

**RATIONALITY AS A CRITERION
FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF *R̥gveda****

I

Exactly sixty years ago in 1923, Karl Friedrich Geldner writing the preface of his German translation of the *R̥gveda* pointed out :

‘Nevertheless the *R̥gveda* remains the oldest monument of the Indian literature, the book of books, in which the broad stream of the political, intellectual and religious evolution of India can be traced backwards to its last sources. For the linguistic and religious researcher it has not lost anything of any great significance in spite of the masterly method. Its research should always lie at the heart of Indologists now as before. Here in order to enliven and fructify this research a new translation has been undertaken although for the time being such an attempt may appear daring. An ideal translation of *R̥gveda* should not only fully exhaust the meaning of the original text but also preserve the original *venre* measure, in order to bring the character of the poem to express in the form... what I have strived for is also a faithful philological translation’.¹

The importance of *R̥gveda* remains unchanged, so is our understanding of it. Despite its unique position at the source of a long literary tradition covering at least three and half millennia, the present understanding of *R̥gveda* is not complete. The modern researches have tried to penetrate into its secret, but to what

extent they have succeeded is attested by the following summary :

‘The Vedic literature is imaginative or primarily concerned with *religious ritual* .. It mentions many tribes, places, and rivers which are probably *historical* but for the most part they cannot be satisfactorily identified or located’...
 ‘The *dividing line* between events on earth and *mythology* is not clearly maintained in these poems (i. e. *Rgveda*) and was probably *not even logically conceived*’²

The position between Geldner's translation and in 1967 when Crossland wrote the above has not radically changed. *Rgveda* has not yielded its significance or rather its secret. The problems are four. Despite modern methods of research which are described by Geldner as ‘masterly’ these compositions brought together in *Rgveda* are still considered basically religious.

They pertain to religious ritual. This necessarily gives a framework to their interpretation and understanding. This is problem one. The social and geographical details mentioned in these poems appear to belong to this earth and therefore create historical bias. The temptation to verify these cannot be avoided but still evades a firm grasp. A historical framework was not found useful to further the understanding of *Rgveda* and hence not above suspicion about its very existence. This is problem number two. The reason for this is the mixing up of the two levels earthly and mythological which cannot be separated from each other. At least so far it has not been possible to do so. And therefore Crossland finally expresses the doubt that probably these compositions are ‘not logically conceived’. In this last problem of the logical conception we really come to the criterion of rationality. *Rgveda* is known to contain mythology and mysticism. Having been considered a religious work all along, history or historical interpretation and with it the

necessary verification of facts, agents, events and such other details necessary in a historical reconstruction and a documentation to establish their having been a part of earthly life with the criterion of rationality and every day logic has probably been not seriously considered. Despite Geldner's efforts to give a faithful philological translation many times he heavily depends upon Sāyaṇa's commentary. Establishing historical sequence of events will not be possible without a rigorous rational interpretation of the Ṛgvedic compositions. If this is to be done we have to rescue the compositions from the twin grip of mythopoeic and mystic interpretation and for doing this the source or the springs of mythopoeic thought have to be discovered. This touches upon 'the dividing line between events on earth and mythology'. Thus the problems of Ṛgvedic interpretation outlined above are not separate but corollaries of one and the same problem and that is the failure to establish the source of the mythopoeic.

Moreover establishing rationality of Ṛgvedic narratives cannot be a criterion for their historicity. In order to establish the historicity, yet another verifactory source is necessary which may be found in contemporary or pre-Ṛgvedic records or archaeological material.³

It is true the criterion of rationality assumes that Ṛgvedic compositions contain a logic or rationality which has evaded us so far. In assuming this we are not blundering because for the larger part the Ṛgvedic language and conceptions do not differ much from our own experience of every day reality and that embodied in Ṛgveda.⁴ And therefore it is possible that mythology found in Ṛgveda is a later day creation which was not in the minds of or expressions and their meaning used by the Ṛgvedic poets.

II

In making rationality a criterion we shall not be doing anything absolutely novel. The history of Ṛgvedic phonetic, etymological and grammatical studies have for more than two millennia tried to preserve Ṛgvedic text and understand it and in the process has evolved the long tradition of linguistic and grammatical studies. Amongst such works may be mentioned *Prātiśākhya* texts, the *Nighaṇṭu* and *Nirukta* of Yāska. The former has three branches : The *saṁhitā-pāṭha*, the *pada-pāṭha* and the *krama-pāṭha*, which assist in understanding the text of *Ṛgveda* and other vedas. These have been of use even to modern scholars. This shows that through these linguistic works the ancients also tried to arrive at interpretations and which means it was an attempt to understand *Ṛgveda* logically, rationally by a detailed study of language.

Yāska's is the first known attempt to interpret etymologically the Vedic texts in his *Nirukta* which itself was removed in age and linguistic state from the *saṁhitās*, which is apparent from his remarks about the language of the Vedas and the language of intercourse current in his own time.⁵ It is also apparent that even in his days the meaningfulness of the Ṛgvedic verses was already doubted. He refers to this controversy. He puts forth a stout defence for interpreting the Ṛgvedic verses through grammatical forms and accentuation.⁶ Evidently already during Yāska's days the meaning of the verses had become obscure. This may have happened even earlier as the list of words called *Nighaṇṭu* which forms the basis of *Nirukta* were handed down traditionally on which he comments. According to Roth, the plan of interpretation of Indian commentators like Yāska was not traditional. It was in reality a grammatical and etymological one. Roth thinks that the scholastic ideas were introduced at an early period but not until the hymns had already become the

subject of learned study, and the religious views.⁷ Yāska belonged to a tradition of etymological interpretation of *Ṛgveda* which he refers to as the *nairuktāḥ*, the school of etymologists. However, an important passage from the 12th section of 1st *pariśiṣṭa* of *Nirukta* speaks about the method of interpretation :

‘This reflective deduction of the sense of the hymns is effected by the help of sacred tradition and reasoning. The texts are not to be interpreted as isolated, but according to their context. For a person who is not a *ṛṣi* or a devotee has no intuitive insight into their meaning. We have said before that among those men who are versed in tradition, he who is most learned deserves especial commendation. When the *ṛṣis* were ascending, men inquired of the gods ‘Who shall be our *ṛṣis*?’ The gods gave them a *ṛṣi* for the science of reasoning, the art of deducing by reflection the sense of the hymns. Therefore, whatever meaning any learned man deduces by reasoning that possesses authority equal to to *ṛṣi*’s.’⁸

This passage, considered by some to be of a later date establishes reason as a factor in the ascertainment of religious truth. They also had an idea that inductive method of interpretation follows from this.

Next to Yāska, Sāyaṇa is considered to have contributed greatly to Vedic exegesis. To him *Ṛgveda* was a sacred book, a source of all wisdom. Although he has a method of interpretation, it can by no stretch of imagination be called rational, his explanations of Vedic narratives being based on from *purāṇas* containing the mythopoeic accretions accumulated down the ages. However Sāyaṇa sometimes uses some unknown sources of tradition and knowledge which are more accessible to us and this is perhaps the use of Sāyaṇa.

R. Roth occupies a unique position in the history of Vedic studies in as much as he is the founder of the inductive and historical method in this field.

III

Thus were laid the foundations of the rational interpretation of *Rgveda*, of which Geldner's translation is probably the most philological of such works, in attempting to make it rational. However, despite this we have seen above the difficulties faced in rendering *Rgveda* logical.

This state of affairs, it seems to us, is mainly due to the fact that despite the sincerest attempts the Vedic interpretation has not been able to make a clean break with the mythopoeic and sacrificial interpretation so lavishly imposed by Sāyaṇa. Moreover it seems to be considered an integral element of *Rgvedic* hymns so that a thoroughly rational interpretation of the hymns is no more considered a possibility and in fact the rational interpretation is even considered ludicrous ! It is forgotten that however impossible a hypothesis might look, the research method requires that the evidence cited and the reasoning advanced to reach certain conclusions, must be thoroughly examined before it is rejected or accepted. In any case as a scientific pursuit it must get a fair trial.

In order to bring about a clean break with the earlier interpretative technique, we have to attack the very foundations of the earlier method. The paradigm of traditional interpretation consists in the (linguistic) phenomenon by which certain words are interpreted in two (or more) ways, one in the context of gods (the *devas*) and the other in the context of *asuras* (the adversaries of *devas*). As an example we may quote the word '*asura*' itself when it is used in the context of the so called

devas it has good sense; when it is used in the context of the adversaries of Indra, as in *asura* Namuci, *asura* Araru, etc. it means an evil being. Besides this, in *Rv* X. 177 it also signifies a god-head i. e. a name of a god.

In a scientific and inductive methodology all uses of the word may be examined and an attempt to establish a logical link between all three should be made. What is most important is to examine the basis for the 'good' and 'bad' contexts.

However this has never been done, as a result of which the interpretation of *Rgveda* could not get rid of the mythopoeic element in interpretation and reach the true rational foundations. One instance of how mythopoeic can be eliminated by questioning this paradigm is given here :

Amongst the Asuras destroyed by Indra is one Araru. There are two references in *Rv* to Indra-Araru episode. The narrative by itself is significant for two reasons. It illustrates the general trend of *devāsura* conflict in a particularised manner. Secondly, it illustrates the close connection between *Rgvedic* verses and the *brāhmaṇa* narratives and rites as symbolic enactment of certain events.

In *Rgveda*, Araru is mentioned only twice. First in I. 129.3 he is given one line of a three-lined verse, 2. Whereas in X. 99.10 he appears only in the fourth *pāda*. In the first case, Sāyaṇa has interpreted Araru as a cloud and the whole line is commented upon to fit in this context. Geldner has translated the name Araru but has followed Sāyaṇa's interpretation. His translation is as follows : "O brave one, protect every inimical mortal, while you pass over the mortal...". The line reads as : *dasmo hi śmā vṛṣaṇam pinvasi tvacām. kaṁ cidvāvirararum śūra martyam parivṛṇakṣi martyam*. The crucial words in this

line are 'vr̥ṣaṇam tvacaṇ' 'yāvīh' and parivṛṇakṣi'. The first, vr̥ṣaṇam tvacam' is a straight forward expression and refers to Arartu and Indra's treatment of him.

Araru is the bull-like man, the naravṛśabha which in later days is the title of a strong, verile he-man. This Araru was fettered by Indra which is sarcastically referred to as 'Indra allowed him to feed himself well'. 'Yāvīh' may be derived from √yu, to ward off, 'Parivṛṇakṣi' is derived from pari+vr̥j, to keep off, remove, i. e. similar to 'yu'. Thus, now the translation of the above line may be : " O you accomplisher of wonderful deeds, you fatten the skin of the bull (like man). O brave one, some mortal Araru you have warded off, you have indeed removed the mortal." The adjective martya, mortal applied to Araru is to be noted as it brings him down from the mythopoeic level to the human and terrestrial !

The second reference to Araru in Rv X. 99.10 is short but meaningful. The verse is in praise of Indra. Only the relevant fourth pāda is examined here : amimī tārarum yaścatuspātā. The epithet, catuṣpāt is glossed upon by Sāyana as pādacatuṣṭayopetaḥ one endowed with four feet. Geldner has followed Sāyana's gloss. The padapāṭha writes it as catuḥ pāt, i. e. treats it as two separate words. Thus pāt when treated as a separate word is the present participle of √pā, to watch, keep, preserve, defend against, to protect etc. Thus the verse may now be translated as : 'He who measured Araru, preserving (him) four times.'

The Saṁhitā and Brāhmaṇa version support this interpretation. Vājasaneyī-Saṁhitā (VS) I.26, śatapatha-brāhmaṇa (SB) I 2.4.15-21 and Taitirīya-brāhmaṇa (TB) III.2.9.4-6 supply most of the information. VS I-26 cites the mantras, the accompanying actions being explained in the SB passage. TB

III. 2. 2. 4-6 run as follows : There was an *asura* called Araru. He lay concealed (?) on the earth. So the *devas* said : Araru has been killed by the earth and therefore killed him by earth. Araru was an enemy... They thought : If unrestrained, he will fly to *div*. Therefore, in order that he should not run away to *div*, they surrounded the *div*. So they drove (him) away the second (time). (He was) beaten away from *antarikṣa*. That was the third driving away. They beat him (saying) this is the *div*. They drive away fourth (time) silently. They drive him from the *aparimita*, the infinite. He was the chief of the *asuras*.

SB narrative is the most detailed account and probably a faithful representation of events which appear to be realistic enough to have taken place. We cite below SB 1. 2. 4. 14-26 from Eggeling's translation : 14. And whoever has evil design upon the sacrifice and hates him, him he put down by means of these (three) worlds and what fourth world there is beyond these. And in putting him down with these three worlds and what fourth world there is beyond these, he flings everything away from this (earth), for on it all these worlds rest....

15. Thereupon after putting the grass-bush between he flings (the wooden sword at it). 'Lest I should injure the earth with this sharp thunderbolt !' Thus (he thinks) for that reason he flings after putting the grass bush between.

16. He flings it, with the text : 'O earth, thou affordest the place for making offerings to the gods ! May I not injure the root of thy plant !' He thereby makes her as if it were with roots remaining in her. Whilst he takes up (the earth dug by the sword), he thus addresses her : May I not injure the roots of thy (plant) and in further saying, 'Go to the fold, the abode of the cows !' when he is about to throw it away (on the heap of rubbish), he causes it not to forsake him : for that which is

within the fold does not forsake him : for that reason he says, ' Go to the fold, the abode of the cows ! ' ... ' Tie him down, O divine Savitṛ, to the furthest end of the earth ! ' he says (whilst throwing on the heap of rubbish the soil dug up) : he thus says to the divine savitṛ : ' Tie him down to blind darkness ! ' When he says to the furthest end of the earth '—' with a hundred fetters ! ' by this he means to say, ' so that he cannot free himself '.—' Him who hates us and whom we hate do not release from there ! ' ... (17) He then throws (the wooden sword) a second time : ' May I drive Araru away from the earth, the place of offerings ! ' Araru, namely, was an Asura and Rakṣas. Him the gods drive away from this (earth) and in the same way he (the *Adhvaryu*) thereby drives him away from this (earth). He adds (whilst repeating the several corresponding acts) : ' Go to fold ... ditto ... release him from there ! ' (18) The *Āgnidhra* presses it down (on the heap of rubbish) with the text : O Araru ! Thou shalt not fly up to heaven ! For when the gods drove away Araru, the Asura-Rakṣas he wished to fly up to heaven Agni pressed him down, saying ' O Araru, thou shalt not fly up to heaven ! ' and he did not fly up to heaven. In the same way the *Adhvaryu* thereby cuts him off from this world, and the *Āgnidhra* from the side of heaven. That is the reason why he does this. He adds : ' Go to the fold etc. (19) He then throws (the wooden sword) a third time with the text ... (2) Three times he throws it with the sacrificial formula, for three are these worlds and with these worlds, he thereby puts him down (21). Silently he throws a fourth time. What fourth world there may or may not be beyond these (three) by that one he thereby drives away the spiteful enemy ...⁹

The symbolism used is : The blade of grass is Araru. The *Āgnidhra*, the text explains, is virtually *agni* himself, *Adhvaryu* enacts the actions performed by the *devas* themselves i. e. he

shuts the *asuras* in from his side. In that battle which is the theme of para 8-10 the *devas* set fire from the northern side so that the *asuras* should not be able to escape.

To summarise the incident : Perhaps Araru, an *Asura*, an enemy of Indra fell into his hands and was kept in captivity in a cow-shed with Savitā as the guard. He was not killed immediately, though it was thought of. This vacillation is explained by the change of mind of *Adhvaryu*. He first thinks of throwing away the blade of grass on the heap of rubbish, but instead decides to preserve it in the cowshed because whatever is within the shed does not forsake him. So he preserved it. But obviously Araru tried to escape to *Div*, but did not succeed as the fire had blocked his way. Therefore the text says, *āgnidhra*, the virtual *agni*, presses him down. The attempt to flee roused the wrath of the *devas* who killed him. He dies with the fourth stroke. The four strokes represent the three attempts to escape and the fourth one during which he was killed and virtually the three worlds and the fourth one beyond this universe i. e. after death. Thus *catuspāt* of the *RV* version refers to four as being the number of times he has been saved or preserved by the *devas* after having been taken into captivity.

We see here clearly the process of creating the mythique in an originally realistic event, a man trying to escape from a forced captivity four times after which he was killed. Araru is called 'mortal' and had nothing demoniac about him. As soon as we know the correct meaning of *catuspāt* for which *padapāṭha* and also the *Brāhmaṇas* furnish the evidence, the mythic element disappears which means this was the original meaning meant to be conveyed by the poet.

We have attributed this change to a self-conscious external interference. This was introduced at a later date. In order to

determine the timing of this change, it is sufficient to point out that as the above narrative demonstrates it did not exist during the days of the *Brāhmaṇas*. In this particular instance we may hold Sāyaṇa or pre-Sāyaṇa commentators no more available to us, to be responsible for the change of meaning of *catuṣpāt*. But the general change of the *asuras* and their allies being represented as the evil forces and the *devas* as representing good may have been introduced at the time when the *Ṛgveda* was made basis for a ritualistic religion. This change is a cultural change which according to anthropologists must 'inevitably result, sooner or later, in changes in all other aspects.'¹⁰ The new religion was created by the change of roles which was effected by the change of meaning of certain crucial words, like *asura*, *Vṛtra*, *purohita*, *dāsa*, *dasyu*, *paṇi*, *śipiviṣṭa*, *dasra*, etc, or through the use of transparent symbolism as in the case of Viṣṇu-narrative. This means that a cultural change was effected through semantic change which in turn may have set in motion through chain reaction wider linguistic change which is yet to be studied.

Thus it is possible to account for the mythopoeic element in *Ṛgveda* which should help us to establish the realistic and rational meaning of *Ṛgveda*, the meaning primarily meant to be conveyed by the poets. And perhaps this is the true significance of the *Ṛgveda* which Geldner hoped the researcher will discover.

1603, Saraswati Prasad
Sadashiv Peth
PUNE 411030

MALATI J. SHENDGE

NOTES

- * This paper was read at the 31st CISHAAN held at Tokyo-Kyoto, Aug 31-Sept. 7, 1983.
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