

SCRIPTURES AND THEIR PURPOSE (*)

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In an age when literature of every kind has grown enormously and is being read throughout the world, the part books play in the formulation of man's ideas and ideals is not difficult of comprehension. Yet when it comes to the question of religious books there has been a sort of hesitation and an injudicious assessment of their value among the intelligentsia, specially during the last few centuries. Perhaps, hesitation is reasonable, even doubting is permissible but outright condemnation of all that is religious as superstition and sophism is something that is perplexing; it shows an attitude of intolerance and self-righteousness. A position that is not enviable. For are these not the very modes of thinking they impute — we do not know with what measure of justification — to the religious man? But these things apart, it should be obvious to anyone now that religion, in spite of all the forces working against it, has come to stay. And true religion can never be annihilated however much other forces may try. For religion is Truth and Truth can never be destroyed. Religion as Swamiji has often stated is not in mere dogmas or creeds but in God-realization, in the realization of the Spirit. And as Sri Ramakrishna posited from his own experience, God is but one by whatever name He may be called and by whatever way He may be approached.

Relation between Scriptures and Religion

There is a very intimate relationship between the scriptures and religion. For the scriptures are nothing but the records of the intuitive experiences of the sages. They have been verified in the lives of saints and prophets and they are verifiable even today by those who earnestly and intently seek to find Truth. They are as the travel guides in the chartless ocean of spirituality. They are the compass, the sextant, the rudder, the sounding line, the barometer and the charts of an aspirant's ship in the religious sea. That is why some of the religions which had no scriptures, no books, quickly dwindled out of sight. When there is no authentic document people are likely to interpret and twist the utterances according to the individuals' tastes and pass them off as real stuff so that there remains nothing in them of the original, in content. It becomes a mass of superstition, fabulous, with the grain of truth miserably lost in the mudheap as it were. Within a short time everything gets coloured by interests and tendencies of individuals. This happens sometimes even in the case of the written sayings, what then to speak of those which were

handed down by word of mouth. Sri Krishna says in the Gita, 'This eternal yoga, O Arjuna, I taught to Vivaswan and Vivaswan taught it to Manu. Manu taught it to Ikshvaku. Thus traditionally handed down it was known among the Rajarshis. But by the passage of time this yoga was lost in this world.'¹ It is to counteract this tendency to corruption and loss that the scriptures are necessary.

A doubt may now be raised whether or not the Vedas, which were presumed to have been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, had undergone such mutation. We have several reasons to believe it has not, chief of them being the reverence with which they were held. It made them sacrosanct. Tampering with them was considered blasphemous. Besides, these truths were tested by later saints and sages. If therefore anyone says to the Hindu that what is told in any particular scripture alone is correct and that it is beyond any man's capacity to verify those teachings, the Hindu forthwith gives up that man. For he was taught differently. He was told that given the urge, intensity, time and attention needed for realization, the teachings could be verified and that every one of us could grow into a Rishi and sense those teachings as the Rishis of old did. To become a Rishi is the only way to liberation says Swamiji and he adds, until one becomes a Rishi one has not become religious. So we see that irrespective of the age in which these eternal truths were discovered, they must be open to probation, testing in every other age, nay at all times.

The Hindu Scriptures

Now among the scriptures of the Hindus the Vedas occupy a supreme position. They are variously called as Sabda, Sruti etc. That which was first uttered was Sabda (the word or the sound). That which was first heard by sages in the depths of meditation, and in the profundity of their being was Sruti. There is another class of books, which are called Smrtis — that which was remembered or the traditional law. These latter were composed later to govern society for a particular period. The latter have changed as changes in society occurred. The former contain the eternal truths and these truths never change. That is why the Vedas are said to be without beginning or end. One beauty of the Vedas is that you find in them all the ideas of religion — beginning from God in the far beyond, God as omnipresent and omniscient upto the unity between the creature and the Creator. This has, of course, led to the formulation of several sects, each contending what is to its liking in the Vedas as the important part, and others as secondary. But as Swamiji points out, 'Each is but a different stage in the journey, the aim of which is the perfect conception of the Vedas.' The Rishis of the Vedas were fearless, so they did not do away with the lower ideas as they came into possession of the higher revelations. They preserved these lower truths so that others who were to come after them may not be bewildered at the heights to which

they had reached, but come up by stages. Most of the people in the world, at any given time, will be like babies as far as spirituality is concerned. They require to be taken step by step. Hence even at the risk of being accused of confusing the issue, they let these lower truths be. These several statements of the Vedas may appear to the lay man as perplexing but the sages were sure that others like them would be born to show a way out of this maze of ideas. Perhaps in their own times they had no difficulty in dispelling the doubts and confusion that might have arisen in the minds of their contemporaries. Although the scriptures describe a variety of things they chiefly speak of one thing — of God and of the means to attain Him. May be there are some seemingly conflicting ideas about Him. But they are not sustained when put under the microscopic test of profound intuition. This in brief is the content of the scriptures.

How to reconcile the so-called contradictions in the Vedas

The apparent contradictions in the Vedas have to some extent puzzled seekers. This doubting, this feeling at sea, is not a new phenomenon. We meet with this type of doubt in the Upanisads too. When Svetaketu was asked by his father, 'Have you known that One by which everything else is known,' he was genuinely perturbed. He had never heard of such a thing before. He protests and asks to be satisfied. However, the father leads him slowly, by examples and experimentations, to the highest Truth. To know about the Highest even intellectually is a difficult task. For there we find all contradictions meeting. Let us take an instance from the discussion between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi. Yajnavalkya while explaining how the individual jiva, after shedding its *upadhis*, incrustations, gets merged in Brahman, like the lump of salt thrown into the water and cannot be separated from It, says: 'After attaining oneness, my dear, there is no more consciousness.'² This perplexes Maitreyi. She seems to think, 'How can this be? He has first said that Brahman is Pure Intelligence. Now he says after attaining oneness there is no more consciousness.'³ Why does he talk in this conflicting language?' She asks Yajnavalkya, 'Sir, just here you have thrown me into confusion by saying that after attaining oneness the self has no more consciousness.' Yajnavalkya then expounds to her that the self that had attained oneness with Brahman loses the 'particular consciousness' superimposed on the self due to its identifying itself with the body, mind and the like and not the Cosmic Consciousness. And when thus explained only Maitreyi's doubt was cleared.

A similar doubt is being raised by Arjuna in a different context. When Sri Krishna urged Arjuna to fight the battle of Kurukshetra in support of the righteous cause, and simultaneously talked highly of renunciation, the latter got confounded. Arjuna asked: 'By apparently contradictory words, it seems as if you are confusing my understanding.

Please tell me that one path by which I can attain the good.’⁴ Sri Krishna in reply says that there are two paths and these are for two different types of people. He further adds that one cannot practise renunciation unless one had rid oneself of all desires. So that was not the path for him. Thus, we see that every great teacher had had to speak not only for one class of people but several, and therefore he had to say things which suited those particular types of persons. If these teachings are taken together, without the idea of the context in which they were uttered, it is natural that they appear to be opposing each other in content.

There is a beautiful story in the Upanisads which rightly illustrates this point. It shows how the same syllable conveys different meanings to diverse types of people: Once the three classes of sons of Prajapati — the gods, men and Asuras — lived a life of continence with Prajapati. After sometime the gods requested Prajapati to instruct them. Prajapati uttered the syllable “Da” and asked whether they had understood what he meant. They replied they had; that Prajapati was asking them to control themselves. After some time the men too having finished their period of probation begged to be instructed. To them also Prajapati said the word “Da” and asked whether they had understood. They too said, ‘Yes, you ask us to give.’ Lastly came the Asuras and to them too Prajapati repeated the same syllable “Da” and asked what they understood by it. The Asuras replied, ‘You ask us to be kind.’ To all of them Prajapati had said that they had rightly understood Him.⁵ Does it not sound incoherent? No, a little explanation will prove it. In Sanskrit the words, control, give and be kind begin with the letter “da” viz. *damyata*, *datta*, and *dayadhwam*. Now the devas or the gods were too much given to enjoyment, men to hoarding and the Asuras to killing. By living a life of celibacy with Prajapati all these three had understood their own particular defects and when therefore Prajapati uttered the syllable “da” they knew what he wanted of them. The gods were to abstain from enjoyment, men were to give and the Asuras were enjoined to be kind and all this was conveyed by the utterance of that single syllable “da”. Does this not show that the scriptures serve the purpose of all genuine seekers?

Similarly in the Vedas, which are meant for all, we find apparently contradictory ideas but suiting men of different tendencies. These contrary views are actually only visions of the same Reality from different angles, from varied heights. So, an earnest seeker has only to find out which path and which ideal appeal to his nature, suit his temperament most. But he has to see unity in the diversity. For diversity makes for creation and unity goes back to the source, makes for our own abode. Scriptures, therefore, do not confuse us but tell us everything and we get bewildered because we have not the acumen to grasp their import.

Purpose of the Scriptures

Having dealt with the content of the scriptures, it is not difficult to

presume what their intention is. It has already been explained that they do not intend to confuse man. This should be always remembered. Secondly, their intention is to guide mankind on the path of spirituality, to help man upward from whatever level of development he is. Like the scientist who does research with the data already in his possession, the aspirant with the help of the scriptures engages in research in the spiritual field. One can verify one's experience — the results of one's research in the laboratory of the spirit — with the conclusions already arrived at in the scriptures. They are like reference books, where we can compare notes. If one's experiences are not in compliance with the eternal truths one has missed one's way somewhere. But this does not happen when one is under the guidance of a competent teacher.

However, there is every chance of the principles of the scriptures being misinterpreted and misused if they fall into wrong hands. We shall cite an instance here to show how the theory of Karma was tortuously treated by glib talkers: When Swamiji was staying at Calcutta in 1897, a preacher belonging to a society for the protection of cows had an interview with him. When asked about the object of the society, the preacher said that it was to protect the old, decrepit and diseased cows from the slaughter house and provide infirmaries for them. Swamiji while commending their work asked the preacher what help his society — which had enough resources — had rendered to the people in central India, where due to famine nine lakhs of people had died. The preacher's non-chalant reply was that the famine had broken out as a result of men's Karma, their sins.

Can perversion of the principles go any further? Swamiji who was furious with indignation at such indifference of the preacher towards humanity, suppressing his feelings said that he had not the least sympathy with associations which did not feel for men even while they were dying of starvation. Let us beware of such misguided people who make a travesty of truth.

Extent of the usefulness of the Scriptures

As already stated the scriptures can help you, guide you but they cannot take you to the goal. Records of other peoples' realization cannot make you realize. You can tread their path, feel their way but you have to struggle for yourself to reach the goal. All effort is yours. The books cannot ferry you across the ocean of life. No one can do that. Even the teacher can only guide you. Sri Sankara referring to mere scriptural knowledge, in an exquisite couplet in Sanskrit, says: 'If the highest Truth is not known all study of the scriptures is in vain. When, however, the highest Truth is known then also the study of scriptures is futile'⁶. Does he then discourage Shastric studies? No one can make this allegation against Sankara. For we meet in his commentaries on the Upanisads very often, the statement, 'Atman is to be pursued vigorously through the

teachings of the Shastras and the Guru.’ What he purports to convey to us is that if the knowledge of the scriptures is not utilized, not put into practice, then that knowledge is acquired in vain. Again, once the Highest is realized all further study of scriptures is useless, for all of them are only as a means to attain the Highest, and not for their own sake. Once the purpose — the attainment of God — is fulfilled there remains nothing more to be gained.

Sri Ramakrishna deprecating too much of studies said, ‘Suppose you have received a letter from your home asking you to buy certain things. And suppose you have mislaid it. If the contents of the letter are known to you, will you worry about the letter or try to collect the things stated therein?’ Another time he exhorted one of his young disciples: ‘What is there in the Vedanta that you study it so much. Is it not that “Brahman alone is real and all else illusory”? Work for its realization.’

Swamiji remarks in one place, ‘Books cannot teach God, but they can destroy ignorance; their action is negative.’ Even the Vedas cannot show you God, cannot make you realize your true self. ‘By what can you know the knower,’⁷ say the Upanisads. Your essential being is the self-luminous consciousness. What is required is to dispel the ignorance that has cloaked it. Remove the covering and you see the light. If we are in a dark room we will have only to throw open the doors and windows to see the sun. We do not require another light to see the sun. He is self-luminous. When he rises we see him. Not only can we see him but we can also dispense with all other lights which we might have lighted to see other objects inside or outside our dwellings. And this Atman, or Brahman, which is the essence of every creature, nay everything that is in the universe, is the source of all light, even of the sun, moon, stars and all, say the Upanisads.⁸

Conclusion

Too much study of scriptures makes man vain-glorious. It leads him away from the goal. The goal of life is God-realization. All scriptures tell us that God alone is real and all other things are transient. They also show us the way to God. What we have to do after knowing the purpose of the scriptures is to work for its realization. Or as Sri Ramakrishna says, what is required is to dive deep down into ourselves and make our life fruitful by realization of our true nature, like the mythical pearl-oyster which after collecting the rain drop, when the star Svati is in the ascendant, dives down to the bottom of the sea to produce the beautiful pearl.

¹ Bhagavad Gita IV.1.2.

² Br. Up. II.iv.12.

³ op.cit. 13

⁴ Bhagavad Gita III.2.

⁵ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, V.ii.1-3.

⁶ Vivekachudamani, 59.

⁷ Br.Up. II.iv.14.

⁸ Katha Up. V.15.