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Viṣṇu through spiritual striving and submission in the first hymn of Ṛgveda

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Abstract

Viṣṇu, inspite of sparsity of explicit mention or dedication in Ṛgveda, has a central place in spiritual striving, in its very first hymn.

Viṣṇu is a wise spiritual purpose or *satyaḥ* (one of three possible meanings) in Rg: i.1.5. Nightly spiritual vigils of sages, their soul submitted servilely to the guardian of immortality, director of the attentive, upright and non-violent are indicated in Rgs i.1.7-8. This is Viṣṇu, called Vardhamāna here. He is called *dīdiviḥ* who could also be Brahaspati to allow for possible practices sage followers of Indra.

‘Servile submission’ to Viṣṇu seems to mean here - to keep one’s own self, ego, individuality, one’s very soul, as it were, in self control and self-restraint. This is ‘*dāsa bhāva*’.

Thus, spiritual striving (i.e., devotion, meditation, religious contemplation), servile submission to Viṣṇu, a wise purpose for man and god, are all present in the very first hymn of Ṛgveda.

Introduction

The name ‘Viṣṇu’ occurs only 113 times in the 15,553 verses of Ṛgveda, and the name ‘Śiva’, not even once, whereas Griffith [1829] finds over 2900 references to Indra. Only a few hymns in the Ṛgveda are dedicated to Viṣṇu, singly or with Indra, while Rudra has only three dedicated to him [Jamison & Brereton 2014, 52], prompting Doniger [2009, 198] to speak of “cameo appearances” of the deities in the scripture. In contrast, a much larger number of hymns – nearly a quarter of the total of 1028, are dedicated to Indra [Jamison & Brereton 2014; Jha 2009].

Partly due to sparsity of explicit mention and dedication, partly owing to restricted translations,¹ it is generally concluded that neither Viṣṇu nor Śiva had the extraordinary stature in Ṛgveda that they have in contemporary Hinduism [Jamison & Brereton 2014, 52-53; Banerji 1939, 35].²

Also, the dominant liturgical use of Ṛgvedic hymns has possibly prompted the view that they were ‘composed’ or ‘received’ solely for these purposes. [eg. Jamison & Brereton 2014, 25]. Although some scholars do allow for a disjunction between the hymns and the ritual,³ even allowing for the possibility that their original purpose may have been different, the understanding of the hymns generally remains tied to rituals.⁴ This dominant tenor of translations⁵ has led historians to conclude that the earliest religion was “primitive animism” and ritual sacrifice was its central feature⁶ and even encouraged some historians to deny the revelatory origin of Ṛgveda.⁷

¹ For an alternative view on conventional restrictions on translating Ṛgveda, see Aurobindo [1998, 18-40 *passim*; Shastri 2017, 80-81]

² Although it is accepted that Viṣṇu is more important than Śiva in the vedas. [Smith, 1994, 98].

³ Doniger [2009, 168] concedes that only some of the hymns may reflect a “self-conscious devotion to the meaning of the ritual” even though all are for ritual performance.

⁴ The canonical form of the veda “must be understood in relationship to the demands of the ritual system for which it served, whether the hymns that it contains were originally composed for such use or not” [Carpenter 1994, 23].

⁵ Even a reconstructive thinker like Ramgopal who favours mystical interpretation, refers to an intended spiritual meaning only of “certain hymns” [cf Patton, 1994, 293].

⁶ The earliest religious ideas of the Aryans were those of a primitive animism ... The central feature of Aryan religious life was ... sacrifice.” [Thapar, 1990]

⁷ “The importance of the sacrifice suggests that the texts were ritualistic and not revelatory in origin.” [Robb 2002, 13]

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Given the centrality of ritual in this perspective, spiritual striving in the hymns finds hardly any substantive room in translations.⁸ For instance, ‘meditation’ in different moods appear only nine times in Griffith’s translation [Griffith, 1896] of the 15,553 verses, while its substance is nowhere recognisable as what modern Hindus regard as meditation [Shastri 2017, 80]. In a more recent translation, the word ‘meditation’ occurs only in one verse (Ṛg iv.54.1).⁹ In general, classical devotional and contemplative techniques find little recognition and no mention.

Against this perspective, Sri Aurobindo put forward the hypotheses that the “Veda is primarily intended to serve for spiritual enlightenment and self culture,” that the verses have multiple meanings that cover “an inner discipline for the elect” and convey a spiritual sense, capturing:

“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].

Others in his footsteps have argued that “... Rigveda is full of spiritual and psychological wisdom” and that it “can be interpreted in several different planes or levels. [Kashyap, 2000, 1-2, also Feuerstein et al, 2001, 20]. Of course, as Sri Aurobindo said, this spiritual wisdom must be apparent in words:

“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 fresh translation seems to be called for. Very recently it has been argued that real “progress in the translation of the ancient Vedic corpus will be made only ... when the Vedas are seen for the profoundly spiritual literature that they are ...” [Feuerstein et al, 2001, 24]

Based on this perspective, this paper re-translates three verses of the first hymn of Ṛgveda (i.1.7-8 & i.1.5). It finds pointers to the presence of Viṣṇu as a supreme goal, to nightly spiritual strivings of sages, and to the practice of the contemplative-devotional technique of *dāsa bhāva* or ‘servile submission’. Here, Viṣṇu is called Vardhamāna and Satyaḥ, the nightly spiritual efforts of sages are covered by the word *dhiyā* (inst. sg. *dhī*) and allusions to Agni, while servile submission is discovered by the decomposition of *emasi* into *ā-ima-si*. Such an early appearance of spiritual striving, contemplative and devotional techniques and of Viṣṇu, in a hymn dedicated to Agni, must alert us to the possibility of their pervasive presence elsewhere in Ṛgveda.

We now present a detailed analysis of the three verses, beginning with the 7-8th verses, where the presence of Viṣṇu has substantial evidence. The two verses have to be read together, since the 8th verse lacks a verb. The analysis of the 5th verse is presented later in further support of the translation proffered of the 7-8th verses.

One peculiarity of the method followed in the translations that follow, is that when one vedic word has more than one relevant meaning, all of them are used in the translation. For instance, *dhī* is translated as “spiritual effort (DMT)” in order to embrace all three of its meanings – devotion, religious thought or contemplation and meditation. In another instance, the word *adhvara* is covered by using all its three alternative

meanings: attentive, upright, non-injuring, simultaneously in the translation. Word meanings and grammatical rules that are utilised, are given immediately below each translation. Lexicographic references are given only when a less usual meaning is used.

VERSES ṚG: i.1.7-8

upa tvāgne divedive doṣāvastardhiyā vayam namo bharanta emasi rājantamadhvarāṇām gopāmṛtasya dīdivim vardhamānam sve dame

Padapāṭham

tvā-agne; doṣau-astah-dhiyā; ā-ima-si.

Translation

Towards you O Agni day by day, fault and evening set aside, with spiritual effort (DMT) are we, thunderbolt supporting, gift bearing;

(a) the soul we have submitted servilely to the director of the attentive, upright, and non-violent ones; the guardian of immortality, to the shining one

OR

(b) the soul we have submitted servilely to the director of the attentive, upright, and non-violent ones; the guardian of immortality, to Bṛhaspati

Towards Vardhamāna (Viṣṇu) are the souls, own selves, egos in self-restraint, in self-control.

Word Meanings & Grammar

upa towards;

tvā you [ac. sg. *yuṣmad* Mw, CWI];

agne O Agni [vc. sg. *agni*];

divedive day by day;

doṣau two doṣas i.e.; fault; evening [nm. dl. *doṣa* = fault; evening also *doṣā* A,Mw,C,];

astah set aside (Mw,W);

dhiyā with spiritual effort DMT [inst. sg. *dhī* = devotion, meditation, thought esp. religious – Hence ‘spiritual effort (DMT)];

vayam we;

namaḥ gift, thunderbolt [nm. sg. *namas* n. = thunderbolt A,Mw, gift A,Mw,W];

bharantaḥ supporting, bearing carrying [nm. pl. *bharat* – pres.act.part. \sqrt{bhr} = to support, to bear, to carry];

ā soul [nm. sg. an = soul A];

ima we have submitted [1st p. pl. perf. act. \sqrt{e} = to submit A,Mw];

si servilely [adv. *si* = service, serving Mw, bound, attentive B, to bind ShSg];

rājantam to the Director [ac. sg. *rājat* – pres.act.part. $\sqrt{rāj}$ = to direct];

adhvarāṇām of the attentive, of upright, of non-violent ones [inst. pl. *adhvara* = attentive A,W,G,ShSg; not injuring Mw, not crooked A,G,ShSg];

gopa guardian;

amṛtasya of immortality; of nectar of immortality [g. sg. *amṛta* = immortality, nectar of immortality];

dīdivim to the shining one, to Bṛhaspati [ac. sg. *dīdivi* = shining A,Mw,Mc; Bṛhaspati A,W, Mw];

vardhamānam towards Viṣṇu [ac. sg. *vardhamāna* = Viṣṇu A,Mw];

sve souls, own selves, egos [nm. pl. *sva* = soul A,W, the human soul Mw; one’s self Mw,C,A; ego Mw,Mc; self identity, individuality W];

⁸ It has recently been suggested that this may have been encouraged by the ignorance of spirituality and yoga in European scholars [Feuerstein et al, 2001, 21].

⁹ “He who with his strength propped apart the ends of the earth, with a roar— Bṛhaspati possessing three seats— him with the gladdening tongue did the seers of old, the inspired poets in meditation, set in front—” [Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 634].

dame in self restraint; in self-control [lc. sg. dama = self restraint, self command A,Mw,W self-control Mc,Mw,C];

Technical comments

*doṣāvastar*¹⁰ is decomposed into *doṣau-astah*, where *doṣau* is dual form of *doṣa* in accusative mood. *emasi* is decomposed into *ā-ima-si*.

Comments

This verse records the nightly spiritual vigils of sages, including followers of Indra,¹¹ and their submission to Vardhamāna or Viṣṇu.

The soul is surrendered 'servilely' (*ā-ima-si*) by them, to the director, the guardian of *amṛta*, the shining one (*dīdivih*). The guardian of *amṛtam* is Viṣṇu in *paurāṇik* lore. It may be construed that his grace also allows or bars the path to immortality. That Viṣṇu is referred to is also supported by the use of the word Vardhamāna.

Apart from Viṣṇu, Vardhamāna also means castor plant, riddle, Burdwan district, Sweet citron, way of joining hands or dancing, diagram, shape, palace, house without a door on the south (A,Mw). None of these alternative meanings make any sense in the context. Hence the word can only mean Viṣṇu here.

In light of the above, the verse implies that Viṣṇu directs those who are attentive to their thought and behaviour, who are upright, and who do not injure others (*advaraḥ*). These are appropriate qualities for a Vaiṣṇava.

The word 'shining one' (*dīdivih*) also fits, since Viṣṇu is known as *prakāśātmā* (v. 30, Vsn). In case the sages are followers of Indra (cf Rg i.6.8), *dīdivih* may mean Bṛhaspati, who is the spiritual preceptor of Indra and the devas.

In the spiritual effort (*dhī*) of sages, fault and evening are both set aside (*doṣau* being dual). After evening is set aside, fires are lit before which sages engage in devotion, meditation and religious contemplation. Those who meditate on inner navel fire, in order to stimulate the Kuṇḍalinī, are close to inner fire as well. Thus, both inner and outer Agni are referred to in this verse.

It is worth recalling here that Agni in *Agnipurāna* advises constant meditation or contemplation of Viṣṇu (374.1-5), which may be alternated with *japa* when tired (374.33).¹²

In night vigils, with spiritual effort (devotion, meditation and religious thought) sages carry the gift of sacrifice and/or support the thunderbolt which is Indra's golden union.¹³

Remarkable here is the indication of *dāsa-bhāva* or servile submission. This is a devotional or contemplative technique that is advised for facilitating union with the supreme in duality. The word *emasi* (*ā-ima-si*) – "The soul we have submitted servilely" – seems unequivocal.¹⁴ Generally, a

servile submission to Viṣṇu seems indicated. In case of followers of Indra, this might include submission to Bṛhaspati as well.

The verse is phrased in such a way as to indicate that Agni and Bṛhaspati are only instrumentalities. The ultimate object of the spiritual efforts is Viṣṇu. Towards him, souls – the own self, ego and individuality, are in self-restraint, self-control. This is the meaning accorded in this verse to servile submission or *dāsa bhāva* during spiritual effort.

The entry in the 7-8th verses, of Sri Viṣṇu as an object of spiritual striving is not abrupt or sudden. The ground is generally prepared in several earlier verses, but most specifically in Rg i.1.5. We now present a detailed analysis of that verse.

VERSE Rg i.1.5

agnihotā kavikratuḥ satyaścitraśravastamaḥ devo devebhīrā gamat

Padapāṭham

satyaḥ-citra-śravaḥ-tamaḥ

Translation

Agni, Hota, the wise purpose is the heaven of Truth, Brahman, Viṣṇu. The bright, conspicuous fame, the manifold wonderful stream, is mental darkness, illusion. Let god in the divine, with man approach.

Word Meanings & Grammar

agni Agni;

hotā hotṛ [nm. sg. hotṛ];

kavi-kratuḥ wise purpose [nm. sg. *kavikratu* m.; *kratu* = purpose A,Mw,C; *kavi* = wise];

satyaḥ m. Brahma loka or heaven of truth (A,Mw,W), Viṣṇu, Brahman (A,Mw);

citra-śravaḥ n. the manifold wonderful stream, the bright, conspicuous fame or loud praise [*citra* comp. n. = manifold, bright, conspicuous, wonderful; *śravaḥ* nm. sg. *śravas* n. = loud praise Mc, Mw; fame, stream, A,Mc,Mw];

tamaḥ n. mental darkness, illusion [nm. sg. *tamas* n. = mental darkness, illusion A,Mw,C, mental blindness, darkness W];

devaḥ god;

deve in the divine [lc. sg. *deva* = divine];

bhīrā with man [inst. sg. *bhīr* = man]¹⁵;

gamat Let ... approach [3rd p. sg. inj. pres. √gam; with lc. = to approach A,Mw, to come C].

Technical Comments

Since terms like Indra-Vayu, Mitra-Varuna elsewhere in Rgveda are treated as if they deal with two entities, Agni and Hota too must be separate entities – the former a god and the latter a man.

If we allow that Agni and Hota are separate entities, then they cannot be the subjects in this verse, since words that follow are not in dual form. Hence, it is assumed that they are being addressed, although the vocative mood is not in evidence.

¹⁰ This is usually translated as 'illuminer of dark' (Mc,Mw,C) or 'illuminer of the evening' [Jamison & Brereton 2014, 89].

¹¹ Sage-followers of Indra are indicated in Rg i.6.8 which speaks of *ganaiḥ indrasya* as the faultless, heavenward bound ones. This is indicative of sages. (It may be noted that the meaning of *gana* as retinues of sages is preserved in Jaina literature, where they are sagely followers of Mahāvīra Mw). In case of Indra's sage followers, 'surrender to *dīdivam*' could mean submission 'to Bṛhaspati' – the preceptor of Indra and the gods.

¹² Agni purana, Tr. N. Gangadharan, Motilal Banarasidas 1954

¹³ (cf. Rg i.7.2). The concluding phrase: *indro vajrī hiranyayah* (parsing the last word into *hiranya-yah*), can be translated as: "Indra is the one having the thunderbolt – golden union". Several verses from Vaiśvāmītra point towards Indra having developed a syncretic approach to union with the divine – but this requires detailed consideration in another paper.

¹⁴ The meaning is carried through even if we substitute 'verily' as a meaning of *ā*, instead of 'the soul'. In that case, the phrase would read 'verily, we have submitted servilely'.

¹⁵ The word *bhīr* is assigned the meaning of man (comp. form), on the following grounds.

In eight verses of Vaiśvāmītra, words whose instrumental plural ends in '*aiḥ*', extend into *bhīḥ*. These words and verses are *pūrva*, *deva* (Rg i.1.2 & 5 resp.), *uktha* (Rg i.2.2), *vāja* (Rg i.5.3), *arka* (Rg i.7.1), *sūra* (Rg i.8.4) *parva* (Rg i.9.1). Parsing these words gives '*bhīr*' or '*bhīḥ*', which does not have an accepted presence. Taking cue from Monier Williams who gives *bhīru* as a name for man, *bhīr* was experimentally assigned the meaning of 'man', with satisfactory results in all instances. It is learnt that even to this day, man is called '*bhīr*' and a woman '*bhīraṇī*' in Haryana.

Satyah has a masculine gender, while words that follow it *citra-śravas*, *tamaḥ* have neuter gender. Even if one allows *tamaḥ* to be a taddhita affix, *śravas* is always of neuter gender, unless as *śravaḥ* it relates to the ear or hearing. If the *taddhita* assumption is dropped, then *tamaḥ* becomes nominative of *tamas* that has neuter gender.

In view of the above, it seems plausible to suppose that *satyah* is not qualified by the subsequent words. This reasoning influences our translation.

Comments

This verse declares to Agni and Hotā, that the ‘wise purpose’, the wise desire or wish, in actions, is “*satyah*”. This word can mean Satya Loka, Brahman or Viṣṇu.

It is remarkable that the formulation in this verse allows for a variety in spiritual beliefs and practices, with *vaiṣṇava* beliefs being one alternative. The next verse Rg i.1.6 deals with those aspiring towards Brahman and/or Śiva, while the 7th and 8th verses revert to Viṣṇu. Rgveda is the oldest and the most syncretic of Indian scriptures.

If aspiring to *satyaloka*, Brahman or Viṣṇu is the wise purpose, what is unwise in human pursuits? It is ‘bright fame’ and the ‘manifold wonderful stream’.

The manifold wonderful stream is the material world. It is agreeable and beautiful, attracting the one possessed of inner fire. But it is in constant flux. Since it negates itself, it is illusion, untruth, *asat*.¹⁶ Chasing this stream, diverts one from the pursuit of *sat* or Truth. The chase entrenches belief in illusion, and creates mental darkness. This is an unwise purpose.

Likewise, bright fame loud praise feeds the ego. It keeps man away from enlightenment. It is therefore unwise.

The 5th verse concludes with a remark on the the true function of god, the *iṣṭa devata*. This is to approach in the divine with man, to attain to the supreme goal, to *satya loka*, Brahman or Viṣṇu. Hence:

“*devaḥ deve-bhirā gamat*”

This advice resonates in Bhagavad Gita 3:10-11, which adds stress on interdependence:

“Brahmā, the creator, ... said: ... Nourish the Devas with Yajna, and the Devas will nourish you. Thus helping one another you shall attain the Supreme goal.” [Davies 1889, 49]¹⁷

Conclusions

Although only a few Rgvedic hymns are dedicated exclusively to Viṣṇu, his place is central to spiritual striving, at least in the verses coming through Vaiśvāmītra.

Viṣṇu is a wise spiritual purpose or *satyah* (which could also mean *satyaloka* or Brahman) in Rg: i.1.5. Nightly spiritual vigils of sages, their soul submitted servilely to the guardian of immortality, director of the attentive, upright and non-violent are indicated in Rgs i.1.7-8. This is Viṣṇu, called Vardhamāna here. He is called *dīdiviḥ* who could also be Bṛahaspati to allow for possible practices sage followers of Indra.

‘Servile submission’ to Viṣṇu seems to mean here - to keep one’s own self, ego, individuality, one’s very soul, as it were, in self control and self-restraint. This is ‘*dāsa bhāva*’.

Thus, devotion, religious contemplation and meditation, servile submission in relation to Viṣṇu, a wise purpose for man and god, are all present in the very first hymn of Rgveda.

Abbreviations

m. male gender; f. female gender; n. neuter gender; p. person; sg. singular; dl. dual pl. plural; perf. perfect; pres. present; act. active; part. participle; mid. middle; adv. adverbial form; nm. nominative; vc. vocative; ac. accusative; g. genitive; lc. locative; inst. instrumental; impv. imperative mood; inj. injunctive mood.

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¹⁶ Truth is that which cannot be negated.

¹⁷ The words used in the Gita are: श्रेयः परमअथ-अवाप्सि-, i.e., ‘final beatitude or bliss of final emancipation’ you obtain then’, which has been translated as the ‘supreme goal’.