A Critical Analysis of the Translations of the Brhaspatisūkta of the Rgveda by the Western Scholars

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Abstract: When it comes to understanding ancient scriptures, particularly Vedas, commentaries not only play a crucial role but are rather indispensable. Even to understand the nuances present in the commentary, one has to learn from scholars rooted in the tradition, and hence we have the guru–śiṣya–paramparā. Given this, the kind of translation given to mantras in the Rgveda by some of the western scholars not only does not synchronise with indigenous thought inlaid in the commentaries but is also found to be misleading. In order to illustrate this, in the present paper, we have taken up the Brhaspatisūkta (10.68) for analysis. Here each mantra is examined with respect to morphology, grammar, syntax and context. The key differences between the commentaries of Śaṅkara and translations of select western scholars, as well as incoherence with the indigenous narrative and philosophical tradition, are discussed.

Keywords: Rgveda, Vedas, Mantras, Western Scholars

Introduction

As per Indian tradition, the study of the Vedas with a comprehensive understanding is mandatory. Commentaries that bring out the meaning of the Vedas facilitate a much better understanding of the Vedic texts. It seems that there have been many commentaries authored on the Vedas; however, only a few of them are available today in their entirety. The tradition of authoring commentaries is not only restricted to Vedic tradition but well extends to other branches of knowledge such as Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, Vyākaraṇa and so on. These branches of knowledge along with commentaries (bhāṣya) have been further supplemented by expositions (vyākhya), annotations (ṭīkā vārttika), explanatory guides (vivaraṇa), compendiums (sāra and sarigraha) and so on. Because of this, the original texts remain semantically intact even when certain people attempt to present contradictory or misleading translations without proper understanding of the prerequisites to study such texts. In the case of the Vedas, even though we find commentaries (bhāṣya), a further layer of analysis, such as expositions, annotations etc., is scarce. Without having grounded properly in a well-established method involving the study of the vedāṅgas, the attempts made by some western scholars, given the scarcity of supplementary layers of analysis, miss out on conveying the Vedas’ real essence. When we look into various western sources that have been attempted to facilitate our understanding of the mantras of the Rgveda, each of them has its own shortcomings. For instance, western translations of Śaṅkara are found to have considerable misinterpretations at various places. The nature of the translations of the Rgveda by western scholars does not synchronise with indigenous thought of the Indian tradition of commentaries.

1 A brāhmaṇa must study the Vedas along with the six Vedāṅgas, without any reason; it is his Dharma. “अब्राह्मण निर्यात्तो घो यदाहि निर्यात्तो न सः” (सप्तसत्तरीति- महाभारत 1.58) (Rajwade, Rgveda Samhitā: With the Commentary of Śaṅkara, 1933, p. 21)
2 Only a few commentators have attempted to explore the meaning of the entire Rgvedic corpus. Unfortunately, all the texts of all these commentators are not available now. Some are partially available among the commentaries, and some are on selected portions of the Rgveda. Not all commentators specifically mention the mandalas or aṣṭakas covered in their texts. A few commentators are only mentioned in some commentaries by other authors whose time and work are not known. Only the commentary by Śaṅkara is complete.
The translations of H.H. Wilson\(^3\) (Wilson henceforth), Ralph T. H. Griffith\(^4\) (Griffith henceforth) and Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton\(^5\) (J&B henceforth), when seen in comparison with Sāyaṇācārya’s work, one finds that Wilson’s translation is closest to it with minimal differences. In contrast, Griffith has attempted to give an independent translation of the Ṛgveda at certain places, and in his translation, one could easily note a gradual increasing degree of differences with Sāyaṇācārya’s work can be found. J&B, however, have produced their independent work, where one scarcely finds any similarities with that of Sāyaṇācārya’s commentary.

It is quite natural to have a difference of opinion in the interpretations of any literature by scholars belonging to varied ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Even in the same tradition, the interpretation may vary at different time frames. The colonial period in the Indian subcontinent witnessed a considerable study of Vedas and other indigenous literature by western scholars. Along with this, they created vast interpretive literature on the Vedas and other Indian texts based on philological hypotheses. They also formed their opinions on other Indian commentators, which were reflected in their respective translations. Some followed the lines of Indian commentators, whereas some refuted their validity.

This paper deals with the confusion which arises when western commentators completely misunderstand key figures and portray them otherwise and conceptually misinterpret the overall theme of the sūkta 10.68.

### Pre-knowledge for the sūkta

The present sūkta is the 68\(^{th}\) sūkta of the 10\(^{th}\) maṇḍala or the 8\(^{th}\) sūkta of the 5\(^{th}\) anuvāka of the 10\(^{th}\) maṇḍala. There are 12 mantras in this sūkta. The ēśi of this sūkta is Ayāśya of Aṅgirasas gotra. The devatā is Brhaspati, and the sūkta is composed in Tristup metre.

Before we look into the present sūkta, a certain understanding is needed. Sāyaṇa, (Rajwade, 1933, p. 4\(^{th}\))\(^6\) begins his commentary by introducing the background story of the present sūkta. Brhaspati is the son of Aṅgiras, and he is the purohita of Indra. Once, the demons Pāṇis stole the cows of Indra and kept them in a dark hidden place in the city of Vala. Indra then sent his dog Saramā to find his cows. When Saramā was unable to complete the task, Indra approached Brhaspati to find them and bring them back.

### The background story of the sūkta

As per the story, when Brhaspati heard the cows’ mooing from the caves of the mountain, he recognised them as Indra’s cows. When Brhaspati destroyed the weapons of Vala, covered by his soldiers from all sides, the cows hidden in the cave became visible. Consequently, Brhaspati brought out the cows from the caves and reunited the deities with their cows. The deities obliged by Brhaspati sang his praises.

### Misinterpretation of the sūkta

Below are some of the major areas where the independent translations present a variety of problems with respect to morphology, grammar, syntax and context. The key differences with Sāyaṇācārya’s commentary and others, as well as incoherence with the indigenous narrative and philosophical tradition, are also mentioned.

**[Mantra 10.68.1]**

In the first mantra,\(^7\) of 10.68th sūkta, Wilson has translated the first example as ‘Like birds swimming in water when keeping watch’ which is different from Sāyaṇācārya. Griffith is also in line with Wilson as he translates the example, ‘Like birds who keep their watch, plashing in water’. J&B have also translated the example independent of Sāyaṇācārya as ‘Constantly gabbling like water birds watching out for each other’. Sāyaṇācārya’s

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\(^3\) H. H. Wilson (1866)

\(^4\) Ralph T. H. Griffith (1889)

\(^5\) Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton (2014)

\(^6\) (कुरुक्षेत्र सातवाच १-८, दूर २०४, २०५, प्रकाशी)

\(^7\) उपरुपुरी न न्यो मृतयुगा कल्याच अभिण्वेष्य पौयाणा विरृष्णी केसली मार्गो वृहत्तिथिर्यं चतुर्वष अर्थाच
explanation would read ‘As the emitters of water, the husbandmen, call out when keeping the birds off the ripe grain’.  

This throws light on the varying perspectives of translators on issues related to the mind and its attributes.

[Mantra 10.68.2]

In the second mantra, there are two different similes which superficially look like a string of interweaved similes that later becomes the basis of confusion and complication for foreign authors, but Sāyaṇācārya has been successful in the uncouling of one simile from the other. Unfortunately, foreign authors have further entangled the mantra rather than disentangling it.

The translation of the second mantra by Griffith is highly misinterpreted due to various levels of errors. Firstly, Brhaspati himself is shown to meet the cattle instead of bringing the cattle to the devatā. He has mistaken the 'bhaga' simile to denote the meeting instead of the actual comparison with the pervasion of the brightness of Brhaspati.

The second problematic part of the sentence is ‘brought in aryaman among us.’ According to Griffith, the ‘aryaman’ is the ‘matchmaker’, a loosely translated word that is not supported by ample evidence. Moreover, the supplementary terms ‘among us’ seem to be unnecessary, misleading the entire context. Therefore, the whole of construe/construct has been disorganised.

J&B, in their introduction to this sūkta, mention that Brhaspati ‘reunited the Āṅgirasas with their cows.’ (Jamison & Brereton, 2014, p. 1491) This statement does not seem right, as Brhaspati himself is Āṅgirasa mentioned in the nominative case, and he joins the cows with ‘aryaman’. Furthermore, as per the introduction, ‘aryaman’ is the ‘civilising god of custom, of one whose roles is patron of marriage, to the marriage ceremony in order to preside.’ (Jamison & Brereton, 2014, p. 1491) But it is challenging to find a proof for such a statement.

They have also complicated the word ‘mitra’ in the given translation, but it is difficult to find the reason for the complication because the word is clearly used in its masculine form, which means Sun, and not neuter, which gives the meaning of an ‘ally’.

Another word which actually complicates the interpretation is ‘anoints’, a translation for the word ‘anakti’, derived from the root anija, which means ‘to join’, or ‘to collect’, or ‘to make impure’ etc., whereas, the biblical term ‘anoints’ is defined by the Cambridge dictionary (Press, 2021) as ‘to make someone holy in a religious ceremony by putting holy water or oil on them’ or ‘to make someone king or queen, especially as part of a religious ceremony.’

This definition does not suit the given context, as here, Brhaspati has united the husband and wife, as Mitra (unites his radiance) with the people. (Wilson, 2016, p. 362) The sense of making someone holy seems very limited and puts down the essence of the sūkta.

[Mantra 10.68.4]

In the fourth mantra, Griffith has again insensibly altered the construe in addition to mistaking certain words in the first part of the mantra. ‘Yoni’, cloud, the origin of water, is translated as ‘the seat of order’, which

8 “मन्त्र, उपभूशमृतिस्म: पं: परिशोऽक्ष: प्राप्तस्म: प्रक्षायस्! मन्त्र! (राजवध, 1933, p. 521)
9 शृंगारभोगसिद्धिन्तिः सह इत्तत्त्वेन विवाह अस्तित्वमि समस्तत्वमि। (राजवध, 1933, p. 521)
10 The Son of Angirases, meeting the cattle, as Bhaga, brought in Aryaman among us. As Friend of men he decks the wife and husband: as for the race, Brhaspati, nurse our coursers. (Griffith, 2017)
11 “The institution of marriage, represented by Aryaman; one meaning of the name being groomsmen of matchmaker.” (Griffith, 2017, p. 582)
12 [19] प्रतिक: मनस्स्या श्राद्धव: तथाकथित: श्राद्ध: हि विनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रतिक: + विनिपित: (मनस्स्या) गात्यविनिपित: प्रति
13 The fact that the word for ‘ally’ (mitra) is identical to the divine name Mitra simply introduces another complication into this complicated verse. (Jamison & Brereton, 2014, p. 1491)
14 As the Sun dews with meath the seat of Order, and casts a flaming meteor down from heaven. So, from the rock Brhaspati forced the cattle, and cleft the earth’s skin as it were with water.
does not bear enough evidence, and ‘madhu’, water as essence, is taken as ‘meath’ (mead), ‘an alcoholic liquor made by fermenting honey and water.’ (Press, 2021) That’s often a meaning, but not in this context.

J&B have taken the first part of the mantra differently from Sāyaṇācārya, but it is grammatically acceptable. But the word, ‘arkaṭ’, adorbale, in the present context, taken in the sense of ‘chant’ is misplaced, causing much confusion in this otherwise simple mantra.

[Mantra 10.68.5]

In the fifth mantra,16 the phrase ‘valasya gāṭṭ’ creates a complication, and in order to understand it correctly, the contextual study of the same is critical. Considering this, Sāyaṇācārya explains the phrase as ‘the cows in Vala’s cave’. Wilson, who otherwise mostly understands Sāyaṇācārya, failed to do so here, as he also translates the phrase as ‘Vala’s cows’. However, Griffith has altered the construe in this context and related the clouds with Vala and the cows with Bṛhaspati. J&B’s translation of the mantra is adequate, apart from where they write, ‘Bṛhaspati brought the cows here as his own.’ This translation can mislead the reader and initiate the hypothesis that the cows are of Vala, and, Bṛhaspati forcibly takes them away from him. Further instances also support this hypothesis.

[Mantra 10.68.6]

In the sixth mantra,17 a very interesting simile is used, i.e., ‘dadbhiḥ na jihvā pariviṣṭam18 ādat,19 in order to compare how Bṛhaspati devours Vala. To present this, the rṣi has taken the example of a tongue that consumes food that is encompassed by teeth; similarly, Bṛhaspati devoured Vala surrounded by his followers. Here, the mantra is trying to show the competence of Bṛhaspati. But unfortunately, J&B completely misunderstood the simile. They translate it as ‘he took (the cows) as the tongue takes (food) trapped by the teeth /[he “ate” (the cows?) as the tongue along with the teeth eats served (food)].’ (Jamison & Brereton, 2014, p. 1491) No clue can be found as to why they had to take the supplementary word ‘the cow’ here. There is no evidence here for this; instead, the reader is further confused with an irrelevance suggestion given in brackets, i.e., ‘/[he “ate” (the cows?)].’20 Bṛhaspati devouring the cows’ is neither befitting the context nor literally or philosophically suitable. This statement is obviously degrading.

Apart from this, Griffith uses ‘prisons’ rather than ‘hidden cows’ for the word ‘nidhir’, which is out of context.

[Mantra 10.68.8]

In the eighth mantra,21 the word ‘viravēṇā’ is translated as ‘a shout’ and ‘varied clamour’ by Wilson and Griffith respectively, which can be a possible choice. Whereas J&B translates it negatively by calling it an ‘ear-splitting cry’. It may not sound inappropriate if one reads it out of context, but with an understanding of the whole context, this usage degrades the image of Bṛhaspati. For anybody who understands this tradition, Bṛhaspati’s weapon is the mantra. With the sound of the mantra he leads the cows from their hiding place. So, a vulgar person may scream, but not Bṛhaspati. This instance affirms the previously mentioned hypothesis that the cows are of Vala, and Bṛhaspati forcibly takes them away from him.

16 अत्र प्रयोगिता कायं अन्तरिक्षां गृहसतह वातां अमेटा ब्रह्मसुतागुणे विशिष्टकोपले ब्रह्मां ज्ञातं आ गातं
17 यद सोमज गाथा रजसु सुधिनपुरोहितानांस्येत्च। इत्यादिः रजसु यदिन्तायानाहृतिदृष्टिधिरोद्भवनि
18 [१-१६०, २०४] विजेत्र रविसु महनुसु हरी परिवर्तिक्ष, परिवर्तिक्ष:। गात्वा + विनासय जोगस्य + गात्वा (कथावि) (राजवाडे, 1933)
19 [कि-] अन (अत्र-ि) भारी + राज
20 अन्यत्र वर्त्तमानस्तिस्तिष्ठस्ति काल तु वेदां विद्यानि विद्याः राज्वां व प्राचीनग्रन्थिदा विद्याम्।
21 अन्यत्र वर्त्तमानस्तिस्तिष्ठस्ति काल तु वेदां विद्यानि विद्याः राज्वां व प्राचीनग्रन्थिदा विद्याम्।

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[Mantra 10.68.9]

The ninth mantra reaffirms this hypothesis. In this mantra, the word ‘govapuṣaṭ’ is translated as ‘Vala, whose beauty was cows’ by J&B. This makes him the owner of the cows and not the thief. Griffith also explains it in the same manner, ‘Vala, as he gloried in his cattle’. Such translations further add to the belief that the cows belong to Vala, which is entirely against the Vedic narrative. Here, Sāyaṇācārya explains ‘govapuṣaṭ’ as ‘gorūpaśarīrasya paśubhiḥ parivrūtasya’ which is translated as ‘Vala surrounded by the kine’, by Wilson which is a better translation.

[Mantra 10.68.10]

The translation of the tenth mantra by foreign authors confirms that the Vedic narrative remains alien to them as they intensify their hypothetical belief. This mantra is tricky if one has not understood the narrative described in other sūktas. With a superficial reading of the mantra, one might consider that Bṛhaspati steals the cows because the term ‘Bṛhaspati’ is in the instrumental case, making the construe as, ‘as the leaves carried off by the winter, so the kine carried off by Bṛhaspati’. Whereas, in fact, the Vala steals the cows just as snow steals the leaves. And Vala is overpowered by Bṛhaspati, which explains the instrumental case.

In this case, the foreign translators make Bṛhaspati, the cow thief. Griffith translates it as, ‘As trees for foliage robbed by winter, Vala mourned for the cows Bṛhaspati had taken.’ Whereas J&B translate it as, ‘As the woods (lament) their leaves stolen by cold, Vala lamented for the cows (stolen) by Bṛhaspati’. Furthermore, there is no evidence for the word ‘lament’, ‘mourned’ and ‘bemoaned’, which should be ‘overpowered’.

Surprisingly, Wilson, who mostly is in line with Sāyaṇācārya’s thought, also translates it considering Bṛhaspati as the thief. He interprets the phrase as ‘Vala bemoaned his kine (carried off) by Bṛhaspati’. The verb ‘akṛpayat’ is derived from the root ‘krp’, which means ‘to be weak’, ‘to surrender’ or ‘to abdicate’. Translating that as ‘bemoaning’ indicates Vala’s sorrow caused by the stealing of cows by Bṛhaspati. There is no justification for translating ‘to be weak’ or ‘to surrender’ as ‘to bemoan’.

The clarity that comes with Sāyaṇācārya’s commentary puts a full stop to these ambiguities. Sāyaṇācārya explained it as, ‘As leaves are carried off by the winter, so the desirable cows were carried off by Vala. Hence, Vala has been abdicat by Bṛhaspati coming in search of the cows, and returned the cows to Bṛhaspati.

[Mantra 10.68.12]

The obsession of the foreign mind with the ‘bovine’ thought repeats itself in the last mantra, as the phrase, ‘yāḥ pūrvīḥ anu ānonavīti’, is translated as ‘who keeps bellowing after the many (cows?)’ by J&B, whereas Sāyaṇācārya’s interpretation would read, ‘who recites in order many (sacred stanzas)’. (Wilson, 2016, p. 364) Literally, the verb ‘ānonavīti’ means ‘to speak in praise of’. This has nothing to do with the sounds that animals make.

Conclusion

All the conflicts mentioned in the above sūkta, when seen in isolation, might look absolutely appropriate, but, when looked upon collectively, they lead to a disturbing and preposterous conclusion that “by torturing Vala, the bellowing Bṛhaspati considering the cows as his own, stole and consumed them, and those cows were the essence of Vala, and this act of Bṛhaspati left the poor Vala lamenting.”
Some western scholars seem not to have imbibed the culture and tradition of India. They consider Bhaspati as a thief or a cowboy rather than a deity, and the actual thief Vala as a hero. Vala actually stole the cows, and Bhaspati brought them back using mantras. For some strange reason, they paint Bhaspati in a bad light. Anybody who has a reasonable understanding of the Vedic culture would know that this interpretation is twisted and far from portraying the reality. Thus, one is left to wonder, whether such interpretations and mistranslations are born out of ignorance or with a certain desire to exhibit their ability to come up with a novel interpretation or with some other intention to hint at the backwardness of Vedic civilisation.

References

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