

The Deciphering of Vedic Knowledge Systems over Middle Ages and Beyond

Amitava Banik

Abstract

The R̥gveda is not among the defunct relics of a past, rather it lives in the daily rituals performed by the Hindus. The true strength of the Vedic text, as both Bankim Chandra and Sri Aurobindo noted, lies in the inclusiveness, the integration of the many and different levels of experimental perception into an integral vision. Swami Vivekananda named Veda as a “knowledge series”. The sources of ancient history of India lies deeply embedded in the Vedas. In the Middle Ages, due to the political reasons, the outside flow of knowledge from India got interrupted due to disruption of oceanic travel but otherwise the flow had been quite continuous over ages. The Western world also took a lot of interest in the 18th-19th centuries to study Sanskrit texts, some of the prominent names being Max Muller and William Jones. Max Muller has written on Vedas that ‘These ancient hymns represent the lowest stratum in the growth of human mind which can be reached anywhere’. The bridge of thoughts and sights that spans the whole history of the Āryan world has its first arch in the Veda, its last in Kant’s critique of Pure Reason. In the Middle Ages we can see development of the vernacular languages in a big way. This also led to the deciphering of the Vedic thoughts and knowledge systems and played an important role in congregation and segregation of Vedic thoughts. This paper intends to draw references to the literature of the Middle Ages and study how the Vedic thoughts and knowledge systems got deciphered through them.

Full Paper

The vernacular languages formed an integral part of the development of the Vedic philosophy and carrying forward of the Sanskrit texts and languages in the days to come. The history of the Sanskrit literatures’ dates back to about 2500 years. The development of several vernacular languages started around 10th century. Sanskrit is a very old language; religion is only one of the aspects of the language through which the language was spread. This should also be remembered that Sanskrit is not merely a language for deciphering Hinduism, rather it is a very old language and even Jainism and Buddhism has enriched this language over the ages. Often there is misconception that Sanskrit is the language of Vedas, Purānas, etc, that is, it is a means of spread of Hinduism, rather there are many Sanskrit texts on arts, science, etc.

I. Sanskrit Literature on Arts and Sciences at Middle Ages

The literature on Arts and Sciences are divided into the several groups as below:

1. **Alchemy** – This is the science related to extraction of gold by the use of element “mercury”. But in addition to science this had relation to mantras and rituals as well to a large extent. Madhavacharya in the 14th century mentioned about three texts which were written in 10th-11th centuries – ‘Raseshvar Siddhānta’, ‘Rashriday’, ‘Rasārṇava’, etc.
2. **Chemistry** – The development of this science was largely related to the field of medical sciences where the uses of gold, mercury, etc. and their extraction involved processes like distillation, fermentation, etc. These literatures had references to Portugese techniques also. Some of the important literatures included – ‘Rasarāja-Mrigaṅka’ (11th century) by Bhojrāj, ‘Rasendra Chuḍāmaṇi’ (12-13th century) by Somdeva, ‘Rasarājlakshmi’ (14th century) by

Bishnudeva, etc. ‘Rasapradīpa’ written in the 15th century has reference to use of mineral acids.

3. **Metallurgy** - The evidence of the development of the science of metallurgy can be found in the art items made of steel, ornaments and coins.
4. **Liquor** – In arthosastro, there is mention of about six types of liquor while in Caraka, there were 84 kinds of liquor. Also, there is mention of strong and mild liquor in ‘Madirarnāba’ (14th century).
5. **Āyurveda** (Medical Sciences) -The two main books on Āyurveda were ‘Caraka-Saṁhitā’ and ‘Suśruta-Saṁhitā’ and Vāgabhatta’s ‘Aṣṭāṅga-Hridaya’ and ‘Aṣṭāṅga-Saṅgraha’. The ‘Caraka-Saṁhitā’ was written by Chakrapani Datta and his guru Naradatta in 11th century. The other important literature written during the Middle Ages were ‘Caraka-tattva-dīpikā’ written by Sivadāsa. The Caraka text by Chakrapani is named ‘Bhanumati’. In 12th century Arundatta wrote text on Suśruta. His text on Aṣṭāṅga-Hridaya is named ‘Sarvāṅgasundara’. In his book, ‘History of Hindu Medicine’, Dr Girindranath Mukherjee has written that the Indian medicine spread across branches like Surgery, Therapeutics, Demonology, Pediatrics, Toxicology, Elixirs, Aphrodisiacs, Anatomy, Physiology, Embryology and Hygiene. There was emphasis on *Vāyu*, *Pitta*, *Kapha* and the testing of nerves as the basis of identification of disease. In the Middle Ages, the only book on the subject is ‘Saṁhitāpadmīni’ by Bhāskarbhatta. The books on pathology include ‘Rogbinishchay’ or ‘Madhavanidhāna’. In 13th century Bijoy Rakshit wrote a note on this named ‘Byakhamadhukosha’. Another note named ‘Cikitsā Saṅgraha’ was also written. In 11th century, Chakrapani Datta wrote a book named ‘Dravyaguṇa-Saṅgraha’ on Materia Medica or medicinal ingredients, plants, substances and products.
There are about 100 texts on Therapeutics, important among them being Chakrapani Datta’s ‘Cikitsāsaṅgraha’ written in the 11th century. In the 16th century, Bhabmisra wrote ‘Bhavaprakāsha’ and in the 17th century, Lolimbaraj wrote ‘Baidyajīvana’. There are not many books on Pediatrics. Important books on the subject are ‘Kumārtaṅtra’ and ‘Bālacikitsā’ written in the last part of Middle Ages.
The book by Gangaram Das named ‘Sorirnischoyadhikar’ is a book on Hygiene. There are also several books on Diets, the science of pulse, medical dictionaries, veterinary science, ornithology, zoology, etc
6. **Cosmetic and Aromatics** – The use of luxury items, scents and aromas are there since very old times. In the 13th century, Gangadhar wrote ‘Gandhasāra’, in the 14th century, Nityanath wrote ‘Rasaratnākara’.
7. **Science of gems** – This is a very old knowledge system. Mallinath (14th century) in his book ‘Ratnashāstra’ wrote about gems like “Nīla”. In the 11th century text ‘Juktikalpataru’ by Bhoja and texts like ‘Ratnasaṅgra’, ‘Laghuratneparikshā’, ‘Manimāhātmya’, etc, there are writings on gems and precious stones.
8. **Cookery or Culinary art** – Nalarāja and Bhimsena are known to be the earliest initiator of this field of learning. Some of important books are ‘Pākārṇava’ written in the 17th century. In the 11th century, Chalukaraj Someshwar wrote ‘Avilositartho-chintamaṇi’ which is a book of knowledge. It contains details of preparation of food like Idli, Doshā, vegetables as well as meat, fish, crabs, pāpad, pulao, etc
9. **Science of robbery** – This is a very ancient knowledge series. This talks about the various ways and techniques for carrying out theft and robbery. In the middle age, there is only one book on the subject – ‘Dhanmukha-kalpa’. The other important book is ‘Dharmachaurja Rasāyana’.
10. **Astronomy** - In this the ‘Āryabhaṭṭīya’ by Āryabhaṭṭa in the 5th century, ‘Aryasiddhānta’ and Brahmagupta’s ‘Khaṇḍankhādyā’ are important texts. In the 11th century, ‘Rājmrīgāṅka’ by Bhoj and ‘Siddhānta-shiromaṇi’ by Bhaskarāchārya (12th century) are important texts.

11. **Mathematics** – This is a very old practiced knowledge system in India. The ‘Ganitasāra-Saṅgraha’ by Mahavirāchārya (12th century), ‘Trisati’ by Sridhar (11th century) where there are studies on quadratic equations, ‘Ganita-Churāmaṇi’ by Pandit Srinivasa in 12th century, ‘Ganita-Kaumodī’ and ‘Bījagaṇita-vatangsha’ by Narayan Pandit (14th century) are important texts.
12. **Astrology** – The important texts on astrology include ‘Varāhamihira’s Brihat-Saṁhitā’ and ‘Horāshāstra’ written by Utpal in 10th century, ‘Sūryasiddhānta’ by Ranganath, ‘Vidyāmadhaviya’ (14th century) and Tajik and Prashnaganana by Nilkantha (16th century). There were also texts on war astrology like ‘Jogjatra’, ‘Kutsthiya’ and ‘Yudhya Jayarnab’.
13. **Prognostication**: Geomancy, Cubomancy, Dream, etc.– The ‘Advaitasagar’ by Ballalsen (12th century), ‘Svapnachintāmaṇi’ by Jagadheb are important texts.
14. **Physiomy and Palmistry** – There are a lot of texts written in the Middle Ages, ‘Sāmudrika-Chintāmaṇi’, ‘Sāmudrika-Kashtavaran’, ‘Sāmudrikasāra’ by Madhav Srigrām Kar and ‘Samudratilak’ by Durlavraj (12th century) are very important.
15. **Geography** – Some authentic texts on geography include ‘Sarvadesha-vrittānta’ by Mahesh Thakur (16th century), ‘Deshāvali Vivbriti’ by Jaganmohan in the 17th century. There is mention of about 56 states of erstwhile Bharat.
16. **Agriculture and Horticulture** - The text named ‘Vrikshāyurveda’ by Sureshwar in the 12th century is an important book on this subject written in the medieval times.
17. **Science of warfare** – The books ‘Louharnab’ and ‘Louho-pradīpa’ by Batsya is an important book on this subject. The book ‘Narapatijaycharya’ by Narahari (12th century) and ‘Yuktikalaotoru’ by Bhoj in 11th century are important texts on the subject.
18. **Sports and Games** – The ‘Sainikashāstra’ by Rudradev (16th century) on hunting birds, ‘Satranjkautūhalam’ on chess are important books on the subject.
19. **Dramatology, Histrionics, Music and Dance** – ‘Nātyashāstra’ is the most important text on this subject. Abhinavgupta’s ‘Abhinavabhāratī’ (10-11th century), ‘Bharataṭīka’ by Maithil Nanadev, ‘Dasarūpaka’ by Dhanañjaya, ‘Srīngarprakāsha’ by Bhoj, ‘Natakparibhasa’ by Srīngabhupal (13th century), ‘Sāhityadarpaṇa’ by Bishwanath, ‘Basantarajio’ by Kūmargiri (14th century), ‘Saṅgīta-Damodar’ by Suvankar (15th century), ‘Mandāramandachampā’ by Krishnakabīr (16th century), ‘Nātyapradīpa’ by Sundar Misra (17th century) are some important texts.
20. **Art and Architecture** – There are books on town planning, sculpture, painting, iconography. The important books on the subject include ‘Yuktikalpataru’ and ‘Samrakhan-Sūtradhāra’ by Bhojraj written in the 11th century. In the ‘Samrakhan-Sūtradhāra’, there is discussion on town planning. The other important books include ‘Prasādamañjari’ and ‘Vāstumañjari’ written by Srinath (15th century), Srikumar’s ‘Silparatna’ (16th century).
21. **Mechanical Devices** – The learning of this period included those on Hydraulics, Hydrodynamics, etc. In the ‘Samarāṅgaṇa-Sūtradhāra’, there is mention of robots. In the 17th century, Devisinghamahipati created a weight lifting device.
22. **Literature** – The important literary materials produced during this period include epics, satires, sequels, anthology, stray verses and floating verses, hymnody, prose, poetries, dramas, monologues, one act plays, dramatic poems, historical writings, genealogical accounts, poetics, metrics, grammar, lexicons, philosophy, books on justice, etc. The important pieces include ‘Gītāgovinda’ by Jayadeva, (12th century), Bhānudatta’s ‘Gītāgurīsha’ (15th century).

II. Bengal Vaishnavism and Sri Chaitanya

An important development in the sphere of philosophical, cultural, religious and literary thoughts was through the spread of Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism as an attitude of the human mind is very old. Sri Chaitanya (1486 – 1533), the godman of Nadiya, in his own exposition of the contents of his faith, given

to the leading intellectuals of the age and to those who were intimate with him, traced the religion to the Vedas, Upanishads and other *Shrutis*. The pious poet-philosophers of Vrindavan, Rupa, Sanatana and Jiva, in particular, with their massive scholarship and unbounded faith, the Bengali Vedantin, Madhusudan Sarasvati of *Advaita-siddhi* fame, Valadeva Vidyabhusan, the author of the Vaisnavite commentary Govinda – Bhāṣya on Vedānta, developed the hints of Sri-Chaitanya into a regular system of philosophy, supported by a sound metaphysics, a subtle psychology of spiritual devotion, based on scientific analysis and classification of spiritual emotions and a new orientation of poetics by the transfiguration of the erotic emotion into the spiritual sentiment. Rupa Gosvāmī, complimented as the systematiser of what was intended by Sri Chaitanya, with whom his scholarly elder brother Sanatan and his talented nephew Jiva collaborated. The neo-Vaishnavism was like a three streamed Ganges flowing out in three outlets – the spiritual, the literary and the musical, running concurrent in the writings, in Sanskrit, by the Vrindavan Gosvamis, in the ‘Padāvali’ literature in Bengali and the ‘Brajabuli’ and in the ‘Kirtana’ music in all the sweet varieties of its forms.

Vaishnavism is one of the most absorbing themes of the history of Bengal, its history of literature, religion and music as well as the social and political history. The Vaishnavism faith of Chaitanya had its root deep – laid in the spiritual soil of the country from unknown times. The ‘Madhurā’ of the Vaishnava devotee and of Vaishnava poetics is to be traced to the Upanishadic conception of Madhu, Rasa and Ānanda, all synonymous Vedic appellations of the supreme reality. A Vaishnava has chalked out a spiritual career of his own wherein *matsevanam*, loving service rendered to Krishna is the highest goal. The corner-stone of the science of faith and love was the Bhāgavata, the Gītā and earlier *Shrutis*. Against the background of the life and realizations of Sri Chaitanya, the Bengali Vaishnava perfected this science of love. It was codified in the philosophical works of Vrindavan-Goswami’s, based on the Bhāgavata.

‘Krishnaism’ is an appropriate term for Bengal Vaishnavism. Of the four propounders of pre-Chaitanya Vaishnavism, Ramanuja and Madhava do not bring in Rādhā at any stage of Love Divine. Both Nimvarka and Vallabha, however, believe in Rādhā, as the subjective concrete in divine love, Krishna being the supreme object of devotion. Bengal Vaishnavism clings to Rādhā as the last word on love and devotion. She is the pivot on which the faith hinges. Sri Chaitanya is best understood, when interpreted in the light of the emotion which is Rādhā’s (*Rādhā-bhāva*).

Bhakti is regarded as the best of the ways and means for the attainment of the highest bliss. According to Shāṅḍilya-Sūtra, it is the highest attachment to God. It is love for and wooing of the great indeterminate. It is the most concentrated dedication of the senses in the service of the lord of the senses. The word ‘*Bhakti*’ is derived from the root ‘*Bhaj*’ which means ‘wooing’. The Gītā revolutionizes the idea of holding out the assurance of God’s wooing of man in exactly the same style of man’s wooing of God.

The Vaishnavite nomenclature of the tripartite energy is ‘*Antaraṅga*’ (intimate and immutable energy which is the Lord’s own or *Svarup-Shakti*), ‘*Vahiraṅga*’ (or *Māyāshakti* is composed of the insensate world) and ‘*Tatastha*’ (or *Jīva-shakti* is above the latter and is essentially pure). So, the metaphysical scheme of God, man and nature is covered by the Vaishnavite conception of three *Shaktis*. The ‘Mahābhāva’ in Rādhā ripens into ‘*Madana*’, the love potential in its finality and infinitude, which is in Rādhā, the eternal and with no second. There have been various approaches to the conception - poetic, humanistic, philosophical or speculative, mystical, symbolic and so on. Above all, there is the standpoint of the devotee, the Bengal Vaishnava who discovered Sri Rādhā in Sri Chaitanya. Between the compiler of ‘*Gāthā-Saptashatī*’ of 1st-2nd centuries AD and Jayadeva Gosvāmī, separated by a millennium, Rādhā emerged from profane poetry and that the extraordinary emotions of the once intellectual Sri Chaitanya divinized her, whereupon his learned following developed her into a regular philosophy. Bengal Vaishnavism is imperfect without an understanding of Jayadeva’s poetry. ‘*Gīta-Govinda*’ was both Gīta and Govinda, so it was a never-failing source of spiritual inspiration to Sri Chaitanya and Vaishnavas of his time and prior to them, to the Maithil poet Vidyāpati, Chandidas, Maladhar Basu and to numerous commentators all over India, the compilers of the ‘*Grantha- Saheb*’ sharing the same attitude to Jayadeva.

In a sense, Jayadeva, Chandīdas and Vidyāpati made the ‘Gaura-candrikā’ even before Gaurachandra appeared on the horizon.

Chaitanyism was not only a spiritual movement but also a mighty social force. Sri Chaitanya’s life on earth spread over 47 years, being equally divided between the life of a house holder and scholar at Navadvip (1486-1510) and that of an ascetic who settled for the most part in Puri (1510-1533) with about six years spent in the tour of Deccan and pilgrimage to various places in North and West India, closely following renunciation. The closing chapters of his life on earth was almost one continuous course of communion with God and of ecstatic trances, spent in company with the select few at the ‘Gambhira cave-house’ in the outskirts of Puri.

The ‘*Kīrtana*-music’, which was a child of Sri-Chaitanya grew from strength to strength, in its various forms of ‘*Nāma-Sankīrtana*’, ‘*Rasa-kīrtana*’, ‘*Nagar-sankīrtana*’ or congregational prayer music and so on. The inner and more intimate circle of Sri Chaitanya’s companions included Advaitācarya, Nityānanda, Chandrasekhar Ācharya, Srivasa (the husband of his mother’s sister), his devoted brother’s Pundarik Vidyānidhi, Gadadhar and three poet-musician brothers – Vasudeva, Madhava and Govinda Ghosa. They all had the highest regard for him and Sri Chaitanya gave them all a new sense of values. But grim orthodoxy and insensible conservatism which constituted itself into some sort of spiritual hegemony formed a strong opposition of the neo-revivalists of *Nyaya*, *shruti* and *tantra*. Visvambhar – Nimai, the redoubtable scholar and dialectician was born into a new man of love, eschewed the path of conflict and controversy and switched over to the ascetic order at Katwa in 1510 AD.

The two important biographical works in Bengali on Sri Chaitanya’s life are Chaitanya Caritāmrita by Krishnadas Kaviraj and Chaitanya-Bhāgavata by Vrindavana Das. Sri Chaitanya was one serious, sincere and universally accepted Vaishnava whose philosophy, he himself lived. His love for men was as real and profound as his love for Krishna. By this great love, he inspired in people an equally great love for him.

Sri Chaitanya is no myth. His achievements constitute history, having gone into the very texture of Bengal’s culture and the fine susceptibility of the Bengal’s nature. Sri Chaitanya left a legacy of love which solved the problems of life in those days. It is often said that Bengal Vaishnavism tradition of Navadvip was upheld and handed down by Sri Chaitanya and his associates (*antaraṅga*) and the Vrindāvana traditions mainly by devoted and erudite group of six Gosvāmīs. But actually, such distinction cannot be made. It was a time when the administration of the country shortly changed hands to that of the Muhammadan conquerors. The onslaught made itself felt in the social and religious spheres of life. He rebuilt the celestial region of Mathurā-Vrindāvana and restored it to its lost glory. Geographically and politically separated. Orissa became culturally one with Bengal. Varanasi, Prayag, Mithilā, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Deccan came closer to Bengal. The difference of languages did not come in the way of a greater Bengal whose poetic medium became the beautiful and mellifluous literary ‘Brajabuli’, which was a spontaneous literary growth in this vast culturally unified area, which is nowhere else to be found in the history of languages.

In the days of political confrontation between Hindu king of Orissa and the muslim kings of Gauda, the vast Vaisnava literature in Bengali, Brajabuli, Oriya and Sanskrit, the *Kīrtana* music, in all its branches and the philosophical writings of the Gosvāmīs, meant for an all-India spiritual audience, made much headway. The history of muslim rule in this part of the country made it possible for Chaitanyism to unfold its cultural possibilities. The people who rallied round this wonderful man belonged to all ranks and strata of society which included the muslim rulers of the country and the sons of the soil whom they ruled, professing a different religion, the scholar and dialectician, as well as the ignorant masses, the purse – proud aristocrat, as well as the impecunious commoner, the virtuous as well as the most sinning among men.

Conclusion

The medieval times saw the spread of the Vedic philosophy, development of knowledge systems. In the Middle Ages. At the same time, the coming of muslim rulers led to a cross cultural interaction. In the midst of all these in the 15th-16 centuries there was a wave of Vaishnavism that led to a kind of renaissance, rise of Chaitanya greatly influenced the way of life in Bengal in the days to come and greatly impacted the Hindu religion. But all these developments took place in the periphery of Vaishnavism. Thus, the middle age might be seen as a missed opportunity in some sense, but it also gave shape to the Vedāntic and Upanishadic traditions that impacted the Hindu way of life in the days to come.

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