aligned thus to *bhāva* and *tāla* - are the theme of this Veda.

The Upaveda of *Atharvaveda* is **Arthaśāstra**. This deals with the science of Polity. Should there be no king, *mātsya-nyāya* or the Law of the Jungle will prevail. The protection of justice or *dharma* is the primary duty of the king. And vanquishing the antagonists of *dharma* is also his corollarial business.

Regulation of the norms of society by way of attention to adherence of their own roles and rules by the members of the various *varṇa-s* and *āśrama-s*, and

striving hard to set an example to the citizens by practice more than, or rather than, by precept is also the king's task. As goes the adage, *yathā rājā tathā prajāḥ*.

### 3. The Six Vedāṅga-s (9-14)

We may now take a quick look at the six limbs of the Veda-s, called Vedāṅga-s. The first of them, **Śikṣā**, deals with phonetics as required for the cultivation of the vedic texts. Its concerns are naturally accent and prosodial length, the origin of sounds and the kind of effort involved in the proper articulation of the syllables in the Vedic text.

The next is **Vyākaraṇa**, grammar, concerned with the proper expression of ideas in grammatically sound sentences - all erected on the foundation of analysis of words into its further components viz. the root (*dhātu*) and the suffix (*pratyaya*) etc., as also principles of word formation and euphony, compounding and dissolution, syntax and semantics.

**Chandas** or prosody deals with metrical compositions: the scansion of metres, the points of caesura, varieties and classification of metres and so on.

**Nirukta** deals with etymology, laying bare the uncanny ways of word formation, and penetration into the core of the sense, thus playing a major role in Vedic interpretation.

**Jyautiṣa** or the study of the luminaries deals with motions of the planets and stars, the calculation of which helps ascertain the proper moment of the performance of sacrifices.

And finally, **Kalpa**, deals with the details and procedures of the general and particular sacrifices, as also the intricate arrangements of the altars into patterns as related to the particular fruits of the sacrifices.

### 4. The Additional Four (15-18)

The last four that remain are Mīmāṃsā, Nyāyavistara, Dharmaśāstra, and Purāṇa. **Mīmāṃsā** is the science of interpretation of sentences, especially the Vedic. Vedic sentences are sometimes open to multiple interpretations, and hence a systematic effort towards the evolution of sound criteria of interpretation becomes a desideratum. This holds good in respect of sentences both of the *karma-kāṇḍa* and the *jñāna-kāṇḍa*.

**Dharmaśāstra**, also called **Smṛti**, attends to the patterns of lifestyle of the various *varṇa*-s and *āśrama*-s, issues of civil and criminal law, and the *samskāra*-s (sometimes translated as “sacraments”) conducive to spiritual evolution. **Nyāya** deals with logic, handling issues pertaining to means of valid knowledge, and more particularly tackling fallacious logic, and placing things in perspective, based on carefully derived ontological categories.

And lastly the **Purāṇa**-s, commonly rendered as “mythology”, perform the role of linking us with the Vedic past on the one hand, and serving as veritable encyclopediae of the common man on the other. Issues of cosmogony or cosmology, genealogies of kings and sanctity of holy spots, routine and special vows, and digests of every branch of knowledge figure in their fold. The Purāṇa-s, eighteen in number, are thus vast treasure-houses of the general wisdom as well as the particular attainments of Indian sages and seers, spanning thus, centuries of history yet abounding in tales of action and suspense, thereby fusing entertainment, education and ennoblement – for the lay and the elite alike.

## Conclusion

We may conclude with one general remark that pertains to all the 18 *vidyā-sthāna*-s, as made by Vijñāneśvara in his *Mitākṣarā* on *Yājñavalkya-smṛti* 1.3, where he glosses *vidyā* as *puruṣārtha-sādhana*: all the *vidyā*-s, collectively we well as individually, conduce thus to the attainment of *Puruṣārtha*-s, the ultimate ends of all human pursuit viz. *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. There can be no valid human activity that does not come under the ambit of the *Puruṣārtha*-s.

The warning of Śrīraṅgamahāguru is pertinent here: “You may all be “educated” in a sense; but that is a certification given by Westerners. Were we to ask the *ṛṣi*-s themselves about this, they would unhesitatingly rebuke us as uneducated. We indeed need to become educated in such sense as would be approved by the *ṛṣi*-s.” (*Śrīraṅgavacanāmṛta* : p.175). We have to reframe, then, the entire educational scheme so that it is reoriented towards the *Akṣara*, the very Source of Creation, that the *Muṇḍaka* speaks of.

Of the several *ṛṇa*-s (“debts”) that we owe, the clearing of this *ṛṣi-ṛṇa* stands out to be the most important one today.



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