

Summary Article: **Sanskrit literature**

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literary works written in Sanskrit constituting the main body of the classical literature of India.

Introduction

The literature is divided into two main periods—the Vedic (c.1500–c.200 B.C.), when the Vedic form of Sanskrit generally prevailed, and the Sanskrit (c.200 B.C.–c.A.D. 1100), when classical Sanskrit (a development of Vedic) predominated. Sanskrit had, however, become the standard language of the court by 400 B.C., and its early literature overlapped the Vedic. The word *Sanskrit* means “perfected,” and the language was adopted as an improvement of the Vedic.

The Vedic Period

The first part of the Vedic period (c.1500–c.800 B.C.), that of the Veda, was a poetic and creative age, but afterward (c.800–c.500 B.C.) the priestly class transferred its energies to sacrificial ceremonial. They produced the *Brahmanas*, prose commentaries, in a later form of Vedic, explaining the relations of the Vedas (which had become sacred texts) to the ceremonials of the Vedic religion. In time the *Brahmanas*, like the Vedas, came to be considered *sruti* [Skt.,=hearing, i.e., revealed].

All later works, in contrast, are called *smriti* [Skt.,=memory or tradition] and are considered to be derived from the ancient sages. The later portions of the *Brahmanas* are theosophical treatises; since they were meant to be studied in the solitude of the forest, they are called *Aranyakas* [forest books]. The final parts of the *Aranyakas* are the philosophical *Upanishads* [secret doctrine] (see Vedanta). In language structure the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* approach classical Sanskrit.

The *Sutras* [Skt.,=thread or clue] were written in the third and final stage (c.500–c.200 B.C.) of the Vedic period. They are treatises dealing with Vedic ritual and customary law. They were written to fulfill the need for a short survey in mnemonic, aphoristic form of the past literature, which by this time had assumed massive proportions. There are two forms of *sutra*; the *Srauta Sutras*, based on *sruti*, which developed the ritualistic side, and the *Grihya Sutras*, based on *smriti*. Those *Grihya Sutras* dealing with social and legal usage are the *Dharma Sutras*, the oldest source of Indian law (see Manu).

The body of works composed in the *Sutra* style was divided into six *Vedangas* [members of the Veda]—*Siksha* [phonetics], *Chhandas* [meter], *Vyakarana* [grammar], *Nirukta* [etymology], *Kalpa* [religious practice], and *Jyotisha* [astronomy]. A *sutra* that is particularly well known in the West is the *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana concerning the art and practice of love. Linguistic standards were stereotyped in the middle of the *sutra* period by the grammar of Panini (c.350 B.C.), regarded as the starting point of the Sanskrit period.

The Sanskrit Period

Nearly all Sanskrit literature, except that dealing with grammar and philosophy, is in verse. The first period (c.500–c.50 B.C.) of the Sanskrit age is one of epics. They are divided into two main groupings—the natural epics, i.e., those derived from old stories, and those which come from artificial epics called *kavya*. The oldest and most representative of the natural school is the *Mahabharata*, while the oldest and best-known of the artificial epics is the *Ramayana*. The *Puranas*, a group of 18 epics, didactic and sectarian in tone, are a direct offshoot of the *Mahabharata*.

In the court epics (c.200 B.C.–c.A.D. 1100), most of which were derived from the *Ramayana*, subject matter gradually became subordinated to form, and elaborate laws were set up to regulate style. The lyric poems are artificial in technique and mainly stanzaic. The most common form, the sloka, developed from the Vedic *anushtubh*, a stanza of four octosyllabic lines. Part of the lyric poetry is comprised of gemlike miniatures, portraying emotion and describing nature; most of it is erotic. However, many lyrics are ethical in tone. These reflect the doctrine of the transmigration of souls in a prevailing melancholy tone and stress the vanity of human life.

Sanskrit drama (c.A.D. 400–A.D. 1100) had its beginnings in those hymns of the *Rig-Veda* which contain dialogues. Staged drama probably derives from the dance and from religious ceremonial. It is characterized by the complete absence of tragedy; death never occurs on the stage. Other typical features are the alternation of lyrical stanzas with prose dialogue and the use of Sanskrit for some characters and Prakrit for others (see Prakrit literature).

In Sanskrit drama the stories are borrowed from legend, and love is the usual theme. The play almost always opens with a prayer and is followed by a dialogue between the stage manager and one of the actors, referring to the author and the play. There were no theaters, so the plays were performed in the concert rooms of palaces. The most famous drama was the *Sakuntala* of Kalidasa. Other major dramatists were Bhasa, Harsa, and Bhavabhuti (see Asian drama).

There is a didactic quality in all of Sanskrit literature, but it is most pronounced in fairy tales and fables (c.A.D. 400–A.D. 1100). Characteristically, different stories are inserted within the framework of a single narration. The characters of the tale themselves tell stories until there are many levels to the narrative. The Panchatantra is the most important work in this style. The sententious element reached its height in the *Hitopadesa*, which was derived from the *Panchatantra*.

Sanskrit literature of the modern period consists mainly of academic exercises. The main body of modern Indian literature is written in various vernacular languages as well as in English.

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