



Yājñavalkya, the most historical example of the Vedic Thought

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Abstract: *The history of ancient Indian culture and civilization may be well studied through the biography of its representative personalities. Yājñavalkya is the most typical and the most historical example of the Vedic thought, the fountain-head, and perhaps the high watermark too of the entire stream of Indian thought. As the outstanding figure of a highly intellectual age, to which humanity owes some of its best literary treasures, and as the chief exponent of the saving knowledge of the Upanisads, Yājñavalkya takes his rank as the father of Hindu Philosophy. The foundation of Indian civilization were fixed roughly during the period 2000 - 1000 B.C. when its primary and formative phase is represented in the institutions and literature of the Aryans and is conveniently designated and distinguished as Vedic civilization with reference to its source in the vast body of Vedic literature.*

Key Words: Ancient India culture, Civilization, Studied through, Biography, Representative.

Vedic civilization had been the work of numerous sages and kings in whom were embodied its characteristic ideals of thought and life. But, unfortunately, most of them are mere names to us and are like mythical personages. The religious history of the Vedic period is associated with many a generation of seers such as Atri, Angiras, Priyamedha, Bhrigu, Gautam, Kaṣyapa, Parāśara, Bhṛṅgu, Vasiṣṭha, etc. who produced and handed down from sire to son, special bodies of Rigvedic hymns which became the property of their respective families. But, none of these numerous names of the leaders of thought in Vedic society can be given a historic reality for want of concrete details and evidence regarding their life and work. But, there is at least one Vedic character of whom it is possible to work out a comparative concrete account. Yājñavalkya was a representative man of his age, one of the most typical embodiments of all that was best and highest in Vedic culture and civilization. He was also one of the last Vedic ṛṣis associated with the later developments of Vedic thought and life, as expressed in the elaborate literature of the Brahmanas and Upaniṣads. Hence, Vedic culture in its most developed and typical form can be best studied in Yājñavalkya - the

acknowledged intellectual and spiritual leader of his times.

Yājñavalkya is the first reputed author of the Ṛgveda-Yajurveda. He is represented as a prominent authority on rituals in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and on philosophy in the Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. Most probably, he belonged to the eastern part of India as the books associated with him mention only the peoples settled in those parts such as Kuru-Pāṇḍalas, Kōśala-Videhas, Śviknas and Srinjayas. The same conclusion is indicated by intimacy of his connection with the two famous Kuru-Pāṇḍala scholars Uddālakā and his son Vṛetaketu, of whom the former was one of his teachers and the latter one of his fellow disciples.

The biography of Yājñavalkya is practically the cultural history of India in his times. That part of the country was then the home of Vedic culture and educationally most advanced. The intellectual life was quickened from various centers which were being visited by groups of wandering scholars to slake their thirst for learning. Soon after completion of his education, Yājñavalkya appears as one of such scholars wandering through the country in pursuit of learning. His companions in travel are said to be



vetaketu, ru?eya and S?tyay?jnin. These travelling scholars were met on the way by the learned king of the times - King Janaka of Videha, who at once raised a discussion on some abstruse topic of ritualism, at which Y?j?avalkya fared the best and was rewarded by the King.

The distinction that Y?j?avalkya achieved as a student was followed up by greater distinction won in his later life. In the Upanisads, which represent Hindu philosophy at its highest, Y?j?avalkya figures as the most distinguished philosopher whose intellectual and spiritual superiority was not challenged. Once, a Seminar was convened for the purpose by King Janak in connection with his celebration of a horse-sacrifice. Eight learned champions including the lady G?rgi, were listed against Y?j?avalkya, who defeated and silenced every one of them in arguments. The transactions of this philosophical seminar, discussions and disputations as well as the theories of solutions of some of the most intricate problems and mysteries of life are recorded with the Brihad?ranyakaUpani?ad.

The fame of Y?j?avalkya as the greatest philosopher of his age was well established and the evidences are of teaching even some of his own teachers by him. Udd?laka?runi - aY?j?avalkya's whilom teacher and a distinguished leader of thought, yielded to his whilom pupil in knowledge and argument. Once, King JanakaVideha, who had occupied the foremost position among the sages of his time and had equipped his mind with suitable doctrines, after pointing out the hidden attributes of Brahma by Y?j?avalkya in a philosophical discussion with him, had left his throne, approached Y?j?avalkya and bowing to him requested his abstruse instructions. Furthermore, at the conclusion of the instructions, the King was so much moved as to lay at the feet of Y?j?avalkya the gift of his entire kingdom with himself as his slave. (Dyssen'sPhilosophy, p. 348)

Y?j?avalkya is said to have lived the philosophy he preached. His theory as to the means

of self-realization, the quest of the Brahma, the Ultimate Truth, led him to the crowning act of his life, the renunciation of the world and adoption of the mendicant's life of homelessness.

Philosophy in India meant something to be realized and lived, and not merely to be studied. The knowledge of Brahma is not an understanding of pantheistic doctrines but a realization in all senses of personal identity with the universal spirit, in the light of which all material attachments and fetters fall away. Y?j?avalkya's teachings lived after him in the memory of generations of teachers and students succeeding one another, by a system of oral tradition to which we owe the conservation of our entire sacred literature. His teachings in some important particulars supply the basis upon which Hindu Philosophy has evolved and expanded through the ages. They may be summed up in three propositions :- i) The ?tm? is the knowing subject within us :- ii) The ?tm? as the knowing subject, can never become an object for us and is therefore itself unknowable : and iii) The ?tm? is the sole reality. There is neither second outside of him nor other distinct from him. There is not and never can be for us reality outside of the ?tm? (a universe outside of our consciousness). The knowledge of ?tm? helps us to attain Emancipation.

This doctrine of ?tm? as the sole reality is no doubt first uttered in the Rigveda. Y?j?avalkya was the first to grasp this conception of the ?tm? in its complete subjective and scientific precision, and thus ranks as one of the founders of Upanisadic Philosophy. We also owe to him another great contribution to human thought, viz., the recognition of the identity of what we usually call God and Soul - the cosmic principle of the universe and the recognition of one ?tm?, our innermost individual being as the Brahma. In this connection, it can be noted another consequence of this teaching of Y?j?avalkya, the assignment of sacrificial rites.

There are few minor details about Y?j?avalkya which may be referred to. The concluding passages of the



Brihadaranyaka Upanisada attribute to the sage the *Yajurveda*. Scholars raise the question that he actually composed the text or merely collected and compile the sacred codes of the *Vedajans*. At the time of *Panini* (c.7th Century B.C.) that code was regarded as the work of *Yajnavalkya* himself and not as a work of handed down by tradition. A Sutra of *Panini* shows that the *Satapatha Brahmana* was regarded in *Panini*'s time, as a work more modern than the other *Brahmanas*. The evidence of *Panini* and *Katyayana* as to *Yajnavalkya* being somewhat more modern is confirmed by a passage in *Grihya Sutra of Patamba* (c. 500 B.C.) in which *Vetaketu* - the contemporary and co-disciple of *Yajnavalkya* is referred to as a rare example amongst the men of later ages, of a scholar who became a *risi* by his knowledge of the Vedas. In the *Satapatha Brahmana*, *Yajnavalkya* is sometimes represented as a somewhat recalcitrant priest, to whom are attributed some new views and doctrines. He protested against the priests' new demand that the benefit of the sacrifices should accrue in part to the priest and said, "Whatever be the blessing for which the priests pray, this blessing is for the worshipper or sacrifice alone". In nutshell, we may note the then educational and cultural conditions as illustrated in the life of *Yajnavalkya*. It comes to our information that, education, beside imparted by the Gurukuls, was very largely spread and promoted in its higher stage by learned debates among scholars of different States who used to seek such opportunities of establishing their philosophical positions or scientific theories, and thereby their intellectual status and eminence, in the realm of

letters. It was also a very happy sign of the times that Learning did not fail to receive her due tribute from Wealth. Brahmins were proud of their intellectual lineage and their own acquired knowledge but some of the Kings also played a large part in the intellectual life of their State, like *Janaka* of *Mithila*, *Ajatasatru* of *Kashi*, *Pravahana Jaivali* of the *Panchal* country or *Avapati Kaikeya* whose pleasures include the company of the learned. Thus, gatherings of learned men at the courts of kings constituted another of agencies by which intellectual life of were fostered in the country. That was the period when the human mind in India was enabled to achieve some of the greatest triumphs in the pursuit of Truth.

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