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Sarasvatī & higher knowledge in Ṛgveda: A study in Vaiśvāmītra

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Abstract

Translations constrained by conventions laid down by Yaska and Sāyanāchārya lead to the view that Sarasvatī in the Ṛgveda is simply a powerfully flowing river, sometimes destructive, sometimes supporting fecundity [Jamison and Brereton, 2014]. Untrammelled by these constraints, translations can yield a different perspective.

This study of three verses of Vaiśvāmītra suggests that Sarasvatī was seen in the Ṛgveda as the shaper of spirituality, intellect, and food-provider. The use of the word-root *dhi* includes three forms of spiritual pursuit – devotion, meditation and contemplation. Sarasvatī promotes agreeable speech, teaching and belongs to the wise. She purifies souls and is a medium of sacrifice.

The verses also implicitly define *yajña* or sacrifice as a curtailment of own nature in the interest of a higher goal or higher good. Spiritual effort, absorption of higher knowledge, retaining it and teaching it can all be regarded as sacrifice in this light.

Keywords: Sarasvatī, Ṛgveda, Vaiśvāmītra, Yaska and Sāyanāchārya

Introduction

A hundred verses in ten hymns have come to us through Vaiśvāmītra, the son of the reputed sage Viśvāmītra. Placed in the beginning of the Ṛgveda Samhitā by Vedavyāsa, they have a defining significance for the scripture. Unfortunately, their full significance has not been appreciated in the conventional approach.

Conventional translations of Ṛgveda have approached it within the constraints laid down by traditions of Yaska and Sāyanāchārya. This mostly results in a ritualistic or laudatory understanding of the verses. There is a strange lack of higher knowledge and spiritual aspirations in such translations, whereas in common understanding the Ṛgveda is the repository of the highest spiritual truth and the source of the best in upaniṣads and purāṇas.

An awkward result of the conventions is that contemporary Hinduism is doubly distanced from the Ṛgveda.

Contemporary Hinduism is known for its reverence for the Trinity and Devī. But in conventional translations of Ṛgveda, the Hindu trinity is often regarded as minor subset of a wider range of vedic deities. An oddity is that the word '*hari*', an appellation of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahma and Yama, is confined to the meaning of a tawny horse of Indra in Ṛgveda.

Present day Hinduism is also well known for its systems of meditation and yoga. But these are completely lacking in Griffith's translation [Griffith, 1896]. For instance, the word 'meditate' appears only nine times^[1] in Griffith's translation of the 10,553 verses. In two instances, it is a deity that is 'meditating'^[2], in one the 'King Soma'^[3], while in still another a "Heaven's Daughter" is 'meditating ill'^[4]. Meditation is on hymns and praises^[5] and to exalt a god^[6]. In sum, although the word 'meditation' does occur nine times, its substance is nowhere recognisable as what modern Hindus regard as meditation.

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¹ 02-011.12, 04-030.8, 05-013.2, 05-035.8.1, 08-044.22, 09-062.10, 10-100.4, 10-183.1, 10-032.1

² 09-062.10 & 10-032.1

³ 10-100.4

⁴ 04-030.8

⁵ 02-011.12, 05-013.2, 05-035.8

⁶ 08-044.22

In modern times, Sri Aurobindo first advanced the hypothesis that the “Veda is primarily intended to serve for spiritual enlightenment and self culture.” He also suggested that Vedas appeared with multiple meanings, one favouring “outer worship for the profane” and others “an inner discipline for the initiate”. There was simultaneously a “spiritual sense for the elect, a concrete sense for the mass of ordinary worshippers.”

According to Sri Aurobindo this implies that the sacred words of Veda covertly contain “a spiritual experience and knowledge and a psychological discipline of self-culture which were then the highest achievement of the human race.” [Aurobindo, 1998, 8]. There are some others who share this view, arguing that the

... Rigveda is full of spiritual and psychological wisdom" and that it "can be interpreted in several different planes or levels. [Kashyap, 2000, 1-2].

Sri Aurobindo argued that any attempt to reinterpret the Rgveda must proceed from its language:

A hypothesis of the sense of Veda must always proceed, to be sure and sound, from a basis that clearly emerges in the language of the Veda itself... there should be clear indications in the explicit language of the hymns which will guide us to that sense. [Aurobindo 1998, 34]

In other words, a new translation of the Rgveda was called for. Although Sri Aurobindo himself initiated this work, he relied on revelations and meditation to chalk out a new approach. It is our belief that even if one looks at the language of Rgveda untrammelled by conventional restrictions, the richness of the Sankṛt language suffices to unveil several layers of meaning, some of them with much spiritual content. Of course, in most cases allusion rather than explicit detail is to be found, since mysterious is the method favoured by gods, who are said to prefer secrecy or invisibility^[7].

The Sarasvatī Verses of Vaiśvāmītra

This paper examines the place of Sarasvatī in relation to spiritual and higher knowledge in the Hymns of Vaiśvāmītra. Vaiśvāmītra is chosen since his hymns are pervaded with allusions to spiritual and religious effort and knowledge. Three of his hundred verses are devoted to Sarasvatī (01-003. 10 to 12).

We now present a detailed analysis of the three verses. The presentation is in reverse order, in order to allow for an ascending order of difficulty of translation. Word meanings and grammatical rules utilised are given immediately after the translation. Lexicographic references are given only when a less usual meaning is used. This is followed by technical comments that precede general remarks.

One peculiarity of the method followed in the translations is that when one vedic word has more than one relevant meaning, all of them are used in the translation. For instance, *dhī* means alternatively devotion, religious thought or contemplation as well as meditation. All three meanings are utilised in the translation by introduction of the word “spiritual effort (DMT)” aimed to capture all three meanings. Likewise, *vasuḥ* has the meanings of light, beneficent as well as the god-*vasu*. The translation that is given uses all three meanings.

Sarasvatī: The Shaper of Spirituality, Intellect, Food
01-003.12 *mahaḥ arṇaḥ sarasvatī pra chetayati ketunā dhiyo viśvā vi rājati*

Light, sacrifice, the stream - Sarasvatī is causing to appear with form, with brightness. Spiritual efforts (DMT), intellectual faculties, food she is governing.

Word Meanings & Grammar

mahaḥ light, sacrifice [nm. sg. *mahas* n. (light, sacrifice)];
arṇaḥ stream m;

pra chetayati causing to appear [*pra* before, *chetayati* 3rd p. sg. pres. act. causative √*cit* (causing to comprehend). Before causing to comprehend comes ‘appearance’ hence ‘causing to appear’ is preferred. Also has same meaning in Mw √*praci*];
ketunā with form, with brightness [inst. sg. *ketu* (form, light/brightness)];

dhiyaḥ spiritual efforts (devotion, meditation, thought) [nm. pl. *dhi* (devotion (A,Mc,Mw,C), thought (A,Mc,C,Mw esp. religious) meditation (Mw,Mc)];

viśvāḥ intellectual faculties [intellectual faculty (A,Mw), intellect (Mc, conditioned C)];

vi food [n. an artificial word for *anna* SBr (Mw)];

rājati she is governing [3rd p. sg. pres. act. √*rāj* (to direct, to govern)];

Technical Comments

Some technical considerations in the translation may be mentioned here.

The word *arṇaḥ* being masculine cannot qualify *sarasvatī* which is feminine. Further *mahas*, which is the root form of *mahaḥ*, is neuter. Clearly these are three different entities. Hence the formulation: “Sarasvati, the mighty flood ...” [Griffith, 1896, p. 4] is disfavoured here. The effort in this paper is more in line with the translation in the discontinued Sarasvatī project:

Sarasvati, makes manifest by her acts a mighty river, and (in her own form) enlightens all understandings. [SSP, nd]

Significant is the use of the word *dhiyaḥ* here. It is the plural of *dhī*, implying devotion, religious thought or meditation, which are captured here by the word: spiritual efforts (DMT).

The independent use of *vi* without *visarga*, indicating a neuter gender, can only be explained by relying on Monier Williams who assigns it the meaning of *annam*.

Comments

Thus translated, the verse is rich with meaning.

Brahma the creator-god gives form to the world. His consort Sarasvatī gives form to light (spiritual), sacrifice and to the stream, Sarasvatī – the former through words, voice and music, the latter through the life that it sustains and the shifts in its path. She also gives the recipients - brightness.

The association of light (spiritual), sacrifice and the stream in this verse may be due to the concentration of sages in the Brahmavarta, the land surrounding the Sarasvatī.

There are some remarkable aspects of the above verse.

First, the reference has value for historians who are aware of the frequently changing form of the now disappeared river^[8].

Second, being a *śakti*, Sarasvatī gives not only form, but also brightness to her products.

Third, Sarasvatī is not the mere stream (which is referred to in neuter gender), but the goddess who directs its form and its products.

The verse concludes that by giving form to food, and to spiritual and intellectual strivings, Sarasvatī governs them.

Sarasvatī: Teacher of the Wise, Medium of Sacrifice

⁷ “For the gods appear to be fond of cryptic epithets; yea, the gods appear to be fond of cryptic epithets.” 1.3.14, Aitereya Upanishad [Nikhilananda, nd].

⁸ The stream *sarasvatī* before it vanished into the desert c 3000-1000 BC, often changed its form according to studies. eg. Sankaran A.V., *Sarasvatī – a river lost in the desert*, <http://www.iisc.ernet.in/currsci/oct25/articles20.htm> 9-2-2017).

01-003.11 *codayatrī sūnṛutānām cetantī sumatīnām yajñam dadhe sarasvatī*

Promoter of true, agreeable speeches, teaching, belonging to the wise – towards sacrifice I hold, give, have drunk Sarasvatī.

Word Meanings & Grammar

codayatrī f. one who promotes (Mw), promoter (C) [f. of *codayitrī*];

sūnṛutānām of true and agreeable speeches [g. pl. *sūnṛtā*];

cetantī teaching [f. pres.act.part. √*cit* (to teach)];

sumatīnām belonging to the wise ones [g. pl. *sumati* (wise Mw,Mc,C)];

yajñam towards sacrifice [ac. sg. *yajña*];

dadhe I hold, I give [1st p.sg. pres. mid. √*dadh* (to hold, to give A,Mw)], I have drunk [1st p. sg. mid. perfect √*dhe* (to absorb A,Mw; to drink A,Mw,W,Dp)]

Comments

The goddess that teaches, belongs to the wise, promotes good speech, is also the medium of sacrifice. Holding, giving, absorbing Sarasvatī is also sacrifice. This verse redefines sacrifice to transcend physical rituals and oblations. It is now a mental act, a spiritual activity. Learning, retaining and distribution of Sarasvatī are all revealed to be sacrifice or *yajña*.

The seed of the idea that Sarasvatī can be the medium of sacrifice is laid in the previous verse (01-003.10)

Sarasvatī & The Nature of Sacrifice

01-003.10 *pāvakā naḥ sarasvatī vājebhīrvājīnīvatī yajñam vaṣṭu dhiyā vasuḥ*

a) Purifying to souls is Sarasvatī. In conflict, man and mare are begging. Towards sacrifice let him command [her]. Through spiritual effort is light, the beneficent, the god-vasu.

b) Purifying to souls is Sarasvatī. In conflict man and mare are begging. Towards sacrifice let her command [him]: “May you hold light, the beneficent!”

c) Purifying, undivided, unbroken is Sarasvatī. In water man and food are begging. Towards sacrifice let him command [her]: “May you hold the beneficent”.

Word Meanings & Grammar

pāvakā purifying f.;

naḥ to souls, undivided, unbroken [ac. pl. √*an* (soul, A), identical (A,Mw) undivided (A,W)];

vāje in conflict, in water [lc. sg. *vāja* water n., conflict (A,Mw, struggle (C)) inst. pl. *vājaiḥ*];

bhir man [comp. form of *bhir* from *bhiru* (man, Mw)];

vājīnī mare (A,Mw,W), food (A ved.); *vatī* begging, asking dl. (A,Mw);

yajñam towards sacrifice [ac. sg. *yajña*];

vaṣṭu Let him/her command [3rd p. sg. act. impv. √*vaś* (to command)];

dhiyā through spiritual effort [inst. sg. *dhi* devotion (A,Mc,Mw,C), thought (A,Mc,C,Mw esp. religious) meditation (Mw,Mc)];

dhiyāḥ ‘May you hold...’ [2nd p. sg. act. opt. √*dhi* (to hold)];

vasuḥ f.m. light (A,Mw), beneficent (Mw,Mc), god-vasu;

Technical Comments

Two innovations have been used in translating this verse.

First, ‘*naḥ*’ has been taken as the accusative plural of ‘*an*’ which has been assigned the meaning of soul by Apte. Along with its nominative form ‘*ā*’, this word-meaning finds frequent use in the verses coming through Vaiśvāmītra.

Secondly, the word *bhir* is used for the first time with the meaning of man (comp. form), on the following considerations.

The instrumental plural of *vāja* is *vājaiḥ* not *vājebhiḥ*. In seven other verses of Vaiśvāmītra, words whose instrumental plural ends in ‘*aiḥ*’, extend into *bhiḥ*⁹. Parsing gives these words gives ‘*bhir*’ or ‘*bhiḥ*’, which does not have an accepted presence. Taking cue from Monier Williams who gives *bhiru* as a name for man, *bhir* was experimentally assigned the meaning of ‘man’¹⁰.

This has given satisfactory results in all the above cases. For instance, *devah deve-bhirā gamat* in 01-001.5 is translated as the injunction

“Let god in the divine, with man approach”,

where *bhirā* is instrumental singular of *bhir*, reminiscent of the injunction in the Gītā

Nourish ye the gods by this, and let the gods also nourish you.

Thus nourishing each other, ye shall obtain the highest good (Davies, 1889, 49)

Comments

With these innovations, the verse permits three viable translations.

The first two variations regard Sarasvatī as a patron of higher spiritual knowledge. Through this, she purifies souls. Man and mare embroiled in battles and conflicts plead for succour.

The first variant of the translation enjoins man to command the Sarasvatī, i.e., the power of higher knowledge and learning, towards sacrifice. By implication, this sacrifice is ‘spiritual effort’, which results in light, the beneficent and also the experience of the god-vasu. The second variant of the translation, enjoins the goddess to command man towards sacrifice – “to hold light, to hold the beneficent” for mankind.

In both these variants, spiritual effort is implicitly regarded as sacrifice. This could possibly be due to the restraint that has to be observed in the pursuit of devotion, meditation or religious thinking. Since this restraint goes against the natural drive for comfort or pleasure, it is sacrifice.

Alternatively, getting embroiled in conflict and war may reflect compulsions of human nature. In that case, curtailing the warlike impulse and directing oneself towards spirituality also involves a sacrifice.

The third variation regards Sarasvatī in the form of an undivided, unbroken, purifying river. The reference seems to be to flooding. Man is enjoined to command the river towards sacrifice.

Sacrifice in this case lies in the river “holding the beneficent”. The hint is towards water. By letting water loose, the river is drowning men and crops. The nature of the river being to flood the banks, it is a sacrifice on her part to control her nature for higher good.

In sum, all three variations in translation point towards the meaning of sacrifice or *yajña* as going against one’s nature to further a higher good.

Conclusions

This translation and study goes against received wisdom.

The influence of the traditional restrictions on translating Ṛgveda has led to the conclusion that Sarasvatī did not have

⁹ The words and verses are *pūrva*, *deva* (01-001.2 & 5 resp.), *uktha* (01-002.2), *vāja* (01-005.3), *arka* (01-007.01), *sūra* (01-008.04) *parva* (01-009.01). The words continue into ‘*bhiḥ*’, whereas their instrumental plurals end in ‘*aiḥ*’ (*pūrvaiḥ*, *devaiḥ*, *vājaiḥ*, *ukthaiḥ*, *arkaiḥ*, *sūraiḥ*, *parvaiḥ*).

¹⁰ In an unexpected confirmation, it was informed to this author in 2015, by a fellow commuter from Delhi that even to this day a man is called ‘*bhir*’ and a woman ‘*bhirāṇī*’ in Haryāṇa.

the role and status in this primary scripture, which she now has in contemporary Hinduism. Thus, it has been said: “the R̥gveda provides little or no evidence for her later role as patron of learning and the arts, though a number of scholars have attempted to find it. Instead she is celebrated, in the three hymns dedicated to her and in other mentions in the text, simply as a physical river with a powerful flow, which is sometimes destructive but which also provides fecundity with its fructifying waters.” [Jamison and Brereton, 2014 p. 53] As against this, we find that the three verses of Vaiśvāmītra studied here, regard Sarasvatī as the shaper of spirituality, intellect, as well as food. The use of the word root *dhi* allows

for all three forms of spiritual pursuit – devotion, meditation and contemplation. She promotes agreeable speech, teaching and belongs to the wise. She purifies souls and is a medium of sacrifice.

The verses also give an implicit definition of *yajña* or sacrifice as a curtailment or control of own nature in the interest of a higher goal or higher good. Spiritual effort, absorption of higher knowledge, retaining it and teaching can all be regarded as sacrifice in light of these three verses.

A comparison of our translation with a conventional translation is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Sarasvatī Verses of Vaiśvāmītra

Table 1 The Sarasvatī Verses of Vaiśvāmītra	
Jamison and Brereton, 2014, 92	Our Translation
Let pure Sarasvatī, providing prize mares along with prizes, be eager for our sacrifice, bringing goods through her insight. The impeller of liberal gifts, taking note of good thoughts, Sarasvatī has received our sacrifice.	Purifying to souls is Sarasvatī. In conflict, man and mare are begging. Towards sacrifice let him command [her].
Her great flood does Sarasvatī reveal with her beacon. She rules over all insights.	Through spiritual effort is light, the beneficent, the god-vasu. Promoter of true, agreeable speeches, teaching, belonging to the wise – towards sacrifice I hold, give, have drunk Sarasvatī. Light, sacrifice, the stream - Sarasvatī is causing to appear with form, with brightness. Spiritual efforts (DMT), intellectual faculties, food she is governing.

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Abbreviations

m. male gender, f. female gender, n. neuter gender,
p. person, sg. singular, pl. plural
nm. nominative, ac. accusative, g. genitive, lc. locative, inst. instrumental,
pres. present; act. active; part. participle; mid. middle;
impv. imperative mood; opt. optative mood.
Lexicographers: A Apte; Mc Macdonald, Mw Monier Williams, W Wilson, C Capellar.