

The Quest for a Proper Perspective in Vedic Interpretation

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The general impression that the proper interpretation of the Vedas is fraught with innumerable difficulties has persisted since the time of Yāska—about the eighth century B. C. Yāska's Nirukta, Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, and the Vedic commentaries of Skandasvāmī, Udgītha, Veṅkaṭamādhava and Sāyaṇa do help us to some extent in affording a hazy glimpse into various aspects of the teachings of the Ṛgveda. But the difficulty lies in the fact that there is a yawning gap of at least a thousand years between, on the one hand, the authors of the above-mentioned Vedāṅgas and, on the other hand, the original seers of the Mantras; and this has mooted the question as to whether the commentators who came much later in point of time could have grasped the original sense or flavour of the Vedas.

Western Indologists have been constantly hurling this question, with renewed vigour, on our face since more than half a century. And a few indigenous supports too were quite handy for their purpose: Thus, Kautsa in Yāska's Nirukta is held to have branded the Mantras as "meaningless";¹ the Muṇḍakopaniṣad relegated the Vedas to an inferior position in comparison to the Upaniṣadic lore;² the Bhagavadgītā was found to have thoroughly thrashed the Vedas as being mere "flowery speech" of the immature fools.³ And, finally, the ritualistic interpretation of the Ṛgveda at the hand of no less an indigenous scholar like Sāyaṇa confirmed and ultimately uprooted the possible hope of ever searching for, or discovering, any mystic or philosophical values, except a few stray and crude ideas in it. The dictum of multifarious interpretative tendency (sarvatomukhā vai vedāḥ) as inherent in the Vedas, and resorted to by the commentators to extract their own outlook or interpretation, has added to the already prevalent confusion. The rejection of the Vedas as unauthoritative by the Buddhists and the Jains since

1. Yāska's Nirukta, I, v, 15 : अनर्थकाः हि मन्त्राः ।
2. Muṇḍakopaniṣad, I, 4-5 : द्वे विश्वे वेदितव्ये इति ह स्म यद्वृद्धविदो वदन्ति परा चैवापरा च ॥४॥ तत्रापरा ऋग्वेदो यजुर्वेदः सामवेदोऽथर्ववेदः शिक्षा कल्पो व्याकरणं निरुक्तं छन्दो ज्योतिषमिति । अथ परा यया तदक्षरमधिगम्यते ॥५॥
3. Bhagavadgītā, II, 42 : याभिर्मां पुष्पितां वाचं प्रवदन्त्यमनीषिणः । कामात्मानः स्वर्गपरां भोगैश्वर्यगतिं प्रति ॥ etc., and II, 45 : त्रैगुण्यविषया वेदाः...etc.

इतिहास और पुरातत्त्व : १०१

very early times has also added weight to the general outlook of the Western Indologists regarding the non-mystic, non-philosophical, matter-of-fact and worldly—and hence “healthy”—approach of the Vedas towards life, thus testifying to the primitive nature of it.

Dr. Louis Renou has painstakingly tried to lay bare the “striking paradox” with regard to the Vedas in that, on the one hand, they are revered or recognised as the omniscient, infallible, eternal principle,...as the source itself of Dharma, as the authority from which arises the totality of Brāhmanic disciplines, on the other hand, the philological traditions, relating to the Vedas, that form the very substance of the constituent texts, are from the very early date, weakened, if not altered or lost, even in the most orthodox domains, the reverence to the Vedas has come to be a simple “raising of the hat”, in passing, to an idol by which one no longer intends to be encumbered later on.¹

It is generally conceded without controversy that the text of the Ṛgveda and other Vedas as we possess to-day, as one that has come down to us in the uninterrupted oral tradition, has remained uncorrupted for over at least last two thousand years, thanks to the text-preservative device of eightfold Vikṛtis.² In spite of all these efforts of thousands of years on the part of Veda-reciters, aspersions are now being cast on the very authenticity of the uncorrupted nature of the text of the Ṛgveda by some Indologists who, of late, have been busy at going back to the so-called “ṛṣi-kavi original form of the RV” on the ground of its presupposed rhythmical regularity, the present traditional oral text actually preserved and written down being only a “palimpsest”.³ This is nothing short of an onslaught at the root of the authenticity of the notion of “uncorrupted text” which has so far been confidently accepted as “our basis...and which, even if we hold it in a few instances doubtful or defective, does not at any rate call for that often licentious labour of emendation to which some of the European classics lend themselves.”⁴

Now, as regards the labours of many European and American scholars in unravelling the past of India, particularly the scholars like Sir Charles Wilkins, Sir William Jones, Sir Thomas Colebrooke, Friedrich Schlegel, James Prinsep, August Wilhelm Von Schlegel, Franz Bopp, Wilhelm Humboldt, Friedrich

1. Louis Renou, *The Destiny of the Veda in India*, 1965, pp. 1-2,
2. cf. *Ṛgveda-Saṃhitā*, ed. by Satavalekar, 1 57, p. 74 : जटा माला शिखा रेखा ध्वजो दण्डो रथो वनः । अष्टौ विकृतयः प्रोक्ताः क्रमपूर्वा महर्षिभिः ॥
3. Fr. Esteller, *The Quest for the Original Ṛgveda*, an article in *B. O. R. I. Annals*, Vol. L, 1909, cf. his other articles listed by Dr. R. N. Dandekar in *Vedic Bibliography*, Vol. II, pp. 3-4.
4. Shri Aurobindo, *On the Vedas*, 1956, p. 21.

१०२ : अगस्त्यनाहटा अभिनन्दन-ग्रन्थ

Ruckert, Eugene Burnouf, Major General Alexander Cunningham, Franz Kielhorn, Hermann Jacobi, Major Seymour Sewell and many others will always be remembered by the students of Indian history with gratitude and admiration.¹ But, as has been pointed out by Shri K. C. Varma and Pandit Bhagavaddatta,² there was another band of scholars whose labours, though valuable in many respects, have been vitiated by political or religious or theological bias, and they were not objective in their studies but were propagandists for the perpetuation of foreign domination of India and endeavoured to convert India to what they considered to be the "true faith", and it is rather strange that an appreciable number of Western authors who have written about India, during the last half a century or so, have been inspired mainly by the latter band. The very Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford was founded by Colonel Boden with the special object of promoting the translation of the Scriptures into Sanskrit, so as "to enable his countrymen to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian Religion"³ as has been specifically stated most explicitly in his Will (dated August 15, 1811). Professor H. H. Wilson, the first holder of the Boden Chair and the first noble English translator of the RV along with Sāyana's commentary, wrote his book, 'The Religions and Philosophical Systems of the Hindus', in order "to help candidates for a prize of 200/- given by John Muir, a well-known old Hailey man and great Sanskrit scholar, for the best refutation of the Hindu Religious system."⁴ Rudolf Roth, who jointly edited with Otto Böehtlingk, the famous St. Petersburg Sanskrit-German Thesaurus, gave out his considered belief that a conscientious European exegete may understand the Veda much more correctly and better than Sāyana, and further gave his ruling as a "conscientious European", in his "search for the meaning which the poets themselves gave to their songs and phrases", that the "writings of Sāyana and of other commentators must not be an authority to the exegete, but merely one of the means of which he has to avail himself in accomplishment of his task..."⁵ The concrete result of the labours of this scholar was the Sanskrit Wörterbuch that has been held to this day as one of the most authoritative basis of modern Vedic exegesis.

1. K. C. Varma, Some Western Indologists and Indian Civilization, an article in "India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture", the Vivekananda Commemoration Volume, p. 165,
2. ibid., also Pandit Bhagavaddatta, Bhāratavarṣa-kā Brhad Itihāsa, Vol. I, pp. 52-71.
3. Monier Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Oxford, 1899, Preface to the New Edition, p. ix.
4. Eminent Orientalists, Madras, p. 72:
5. Theodor Goldstücker, Pāṇini, Varanasi, 1965, p. 266,

इतिहास और पुरातत्त्व : १०३

Now, as has been explicitly testified by Theodor Goldstücker, with regard to this Sanskrit Wörterbuch, no other work has come before the public with such unmeasured pretension of scholarship and critical ingenuity as this Wörterbuch, and which has, at the same time, laid itself open to such serious reproaches of the profoundest grammatical ignorance. And further, Goldstücker considers his duty to do so when he exposes Dr. Böethlingk to have been a Sanskrit scholar "incapable of understanding even easy rules of Pāṇini, much less those of Kātyāyana, and still...capable of making use of them in the understanding of classical texts."² And the real worth of the magnum opus of both these scholars has been brought out by Goldstücker in these words : "It is one of my most serious reproaches against the Sanskrit Wörterbuch, that it not only creates its own meanings, and by applying them to the most important documents of the literature, practically falsifies antiquity itself, but deliberately, and nearly constantly, suppresses all the information we may derive from the native commentaries....Yet while the reader may peruse their Dictionary page after page, sheet after sheet, without discovering a trace of these celebrated Vaidika commentaries, while the exceptions to this rule are so rare as to become almost equal to zero, Professor Weber dares to speculate on the credulity of the public in telling that this Dictionary ALWAYS quotes the native exegesis !"³

Roth was supported by a self-opinionated American scholar, William Dwight Whitney, who stated that the "principles of the German School are the only ones which can ever guide us to a true understanding of the Veda."⁴ And this method consisted of "the road which is prescribed by philology : to elicit the sense of the texts by putting together all the passages which are kindred either in regard to their words or their sense" and guess the sense of a word by "having before them ten or twenty other passages in which the same word recurs." Goldstücker has called the bluff of Roth's claim by pointing out to the fact that there are many instances in which a Vaidika word does not occur twenty or ten, nor yet five or four, times in the Saṃhitās; how does Roth, then, muster his ten or twenty passages, when, nevertheless, he rejects the interpretation of Sāyaṇa.⁵ One wonders how Mādhava-Sāyaṇa, one of the profoundest scholars of India, the exegete of all the three Vedas and of the most important Brāhmaṇas and a Kalpa work, the renowned Mīmāṃsist, the great grammarian who wrote the learned commentary on the Sanskrit radicals had not the proficiency of combining in his mind or otherwise those ten or twenty passages of his own Veda, which Professor Roth

1. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

4. American Oriental Society Proceedings, October, 1867, quoted by Pandit Bhagavaddata. *op. cit.*, p. 39 ft. nt..

5. Theodor Goldstücker, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

has the powerful advantage of bringing together by means of his little memoirs :¹

Even the much-extolled Max Müller himself was, unfortunately, a bigoted and dogmatic Christian² as would be testified by some of his fulminations which make interesting reading as examples of a distorted judgment :

(a) "History seems to teach that the whole human race required gradual education before, in fullness of time, it could be admitted to the truths of Christianity"³

(b) "A large number of Vedic hymns are childish in the extreme : tedious, low, commonplace."⁴

(c) "The ancient religion of India is doomed and if Christianity does not step in, whose fault will it be ?"⁵

Sir Monier-Williams, the successor of Professor H. H. Wilson to the Boden Chair at Oxford and the author of the Sanskrit-English and English-Sanskrit Dictionaries, minces no words when, in his defence against personal criticism to which he had for many years been content to acquiesce without comment, declares by way of an explanation in the following words :

"I have made it the chief aim of my professional life to provide facilities for the translation of our sacred Scriptures into Sanskrit, and for the promotion of a better knowledge of the religions and customs of India, as the best key to a knowledge of the religious needs of our great Eastern Dependency. My very first public lecture delivered after my election in 1860 was on 'The Study of Sanskrit in relation to Missionary Work in India' (published in 1861)."⁶

Not only that, he has further expressed his cherished aspirations as follows :

"When the walls of the mighty fortress of Brahmanism are encircled, undermined, and finally stormed by the soldiers of the Cross, the victory of Christianity must be signal and complete."⁷

1. Ibid.

2. Kailash Chandra Varma, op. cit., p. 195.

3. Max Müller, A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature, p. 32.

4. Pandit Bhagavaddatta, op. cit., p. 39, quoted from Chips from a German Workshop, Second Edition, 1866, p. 27; also India, What It Can Teach Us, Lecture iv.

5. Ibid. p. 38, quoted from a letter of Max Müller to Duke of Argyll, Under Secretary of State for India (dated the 16th December, 1868).

6. Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Preface to the New Edition, pp. ix-x.

7. Pandit Bhagavaddatta, op. cit., p. 9,

Even Winternitz is not free from the theological bias, when he upholds the sublimity of the poetry of the Old Testament and fails to allude to the sublimity of the Bhagavadgītā or the Nāsadiya-sūkta,¹ the latter being, in contrast, adjudged by no less a historian than Will Durant as the loftiest poem,² and which Zenaide A. Ragozin finds “reaching the uttermost bounds of philosophical abstractions ... never obscure, unless to the absolutely uninitiated.”³

As a net result of this combined and organized conspiracy of the past few generations of European Indologists in the direction of undermining the supreme sanctity of fundamental Scriptures of ancient Indian religion, the hymns of the ṛgveda are nowadays almost readily accepted by educated Indians and most of the modern Sanskrit scholars to be nothing more than the sacrificial composition of a primitive and still barbarous race, written around a system of ceremonial and propitiatory rites, addressed to personified Powers of Nature and replete with a confused mass of half-formed myths and crude astronomical allegories yet in making; and that it is in the later hymns that the first appearance of deeper psychological and moral ideas are perceived, which, some think, are borrowed from the hostile Dravidians, identified with “robbers” and “Veda-haters” freely cursed in the hymns themselves.⁴

As has been very succinctly put by Shri T. V. Kapali Sastry, Europe, inspite of the scrupulous care associated with all scholarly labours that it brought to bear upon its Vedic studies, could not escape the limitations of its temperamental mould which is in fact diametrically opposed to the Indian spirit; it surmounted the difficulties in understanding the texts by partly drawing upon conjectures and; partly on certain inexact sciences, very often conjectural-comparative philology comparative mythology or comparative religion.⁵ Indian students and seekers of knowledge of the Vedas especially in the last century followed the lines of European scholarship and swallowed as gospel-truth European opinion because it had gained in prestige by its association in their minds with European science and culture which is a different matter altogether, estimable indeed, based as they are on different firmer grounds.⁶ Now, there is no reason why we should continue to repeat the same song of the nineteenth century Europe, be it the theory of imaginary migration of imaginary Indo-European race, the fancifully “reconstructed” Indo-European language, the imaginary chronology and consequent relative contemporaneity of the Ṛgveda in relation to Avesta and Ancient Greek of Homer, the pre-

1. Dr. M. Winternitz, History of Indian Literature. Vol. I, p. 79.

2. Will Durant, Story of Civilization, p. 409.

3. Vedic India, 1195, pp. 426-427.

4. Shri Aurobindo, op. cit., p. 3.

5. T. V. Kapali Sastry, Lights on the Veda, Pondichery, 1961, p. 10.

6. Ibid., p. 11.

१०६ : अगरचन्द नाहटा अभिनन्दन-ग्रन्थ

Vedic chronological position of the Indus Valley civilization and also the Hittite one, and above all the unquestionable air of authority of St. Petersburg Sanskrit-German Wörterbuch, the compilers of which last have been called the "Saturnalia of Sanskrit Philology" by Goldstücker.¹ The religious prejudices of these scholars have been passed down to the last few generations of Indian Indology as "scientific" and hence "impartial" to such an extent that a modern critical Indologist like J. Gonda observes with astonishment : "It is indeed somewhat strange that scholars should have acquiesced for nearly a century in translation and interpretative method of Rudolf Roth and Hermann Grassman".²

It is for these reasons that a penetrating fresh inquiry into, and thorough revision of the opinions among scholars about the Vedic culture and Vedic worship is a desideratum, especially when times and conditions have changed; new facts and evidences have accumulated, modern sociologists have revised their old-world opinions of past generations of scholars in regard to human origins, the history, polity, psychology, religion and life in general of at least some of the early races and peoples whom we call primitive.³

What, then, is the way out? Are we to continue to take the tradition about this most ancient sacred Scripture of India, the R̥gveda, as the repository of the mystic wisdom of ancient seers of remote age, to be a big hoax carefully perpetuated for thousands of years? Are we to rely upon the "impartiality" and "authoritative" scholarship of the generations of European scholars of last one century in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary recorded by themselves in their own works and memoirs? The choice is too clear to be elaborated further. As has been aptly put by Shri G. K. Pillai, slightly in a different context, prejudices and preconceived notions should be given up, and one should approach the shrine of truth with the object of finding out the truth.⁴

What, then, are going to be our tools? The question is not so baffling as might have been a century ago. Hundreds of scholars both Indian and non-Indian have contributed their mite to the study of the Vedas and have fashioned fresh tools in the forms of publication of a highly correct edition of the R̥gveda, of the commentaries of Śaṅkara, Veṅkaṭādhara, Udgītha, Skandasvāmin and Dayānanda Śārasvatī, of the completely revised and fully exhaustive indices and concordance of the whole range of Vedic literature right from the Samhitās to the Vedāṅgas, of the studies of various Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads, of the critical studies of various aspects of Vedic thought by scholars like Anand Coomaraswamy, Shri Aurobindo, Shri V. M. Apte, Shri B. K. Chattopadhyaya, Dr. J. Filliozat, J.

1. Theodore Goldstücker, op. cit., p. 290.
2. J. Gonda, The Vision of the Vedic Poets, The Hague, 1963, p. 7.
3. T. V. Kapali Sastry, op. cit., pp. 10-11.
4. Govind Krishna Pillai, Vedic History, Allahabad, 1959, p. 3.

इतिहास और पुरातत्त्व : १०७

Gonda, Dt. V. Raghavan, Swami Prabhavananda, Swami Satprakashananda, Professor H. D. Velankar, Dr. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala, Pandit Satavalekar, Pandit Yudhiṣṭhira Mīmāṃsaka, Shri K. C. Varadachari, Dr. T. G. Mainkar and a host of others. All the help that can be requisitioned from the text-critical, exegetical, literary, linguistic, grammatical, lexicographical, historical, sociological, psychological and parapsychological studies of the ancient world should be most welcome, without, of course, losing the sight of the essentially mystic nature of the language and thought-content of the text, which should no longer be regarded as being a mere oldest linguistic record of primitive Indo-Aryans. At the same time the ancient interpretative traditions of the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads, of the Nighaṇṭus, the Prātiśākhya, the Niruktas, the Pāṇinian and other contemporary ancient schools of Sanskrit Grammar, should also be given due weight in view of their comparative chronological vicinity to the Vedas. The Brāhmaṇas need no longer be mere "twaddles", since, on the contrary, they are now known to have preserved for us the proofs of living mystic tradition in continuity of the Vedas and afford a glimpse into the mystic background of the eternal sacrifice in Nature and its relation to the sacrificial ritual, and held a key to the Ādhidaivika and the Ādhyātmika aspects of Vedic mysticism.¹ And Yāska's Nirvacanas need no longer be the damned "fantastic, arbitrary and almost lawless" etymologies² in view of the fact that Yāska never intended to attempt at "deriving" the same obscure Vedic words from alternative strange roots and thus exhibit his uncertainty and ignorance; he rather tried to indicate the different shades of the meaning of the word in question by giving the corresponding equivalent sense-roots prevalent in his own day and thus supplement the vedic exegesis at a point where the contemporary Vyākaraṇa had exhausted its efforts.³ And Pāṇini, with all his minute details about the Vedic idiom, grammar and accent, can help the Vedic interpreter of the RV to a great extent, as has been duly demonstrated by scholars like Dayānanda Sarasvatī, Goldstücker, Paul Theime, Dr. Vishvobandhu, Dr. S. S. Bhavé and others. After all the path is now no longer so obscure if we settle to the task with proper perspective and always keep in mind the fact that we have in the hymns of the RV not merely prayers for worldly benefits, but rather "the riches of occult and spiritual truths, treasured hidden by the coverings of symbolic imagery devised for the double values by the ancient mystics of the R̥gveda."⁴

ŚIVĀH SANTU SATĀM PANTHĀNAH :

1. Dr. Nathulal Pathak, Aitareya Brāhmaṇa kā Eka Adhyayana, p. 185.
2. Shri Aurobindo, op. cit., p. 638.
3. Pandit Yudhiṣṭhira Mīmāṃsaka, Vaidic Chhandomīmāṃsā, p. 27.
4. T. V. Kapali Sastry, op. cit., p. 36.

१०८ : अगरचन्द नाहटा अभिनन्दन-ग्रन्थ