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

Dr. Rahul A Shastri

Abstract
Viṣṇu, inspite of sparsity of explicit mention or dedication in Rgveda, has a central place in spiritual striving, in its very first hymn. Viṣṇu is a wise spiritual purpose or satya (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 Vardhamāṇa here. He is called dādiviḥ who could also be Brahma 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 Rgveda.

Introduction
The name ‘Viṣṇu’ occurs only 113 times in the 15,553 verses of Rgveda, and the name ‘Śiva’, not even once, whereas Griffith [1829] finds over 2900 references to Indra. Only a few hymns in the Rgveda 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, it is generally concluded that neither Viṣṇu nor Śiva had the extraordinary stature in Rgveda that they have in contemporary Hinduism [Jamison & Brereton 2014, 52-53; Banerji 1939, 35].

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, even allowing for the possibility that their original purpose may have been different, the understanding of the hymns generally remains tied to rituals. This dominant tenor of translations has led historians to conclude that the earliest religion was “primitive animism” and ritual sacrifice was its central feature and even encouraged some historians to deny the revelatory origin of Rgveda.

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 vedas “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 Paton, 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]
Given the centrality of ritual in this perspective, spiritual striving in the hymns finds hardly any substantive room in translations. For instance, ‘meditation’ in different modes appears 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 (Rg iv.54.1). 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 Rigveda (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 Satyā, the nightly spiritual efforts of sages are covered by the word dhiyā (inst. sg. dhi) 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 Rigveda.

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, dhi 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 adhvāra 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 RG: i.1.7-8
ups tvāṇe divedive doṣāvastardhiyā vayam namo bharanta emasi rājantamadhvarānām gopāṁrtasya didivim vardhamānam sve dāme

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

Translation
Towards you O Agni day by day, fault and evenning 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
(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
ups towards;
tvā you [ac. sg. yuṣmad Mw, CW1];
agni O Agni [vc. sg. agni ];
divedive day by day;
dosau two dosā i.e.; fault; evening [nm. dl. dosā = fault; evening also dosā A,Mw,C,];
astah set aside (Mw,W);
dhiyā with spiritual effort DMT [inst. sg. dhi = devotion, meditation, thought esp. religious – Hence ’spiritual effort (DMT)’];
vayam we;
namah gift, thunderbolt [nm. sg. namas n. = thunderbolt A,Mw, gift A,Mw,W];
bharantaḥ supporting, bearing carrying [nm. pl. bharat – pres.act.part. vhr = to support, to bear, to carry];
ā soul [nm. sg. an = soul A];
ima we have submitted [1st p. pl. perf. act. ṛe = to submit A,Mw];
si servilely [adv. si = service, serving Mw, bound, attentive B, to bind ShSg];
rājant to the Director [ac. sg. rājat – pres.act.part. ṛra = to direct];
adhvarāṁ of the attentive, of upright, of non-violent ones [inst. pl. adhvarara = attentive A,W,G,ShSg; not injuring Mw, not crooked A,G,ShSg];
gopa guardian;
āmrasya of immortality; of nectar of immortality [g. sg. amṛta = immortality, nectar of immortality];
ādidivim to the shining one, to Bṛhaspati [ac. sg. didivi = shining A,Mw,Mc; Bṛhaspati A,W,Mw];
vardhamānam towards Viṣṇu [ac. sg. vardhamāna = Viṣṇu A,Mw];
vse souls, own selves, egos [nm. pl. sve = soul A,W, the human soul Mw; one’s self Mw,C,A; ego Mw,Mc; self identity, individuality W];
Technical comments
dosāvastar is decomposed into dosau-astabh, where dosau is dual form of dosa in accusative mood. emasi is decomposed into ā ima-si.

Comments
This verse records the nightly spiritual vigils of sages, including followers of Indra, 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 (dīdiviḥ). 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’(dīdiviḥ) also fits, since Viṣṇu is known as prakāśatāma (v. 30, Vsn). In case the sages are followers of Indra (cf Rg i.6.8), dīdiviḥ may mean Bṛhaspati, who is the spiritual preceptor of Indra and the devas.

In the spiritual effort (dīhi) of sages, fault and evening are both set aside (dosau 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 Kundalini, 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 Aṇgipurāṇa 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 7th-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
agnihotra kavikratuḥ satyaścitārāvastamaḥ devo devebhīrī gamat

Padapātham
satyā-citra-śravāḥ-tamah

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 hoṭr [nm. sg. hoṭr]; kavi-kraṭuḥ wise purpose [nn. sg. kavi kru m.; kraṭu = purpose A,Mw,C; kavi = wise]; satyāḥ 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]; tamah n. mental darkness, illusion [nn. sg. tamas n. = mental darkness, illusion A,Mw,C, mental blindness, darkness W]; devaḥ god; deve in the divine [lc. sg. deva = divine]; bhīrī with man [inst. sg. bhīr = man];
gamat Let ... approach [3rd p. sg. inj. pres. 有益; with lc. = to approach A,Mw, to come C].

Technical Comments
Since terms like Indra-Vayu, Mira-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 & Breton 2014, 89].

11 Sage-followers of Indra are indicated in Rg i.6.8 which speaks of goaḥ indraṣva as the faultless, heavenward bound ones. This is indicative of sages. (It may be noted that the meaning of goaḥ as re iterations 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 vajr hiṁsanayaḥ (parasing the last word into hiṁsanaḥ), can be translated as: “Indra is the one having the thunderbolt – golden union”. Several verses from Vaiṣṇavmitra 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 ǳ instead of ‘the soul’. In that case, the phrase would read ‘verily, we have submitted servilely’.
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 śravas it relates to the ear or hearing. If the taddhita assumption is dropped, then tamaḥ becomes indicative 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, Brahma or Viṣṇu.

It is remarkable that the formulation in this verse allows for a variety in spiritual beliefs and practices, with vaiśṇava beliefs being one alternative. The next verse Rg i.1.6 deals with those aspiring towards Brahm 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, Brahma 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 īśta devata. This is to approach in the divine with man, to attain to the supreme goal, to satya loka, Brahma or Viṣṇu. Hence:

“devah deve-bhirā gamat”

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

“Brahmā, the creator, … said: … Nourish the Devas with Yajña, 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 Vaiśvāmitra.

Viṣṇu is a wise spiritual purpose or satyah (which could also mean satyaloka or Brahma) 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 didīvih who could also be Brahspati 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; mn. nominative; vc. vocative; ac. accusative; g. genitive; lc. locative; inst. instrumental; impv. imperative mood; inj. injunctive mood.

References

2. Banerji RD. Prehistoric, Ancient and Hindu India, Blackie and Sons (India) Ltd, Bombay, 1939.

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16 Truth is that which cannot be negated.
17 The words used in the Gita are: वेय । परमसुध्य-अवलस्य । ।, i.e., ‘final beatitude or bliss of final emancipation’ you obtain then’, which has been translated as the ‘supreme goal’.

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