

The Authenticity Of Vedic Evidence: The Niruktas View

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Since time immemorial, the Vedas have been treated as supreme sort of verbal evidence. Vedic phrases are quoted by the doyen of various branches of knowledge to substantiate and adjudicate their views and principles. Even the staunch adversaries of Vedic tenets, as they are popularly perceived, Jains and Buddhists, directly or indirectly have Vedic traces and several times, Vedas and Vedic scholars are eulogized by them. Though it is not hard to trace dictum of Jainism and Buddhism to the Vedas, yet no explicit weightage is given to Vedic claims.

Yaska in his Nirukta, having first quoted the opinion of Kautsa regarding meaninglessness of the Mantras, refutes it in a very lucid and spirited style. Kautsa's objection to meaningfulness of Vedic Mantras is as follows.

1. The words of Vedic sentences are sacrosanct and cannot be changed with a synonym.¹ For example: अग्निमीळे पुरोहितम्² If the word Agnim is replaced with Vahnim, neither there will be any semantic change, nor will it disturb syntactical set up with respect to prosody. But, such alteration is not allowed by Vedic tradition.

The syntactical sequence of Vedic Mantras is fixed. Hence, the order of the words occurring in a sentence cannot be transposed. There will be no harm to intended meaning if the order of the words is changed. Even if अग्निमीळे पुरोहितम् is read in transposed order like पुरोहितम् अग्निमीळे, there will be no swerve from original sense. But, such practice is also not viewed.

2. The application of the Mantras is ascertained by its semantic symptoms, but the injunction regarding application of Mantra is prescribed by the

¹ नियतवाचोयुक्तयो नियतानुपूर्व्या भवन्ति, निरु. १.१५

² ऋग्वेद १.१.१.

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Brāhmaṇa.³ For instance- उरु प्रथस्वेति प्रथयति (श.ब्रा.१.१.६.८) | The Mantra runs as उरु प्रथस्व⁴ (Be strewn broadly). The sense of the Mantra is quite clear. In spite of this, Brāhmaṇa prescribes-| प्रथयति Had the Mantra been meaningful, the repetition of the same by the verbal word | प्रथयति would have been uncalled for.

3. The Mantras contain irrelevant meaning⁵ as ओषधे त्रायस्वैनम् (O herb protect this tree). How an herb which cannot protect itself, can protect a tree. स्वधिते मेन हींसीः⁶ (O sword do not kill this). This Mantra is uttered while killing sacrificial animal. How topsy turvy is this, that the animal is being killed with sword, and sword being prayed to not to kill.
4. The great paradox is witnessed in the meaning of Mantras⁷ एक एव रुद्रोऽवतस्थे न द्वितीयः, (तै.स. १.८.६.१) (There is no second Rudra but one). असंख्याता सहस्राणि ये रुद्र अधि भूम्याम्⁸ (There are Rudras in innumerable thousands on the Earth). On one hand it is stated that Rudra is one without any second, on contrary Rudras are numerated in innumerable thousands. What greater paradox than this is possible. अशत्रुरिन्द्र जज्ञिषे⁹ (O Indra you are born without enemy), शतं सेना अजयत् साकमिन्द्रः¹⁰ (Indra at a time conquered hundred armies). If Indra was born without an enemy, why should he conquer hundred armies? There is very popular word in Vedic literature- इन्द्रशत्रु which means one, whose enemy is Indra. In this example also, we behold oxymoronic stint.
5. Adhvaryu orders learned Hotā to recite Mantra for enkindled Fire (अग्नये समिध्यमानायानुब्रूहि¹¹). How a learned Hotā does not know the rites to be performed by him. Prescription by a Vedic sentence is very ironic if not

³ अथापि ब्राह्मणेन रूपसम्पन्ना विधीयन्ते, निरु. १.१५

⁴ वा.सं. १.२२

⁵ अथापि विप्रतिषिद्धार्था भवन्ति, निरु. १.१५

⁶ वा.सं. ५.४२

⁷ अथापि विप्रतिषिद्धार्था भवन्ति, निरु. १.१५

⁸ वा.सं. १६.५४

⁹ ऋग्वेद १०.१३३.२

¹⁰ Ibid, 10.133.2

¹¹ तै.सं. ६.३.७.१

idiotic. Had there been the meaning of Vedic Mantras, this type of irony would not have occurred.

6. Another incongruity is beheld in the Mantras like-
अदितिर्द्यौरदितिरन्तरिक्षम् अदितिर्माता स पिता स पुत्रः ।
विश्वे देवा अदितिः पञ्च जना अदितिर्जातमदितिर्जनित्वम् ॥¹²
7. How the same entity can be both sky and heaven, mother and father. In worldly behavior, the mother is different and father is different entity. So and so forth-
8. Some Mantras are shrouded with vagueness and do not convey explicit meaning¹³ as- अम्यग्, यादृश्मिन्, जारयायि, काणुका etc.
9. Jaimini, the promulgator of Mimamsa Sutras has beckoned the adversary view regarding meaninglessness of Vedic Mantras from Yaska as indicated below to the tune of Yaskan sequence- वाक्यनियमात् (१.२.३२), तदर्थशास्त्रात् (१.२.३१), अचेतनेऽर्थबन्धनात् (१.२.२४), अर्थविप्रतिषेधात् (१.२.३६), बुद्धशास्त्रात् (१.२.३३), अविज्ञेयात् (१.२.३८) -

Having raised the adversary views of opponent, Yaska refutes it pointwise-

1. The view that the words and word-orders in Vedic sentences cannot be changed. This is visible in common language also, as इन्द्राग्नी, पितापुत्रौ In these compounded words the word-order cannot be changed. By virtue of the formula 'द्वन्द्वे धि' (पा. २.२.३२) 'अग्नि' was to come first in the compound and then 'इन्द्र' which is prohibited by a relevant Vartik- अभ्यर्हितं च and the word 'इन्द्र' became first component of dual compound. 'इन्द्र' is more important, compared to 'अग्नि' in the realm of literary documents beginning from the ṛgveda. In the ṛgveda, he is the most lauded divinity. Brhaddevatā states –

रसदानं तु कर्मास्य वृत्रस्य च निबर्हणम् ।

स्तुतेः प्रभुत्वं सर्वस्य बलस्य निखिला कृतिः ॥ (२.६)

The same way in पितापुत्रौ also the same prescribed device is at work. The Mīmāṃsāsūtra अविरोद्धं परम् (१.२.४४) has further elaborated it. The

¹² ऋग्वेद १.८९.१०

¹³ अथापि अविस्पष्टार्था भवन्ति, निरु. १.१५

sacrosanct use of word and word-order cannot be demurred. But, that does not inculcate the meaninglessness.

2. The second option also does not stand firmly. In उरु प्रथस्व इति प्रथयति, प्रथयति is just repetition of what is suggested by उरु प्रथस्व¹⁴ Any fact is not of null effect if it is repeated. There is no flaw if an action suggested by Mantra is repeated by the Brāhmaṇa statement to further elucidate it. Mīmāṃsāsūtras गुणार्थेन पुनः श्रुतिः, 1.2.41, परिसंख्या, 1.2.42, अर्थवादो वा, 1.2.43, purport the same notion in rather detailed mode.
3. Third objection that the Mantras contain irrelevant meaning is also weak. The concept of violence and non violence is ascertained by the Vedas. In ओषधे त्रायस्वैनं, स्वधिते मैत्रं हिंसीः the action of protection and non-violence respectively are proclaimed by the Veda. Hence these are valid statements. In ओषधे त्रायस्व Herb is not invoked to protect but, the deity presiding over ओषधिः herb.¹⁵ The स्वधिते मैत्रं हिंसीः substantiated by Yaska is an inspiring notion to the logicians to validate their concept of निषिद्धत्वोपाधि¹⁶
4. The argument that there is great paradox in the Mantras. There are quite opposed statements as already mentioned. The Nirukta proposes a feasible solution to this stating that in common language we come across such examples as- असपत्योऽयं ब्राह्मणः, अनमित्रो राजा (This Brahmana is enemyless, the king has no enemy). These statements are used to eulogize the quality of any individual.
5. At the time of bidding salute to the teacher, the disciple utters his own name though his name is well-known to his teacher. Madhuparka (a kind of drink) is offered to a deserving person after uttering the word Madhuparka thrice. Though the person to whom the Madhuparka is offered knows it prior, yet the word Madhuparka is literally uttered. जानन्तमभिवादयते, जानते मधुपर्कं प्राह । निरु.1.16. Jaimini elucidates this fact more verdantly.

¹⁴ यथो एतद्-ब्राह्मणेन रूपसम्पन्ना विधीयन्ते, उदितानुवादः स भवति, निरु. १.१६

¹⁵ अभिमानिव्यपदेशस्तु विशेषानुगतिभ्याम् २.१.५

¹⁶ See तर्कभाषा under व्याप्यत्वासिद्धहेत्वाभास

सम्प्रैषकर्मणो गर्हानुपलम्भः संस्कारत्वात् । मी.सू. 1.2.45

6. The objection regarding अदिति being all is also figurative statement as in practical uses like सर्वरसा अनुप्राप्ताः पानीयम् (All the tastes are found in the water). This answer of Yaska ought to be seen in unison with his following statements. महाभाग्याद्देवताया एक आत्मा बहुधा स्तूयते एकस्यात्मनोऽन्ये देवाः प्रत्यङ्गानि¹⁷ (By the virtue of opulence of divinity, one supreme soul is lauded in different ways, all the deities are part and parcel of that alone soul. According to this matrix there is no incongruity in terming अदिति as the earth, the sky etc. This problem is quite beautifully treated by Sankaracharya - एकैका देवता बहुभी रूपैरात्मानं प्रविभज्य बहुषु यागेषु युगपदङ्गतां गच्छति, परैश्च न दृश्यते, अन्तर्धानक्रियायोगात्¹⁸ (Every divinity having divided it into manifold forms simultaneously becomes part in several sacrifices, and is not seen by others by virtue of its hiding capacity). Jaimini solves this problem basing on the axiom similar to that adopted by Yaska- गुणादप्रतिषेधः स्यात् । (मी.सू.1.2.47)

7. The last objection that the meanings of Vedic sentences are dubious and abstruse is refuted by Yaska in satiric style-

This is not the fault of a dried tree, if the blind man does not see it. This is the fault with the blind man. In common civil life a person skilled in the disciplines of fine arts, painting etc. by his dexterity becomes special. But among the scholars, who have received sastric knowledge through the tradition of disciplic succession, more knowledgeable is lauded. नैष स्थाणोरपराधो यदेनमन्वो न पश्यति । पुरुषापराधो भवति । यथा जानपदीषु विद्यातः पुरुषविशेषो भवति । पारोवर्यविस्तु तु खलु वेदितृषु भूयोविद्यः प्रशस्यो भवति ।¹⁹ Jaimini presents the same view in the following formula –

सतः परमविज्ञानम् (1.2.49)

According to Yaska there have been seers, who perceived every element. They visualized the Mantras and vouchsafed it to their suitable less calibrated

¹⁷ निरु. ७.४

¹⁸ ब्रह्मसूत्र १.३.२७

¹⁹ निरु. १.१६

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disciples, who were not advanced at par with these seers to perceive the Mantras - साक्षात्कृतधर्माण ऋषयो बभूवुः । तेऽवरेभ्योऽसाक्षात्कृतधर्मभ्य उपदेशेन मन्त्रान् सम्प्रादुः।²⁰

This suggests that the Mantras were not composed by any mundane or un-mundane body but perceived by in-sighted seers. भर्तृहरि in his वाक्यपदीय holds this view in totality.-

अनादिमव्यवच्छिन्नां श्रुतिमाहुरकर्तृकाम् । वा.पा. १.१४५

The similar view is expressed by the Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā and up to a great extent by the Vedānta. According to Sāṃkhya system, the Vedaas are manifest by their own power and self testified-

निजशक्त्यभिव्यक्तेः स्वतः प्रामाण्यम् । (सा.प्र.सू. ५.५१)

The Vedanta has adopted middle path. It accepts the revelation theory regarding Veda, But in moderate manner. The Brahman who is cause of the creation is simultaneously the cause to the Shastra (Veda) also but the Vedas cannot be accepted as effect but are as natural as the in-breath and out-breath. Secondly the existence of Brahman itself is certified by the Vedas. The Vedas are supreme verbal evidence to prove the existence of the Brahman-

शास्त्रयोनित्वात् (ब्र.सू. १.१३)

The Nirukta has always stressed that the Mantras were flashed to seers- त्रितं कूपेऽवहितमेतत्सूक्तं प्रतिबभौ ।²¹ (This hymn flashed to Trita, when he was fallen in a well). मत्स्यानां जालमापन्नानामार्षं वेदयन्ते²² (The Mantra was perceived by the fish, when these were entirely trapped in the net).

Mīmāṃsā system of philosophy quite meticulously dismisses the possibility of any person whatsoever composing Vedic sentences-

आदिमात्रमपि श्रुत्वा वेदानां पौरुषेयता ।

न शक्याध्यवसातुं मनागपि सचेतनै ॥

प्रपाठकचतुष्टिनियतस्वरकैः पदैः ।

लोकेष्वश्रुतप्रायैः ऋग्वेदं कः करिष्यति ॥²³

²⁰ Ibid, 1.20

²¹ निरु. ४.६

²² Ibid, 6.27

²³ श्लोकवार्तिक

Yaska in his concluding statements envisages pretty valuable fact regarding expositions of the Vedas.

अयं मन्त्रार्थचिन्ताभ्यूहोऽपि श्रुतितोऽपि तर्कतः.... न होषु प्रत्यक्षमस्त्यनृषेरतपसो वा.... मनुष्या वा ऋषिषूक्तामत्सु देवान् अब्रुवन् को न ऋषिर्भविष्यतीति तेभ्य एतं तर्कं प्रायच्छन् ।.... सेयं विद्या श्रुति-मति-बुद्धिस्तस्यास्तपसा पारमीप्सितव्यम्.....।²⁴

This pondering over the meaning of Mantras proceeds through the Vedic sources and rational logic. The meaning of the Mantras cannot be assimilated by a man who is neither a seer nor an ascetic. The men asked the divinities when the seers were getting emancipated, who would be their seer. The divinities gifted men with the seer, which was logic. Their sacred knowledge of understanding the meaning of the Mantra ought to be desired to obtain by the means of listening to enlightened Guru, contemplation, intellectual intelligence and performance of penance.

The gist of the above mentioned narration of Yaska is propagated by Manu in concise form as extracted below-

आर्षं धर्मोपदेशं च वेदशास्त्राविरोधिना ।

यस्तर्केणानुसन्धत्ते स धर्मं वेद नेतरः ॥ (म.स्मृ. १२.१०६)

One who searches discourse of Dharma conveyed by the ṛṣi with (help of) logic, which is not opposed to the Veda and concurrent authoritative scriptures, he only knows the Dharma not the others.

Now it is evident that placing the Veda in a very high seat by intellectual tradition of India has dominated Indian ideology and pattern of thinking through the ages. Veneration for Vedas in the psyche of Indian wisdom has its strong footing even today, which has not dwindled even after callous vicissitude of time. The Nirukta of Yaska has contributed a lot to establishing, fostering and maintaining this perennial view.

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²⁴ निरु. १३.१२-१३