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A Critical Analysis of the Translations of the *Bṛhaspatīsūkta* of the *Ṛgveda* by the Western Scholars

Vasudev Aital^{a, *}

^a Centre for Indian Science and Technology in Sanskrit, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai-400076, India

*Corresponding author Email: vasu.aital@gmail.com

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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 them 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *Bṛhaspatīsūkta* (10.68) for analysis. Here each *mantra* is examined with respect to morphology, grammar, syntax and context. The key differences between the commentaries of Sāyaṇācārya and translations of select western scholars, as well as incoherence with the indigenous narrative and philosophical tradition, are discussed.

Keywords: Ṛgveda, Vedas, Mantras, Western Scholars

Introduction

As per Indian tradition, the study of the Vedas with a comprehensive understanding is mandatory.¹ 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;² 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 (*vyākhyā*), annotations (*ṭīkā/vārtika*), explanatory guides (*vivaraṇa*), compendiums (*sāra* and *saṅgraha*) 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 *Ṛgveda*, each of them has its own shortcomings. For instance, western translations of Sāyaṇācārya are found to have considerable misinterpretations at various places. The nature of the translations of the *Ṛgveda* 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. “ब्राह्मणेन निष्कारणो धर्मः षडङ्गो वेदोऽध्येयो ज्ञेयश्च” (ब्या०म०भा० – पस्यशाहिकम् २.४) (Rajwade, Ṛgveda Saṃhitā: With the Commentary of Sāyaṇācārya, 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 *maṇḍalas* 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 Sāyaṇācārya is complete.



The translations of H.H. Wilson³ (Wilson henceforth), Ralph T. H. Griffith⁴ (Griffith henceforth) and Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton⁵ (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 68th *sūkta* of the 10th *maṇḍala* or the 8th *sūkta* of the 5th *anuvāka* of the 10th *maṇḍala*. There are 12 *mantras* in this *sūkta*. The *ṛṣi* of this *sūkta* is Ayāśya of Aṅgirasas *gotra*. The *devatā* is Bṛhaspati, and the *sūkta* is composed in *Triṣṭup* metre.

Before we look into the present *sūkta*, a certain understanding is needed. Sāyaṇa, (Rajwade, 1933, p. ५१७)⁶ begins his commentary by introducing the background story of the present *sūkta*. Bṛhaspati is the son of Aṅgiras, and he is the *purohita* of Indra. Once, the demons Paṇis 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 Bṛhaspati to find them and bring them back.

The background story of the *sūkta*

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

³ H. H. Wilson (1866)

⁴ Ralph T. H. Griffith (1889)

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

⁶ (ऋ०सं० सा०भा० १.६.५, १०.१०८, १.३२.११ इत्यादि)

⁷ उदयुतो न वयो रक्षमाणो वावदतो अभ्रियंसेव घोषाः। गिरिभ्रजो नोर्मयो मदन्तो बृहस्पतिमभ्यर्कं अनावन्।



explanation would read 'As the emitters of water, the husbandmen, call out when keeping the birds off the ripe grain'.⁸

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*,⁹ 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 uncoiling 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 Griffith¹⁰ is highly misinterpreted due to various levels of errors. Firstly, Bṛhaspati 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 Bṛhaspati.

The second problematic part of the sentence is 'brought in *aryaman* among us.' According to Griffith, the '*aryamar*' is the 'matchmaker',¹¹ 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 Bṛhaspati 'reunited the Aṅgirasas with their cows.' (Jamison & Brereton, 2014, p. 1491) This statement does not seem right, as Bṛhaspati himself is Aṅgirasa mentioned in the nominative case, and he joins the cows with '*aryamar*'. Furthermore, as per the introduction, '*aryamar*' is the 'civilising god of custom, one of 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*'¹² 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'.¹³

Another word which actually complicates the interpretation is 'anoints', a translation for the word '*anakti*', derived from the root *añja*, 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, Bṛhaspati 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*,¹⁴ Griffith has again insensibly altered the construe¹⁵ 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 "उद्भूतः उदकस्योद्भूतयितारः वचः पक्षिणः पक्वात्सस्यात् रक्षमाणाः कृषीवलाः" (ऋग्वेद १०.६८.१) (Rajwade, 1933, p. 521)

⁹ सं गोभिरङ्गिरसो नक्षमाणो भगं हुवेदंशर्मणं निनाया जनं मित्रो न दम्पती अनक्ति बृहस्पते वाजयश्रुर्विवाजौ।

¹⁰ The Son of Angirasas, meeting the cattle, as Bhaga, brought in Aryaman among us. As Friend of men he decks the wife and husband: as for the race, Bṛhaspati, nerve our courses. (Griffith, 2017)

¹¹ "The institution of marriage, represented by Aryaman; one meaning of the name being groomsman of matchmaker." (Griffith, 2017, p. 582)

¹² [पुं०] प्रमीते: मरणात् त्रायते सर्वलोकं वर्षद्वारेण इति मित्रः। प्रमीति + क्तिन् (भावे) > मिद् + त्रै (ऋ३।१) पालने) + (आतो लोपश्च)। {यद्वा} सं समन्वतः सर्वतः सम्यक्वा भिन्वानः वृष्टिं सततं प्रक्षिपन् सिञ्चन् वा द्रवत्यन्तरिक्षलोके इति मित्रः। मि (डुमिच्।) प्रक्षेपणे) / भिन्व् (मिर्वि।) सेवने सचने च) + लट् + शानच् > भिन्वान् > मित् + ड्रु (ड्रु।) गतौ) + ड > त्रा {यद्वा} मेदयति सर्वं हि असौ उदकेन स्नेहयति इति मित्रः। मिद् (जमिर्दा।) स्नेहने) / (मद्वा।) मथाहिंसनयोः) / (जमिर्दा।) स्नेहने) / (मर्दा।) स्नेहने) + शिच् + क्त्वा {यद्वा} [पुं०] मेदयति स्निहयति इति मित्रः। मिद् (जमिर्दा।) स्नेहने) + क्त्वा ["अमिचिमदिशसिभ्यः क्व" (उ०सू० ४.१६३)]।

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 अप्रुषावन्मधुन ऋतस्य योनिमवक्षिपन्नुर्कं उल्कामिन्वु द्यौः। बृहस्पतिरुद्दत्तन्मरमनो गा भूम्यां उद्रेव वि त्वर्चं विभेदा।

¹⁵ As the Sun dews with meath the seat of Order, and casts a flaming meteor down from heaven. So, from the rock Bṛhaspati 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, `arkaḥ, adorable, 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 gāḥ' 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., `dadbhīḥ na jihvā pariviṣṭam¹⁸ ādat¹⁹, in order to compare how Bṛhaspati devours Vala. To present this, the ṛṣi 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 [the "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 `nidhīr, which is out of context.

[Mantra 10.68.8]

In the eighth *mantra*,²¹ the word `viraveṇā' 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 अपु ज्योतिषा तमो अन्तरिक्षादुद्रः शीपालमिव वातं आजत् बृहस्पतिरनुमुश्या वलस्याभ्रमिव वात आ चक्र आ गाः॥

¹⁷ यदा वलस्य पीयतो जसु भेदहस्पतिरमितपोभिरुक्तैः इन्द्रिर्न जिह्वा परिविष्टमाददाविर्निर्धौकृणोदुस्रियाणाम् ॥

¹⁸ [पुं० स्त्री०, नपुं०] परितः विष्टम् आवृतम् इति परिविष्टम्, परिवृतमित्यर्थः। परि + विष् (विशुं०) प्रवेशने) + क्त (कर्मणि)। (Rajwade, 1933)

¹⁹ [क्रि०] अद् (अद्०) भक्षणम् + लङ्।

²⁰ Another complex simile worth exploring is in the second half of verse 6, where the poet exploits the ambiguity of two words (*pariviṣṭam* and *ādat*) to deploy two distinct three-term comparisons simultaneously. The past passive participle *pāriṣṭam* can belong to either of two roots, *viṣ* "enter," in which case the idiom means "surrounded, trapped," or *viṣ* "work," in which case the idiom means "served." The verb *ādat* can belong to *√dā* "give," with preverb *ā*, in which case the idiom means "take," or to *√ad* "eat." Combining these possibilities, we can interpret the image as that of the tongue worrying food caught between the teeth, or as the tongue and the teeth eating food that has been served. Either image can be appropriate to the removal of the cows from the cave, though we are partial to the notion of Bṛhaspati winking out cows from every interior crevasse. (Jamison & Brereton, 2014, p. 1491)

²¹ अश्रापिनद्धं मधु पर्यपश्यन्मत्स्यं न दून उदनि क्षियन्तम् निष्टज्जंभार चमसं न वृक्षाद्बृहस्पतिर्विदेगां विकृत्य।



[Mantra 10.68.9]

The ninth *mantra*²² reaffirms this hypothesis. In this *mantra*, the word 'govapuṣaḥ' 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 'govapuṣaḥ' as 'gorūpaśarīrasya paśubhiḥ parivr̥tasya' 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*²³ by foreign authors confirms that the Vedic narrative remains alien to them as they intensify their hypothetical belief. This *mantra*²⁴ 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'²⁵ is derived from the root 'kṛp', 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,²⁶ 'As leaves are carried off by the winter, so the desirable cows were carried off by Vala. Hence, Vala has been abdicated by Bṛhaspati coming in search of the cows, and returned the cows to Bṛhaspati.'²⁷

[Mantra 10.68.12]

The obsession of the foreign mind with the 'bovine' thought repeats itself in the last *mantra*,²⁸ as the phrase, 'yaḥ pūrviḥ anu ānonavītī', 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 'ānonavītī' 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."

²² सोषामविन्दुत्स स्वशंः सो अग्निं सो अर्केण वि बन्धाधे तमांसि। बृहस्पतिर्गोवपुषो वलस्य निर्मज्जानं न पर्वणो जभारा।

²³ हिमेवं पर्णा मुषिता वनानि बृहस्पतिनाकृपयद्बलो गाः। अनुनुकृत्यमपुनश्चकार यात्सूर्यामासां मिथ उच्चरातः॥

²⁴ हिमेवं पर्णा मुषिता वनानि बृहस्पतिनाकृपयद्बलो गाः। अनुनुकृत्यमपुनश्चकार यात्सूर्यामासां मिथ उच्चरातः॥

²⁵ [क्रि०] कृप् (कृप[१०] दौर्बल्ये) + लङ्।

²⁶ हिमेव यथा हिमेन पर्णा पर्णानि पचपत्राणि मुषिता मुषितानि भवन्ति तद्वद्वलेन वनानि वननीयानि गोघनानि मुषितान्यभूवन्। अथ गवामन्वेषणाय बृहस्पतिना आगतेन हेतुना बलः अकृपयत् अस्मै ता मुषिताः गाः प्रायच्छत्। तत्र अनुनुकृत्यम् अननुकरणायम् अपुनः कर्तव्यं च तत्कर्म चकार। यथा तत्पश्चात्करणाय न भवति यथा पुनरकरणाय तथाकार्षीदित्यर्थः। किं तदिति आह। सूर्यामासा सूर्याचन्द्रमसौ मिथः परस्परमहोरात्रयोः उच्चरातः उच्चरत इति यात् तच्चकार।

²⁷ The words originally found in the *mantra* are in bold format and editorial notes are in normal format.

²⁸ इदमकर्म नमो अभियाय यः पूर्वान्त्वानोनवीति। बृहस्पतिः स हि गोभिः सो अश्वैः स वीरिभिः स नृभिर्मां वयो धात्।



Some western scholars seem not to have imbibed the culture and tradition of India. They consider Br̥haspati as a thief or a cowboy rather than a deity, and the actual thief Vala as a hero. Vala actually stole the cows, and Brihaspati brought them back using *mantras*. For some strange reason, they paint Br̥haspati 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.

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