

# FROM THE VEDAS TO THE UPANIṢADS TO THE BHAGAVAD-GĪTĀ: AN OUTLINE

## I. Vedic Sacrifice (Yajña)

- I.a. as business deal
  - I.a.1. One sacrifices in order to get this-worldly goods
  - I.a.2. One invites the gods and makes offerings to them because they have the power to grant one's wishes; therefore gods are important.
  - 1.a.3. Fire (**Agni**) is simply a devourer that destroys the sacrificial offerings and transports them to the realm of the gods.
- I.b. as world-maintaining (see **Purusa Sūkta** ["Hymn of the Man"], *Ṛg-Veda* 10.90)
  - I.b.1. Fire becomes agent of transformation rather than simple destruction.
  - I.b.2. The power of the sacrifice to create and renew the world is called **Brahman**, which is seen as a kind of **tapa** (heat).
  - 1.b.3. Because power resides in the sacrifice itself rather than in the gods, the gods decline in importance, since they too, must sacrifice.

## II. "Interiorization of the Sacrifice"

- II.a. Brahman-priest does it in his head
  - II.a.1. At first as a "quality control" measure to ensure that there will be no ritual faults that might offend the gods.
  - II.a.2. Later, he sees it as a valid sacrifice in its own right.
- II.b. practitioner of mental sacrifice has more access to the power of the sacrifice, since:
  - II.b.1. He does not depend upon patrons to provide funding, so he can do it anytime and anywhere, even constantly; and
  - II.b.2. Because he does it in his head, the mental sacrifice is ideal, free of ritual errors.
- II.c. Because of this, the word **karma** shifts from meaning "ritual action" or "religious action" to *all* action, since, if one does the sacrifice mentally all the time, then all times becomes ritual times.

## III. Developing Sense of the Individual Self and Unity of All Things in Brahman

- III.a. Student wishing to learn the mental sacrifice leaves village to study with a guru.
- III.b. Isolation from village, occupation, and family leads to greater consciousness of one's self as an individual.
- III.c. Greater sense of individuality leads to speculation about the nature of the Self (**ātman**)
- III.d. Upaniṣadic philosophy sees **ātman (Self) = Brahman**
  - III.d.1. **Brahman** is the power of creation and renewal (see I.b.2. above)
  - III.d.2. Because **Brahman** creates and sustains everything through self-division, it also pervades everything and provides their base or foundation.
  - III.d.3. Individuality and particularity among both persons and all other phenomena assume only secondary importance; the vital essence is all **Brahman**, which creates an essential unity among all things. Philosophical position of **monism**.
- III.e. Speculation about what happens after death leads to the emergence of the notion of transmigration of the **ātman**.

- III.e.1. This lead to the idea that the **ātman** is trapped in **saṃsāra** (i.e., endless cycle of lives), driven by **karma**, which, in turn, is driven by **tr̥ṣṇa** (i.e., desire).
- III.e.2. Upaniṣadic philosophy comes to see this as a problem, and the goal becomes **mokṣa** (i.e., liberation from **saṃsāra**).
- III.e.3. Because individuals liberate themselves through their own knowledge and practice [**i.e., personal liberation by self-power**], the gods become utterly inconsequential: they are also beings trapped in **saṃsāra**.

#### IV. Result: Bifurcation of Indian Religion

- IV.a. Most people continue doing Vedic sacrifice for the traditional this-worldly ends.
- IV.b. Some train the forest to do Upaniṣadic meditation (**sannyāsin**), and devalue continued practice of sacrifice.
- IV.c. Thus, there are effectively two distinct religious groups with competing visions and practices.

#### V. Bhagavad-gītā re-integrates and transforms Indian Religion

- V.a. **Karma-yoga** (“discipline of action with detachment”)
  - V.a.1. Doing one’s duty because it is one’s duty.
  - V.a.2. Offer fruits of one’s actions to one’s personal deity (e.g. **Kṛṣṇa [Krishna]**) as sacrifice. This can be practiced anywhere by anybody. There is no requirement to renounce society and family life.
  - V.a.3. This is still a religious practice undertaken by individuals, and its success depends upon their efforts and their success [**i.e., liberation by self-power**].
- V.b. **Bhakti-yoga** (“discipline of devotion”)
  - V.b.1. One god in the pantheon is seen as the supreme god
  - V.b.2. This god has the power to pull people out of **saṃsāra** in response to their devotion.
  - V.b.3. Therefore, release from **saṃsāra** no longer depends upon the individual’s efforts at self-liberation. Rather, salvation takes place in dependence upon the personal deity’s power to save [**i.e., other-power**]. Salvation comes about through **prasāda** – the god’s grace assisting devotees towards **mokṣa** (release). **Personal liberation becomes salvation by other power.**

#### VI. A New Path: Bhakti-mārga [Way of Devotion]

- VI.a. Practice of devotion to one’s personal deity (e.g., **Kṛṣṇa** or other gods).
- VI.b. Open to everyone, including women, low castes and outcastes.
- VI.c. Temples appear for the first time.
- VI.d. **Pūjā** replaces **yajña** as the devotees’ principal mode of making offerings to the gods.
- VI.e. Gods become important once again as savior-figures. Elaborate mythologies describing their salvific efficacy emerge.