

Efforts to Preserve the Vedas

As we gradually enter the post-Vedic period, the preservation of the ancient scriptural texts and their utility become subjects of very important debates. Some of the problems with the handling of the scriptures are created merely by the historical linguistic changes. The language of the ancient scriptures was increasingly becoming archaic and a large percentage of the vocabulary and grammar of the ancient language did not survive in the newer forms of Sanskrit. Similarly, the time-gap, the migrations, and the cultural and ethnic contacts and mergers changed the pronunciation significantly, so that a number of features, like the accents of ancient language were lost in the later forms of Sanskrit. Under such conditions, the maintenance of the form and the understanding of the ancient texts became increasingly precarious. The beginning of such concerns is already manifest in the late Vedic texts. By the end of the late Vedic period we already see the beginning of some formal efforts to deal with this situation. It is manifested in the creation of multiple forms of recitation.

There was the original undivided text of the scriptures that was handed down by the tradition orally. This text was called Samhita, the joined unbroken form of recitation. A new form of word-by-word (padapatha) recitation was now created and an understanding of word combinations was developed. This subsequently led to the development of the traditions of Sanskrit grammar, etymology and phonetics.

By using various permutations and combinations of the words of the padapatha, numerous other versions of the Vedic texts were produced and have been kept alive in the recitational tradition till today. The recitational preservation of these various permutations and combinations was perceived to be a sure way of preserving the original Vedic text and protecting it from even the slightest change. Even the slightest change in the original would lead to hundreds of changes in the permutations and combinations, and hence if the combinations and permutations were fixed, the original could always be restored, in case of doubt. In this way, the body of the Vedic texts came to be preserved with a great degree of accuracy, especially when the tradition was passed down entirely in oral transmission.

EMERGENCE OF PHONETIC ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION

A great deal of care was also given to ensuring the proper pronunciation of the Vedic texts. As the priestly communities migrated to different regions of South Asia, their mother tongues underwent great changes. With the increasing gap between the language of the original Vedic texts and the mother tongues of the reciters, there was a growing fear of mispronunciation of the scriptural texts. The Vedic accents were no longer observed in either the colloquial forms of Sanskrit or in the vernaculars. Many vowels and consonants of the Vedic Sanskrit did not occur in the vernaculars, the mother tongues of the reciters. It is clear from the modern recitation of the Vedic texts that the mother tongues of the reciters affect the recitation of the texts and the same texts sound different if recited by a Bengali or a Tamil Brahman priest. The fear of mispronunciation led to the development of a full-scope tradition of phonetic analysis that is preserved in over a hundred different treatises called Siksas and Pratisakhya. These treatises analyze the articulatory features of each Sanskrit sound and point out specific mispronunciations to be avoided. On the whole, one must

recognize that there was a great deal of success in preserving the phonetic shape of the Vedic texts.

ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING

One of the early debates regarding the analytical understanding of words is found in Yaska's Nirukta around 500 BCE. Yaska's Nirukta is a commentary on a list of Vedic words (Nigantu). Yaska says that the original sages (rishis) had direct insight into the nature of things. These original sages received the Vedic texts in their mystical trances. They handed these texts to later generations of sages who did not have such a direct insight. This perception of a gradual decline from an initial golden age is found in many post-Vedic traditions and their efforts to preserve the texts and their comprehension need to be understood against the background of this perception of decline.

Yaska says that one cannot refuse to offer an etymology for a word because that refusal would amount to accepting that the word has no perceptible meaning. Recitation of scriptures without any comprehension of meaning is like carrying a burden. It does not produce any merit. For Yaska the science of etymology becomes an essential tool to understand the meaning of scriptural words. Yaska's efforts are clearly motivated by an old belief that goes back to the Brahmana texts, namely, that perfection of ritual form (rupasamrddhi) can only be achieved when the recited verse echoes the ritual action being performed. This requires that one be able to comprehend the meaning of the recited Vedic passages.

However, Yaska represents only one side of the debate. He also refers to an opposing view, that of Kautsa. Kautsa claimed that the science of etymology as a tool for comprehending the meaning of the scriptural texts was worthless because the Vedas had no meaning at all. Kautsa claims that the words of the scriptures, unlike those of contemporary Sanskrit, were fixed in order. If the words of the cited Vedic passages were meaningful, the Brahmanas would not have offered their explanations. The Vedic passages, if understood as meaningful utterances, often seem to be contrary to facts of experience and contradictory to each other. Therefore, it is better to accept that they are completely meaningless, and there is a suggestion that their main utility lies in their value as magical sounds and not as meaningful linguistic utterances. Thus, in the opinion of Kautsa, the scriptural texts have been reduced to nonlinguistic magical sounds. This is indeed one direction in which some later traditions deal with sacred utterances.

Yaska, on the other hand, insists on the etymological efforts to find out the meaning of the scriptural words. The grammarian Patanjali and the Mimamsa author Jaimini later support Yaska's stand. However this debate makes certain points quite clear. The preserved ancient texts of the Vedas have become at least partially unintelligible due to language change. The texts are no longer considered as human authored words but as a unitary body of words which are of some divine origin or completely uncreated and ideally should not contradict each other.