

Modern Hindu Interpretation of the Scriptures: Swami Dayānand Sarasvati and S. Radhakrishnan*

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PART I: SWAMI DAYĀNAND SARASVATI

The Formation of this Interpreter of the Veda

Swami Dayānand Sarasvati, the founder of Ārya Samāj, framed ten rules (*niyam*) for the guidance and practice of the society he founded. Of these rules, the third one declares, "The Veda is the book of the sciences of truth. It is the supreme duty of all Aryans to study and propagate the Veda." In a similar vein his *magnum opus Satyārth Prakāsh* has the subtitle, *A Guide to the Vedic Hermeneutics*. These two instances should be sufficient to show that Vedic interpretation occupies an important place in Swami Dayānand Sarasvati's thought.

1. This is not strange. The Swami grew up in a family where the Vedas were honoured and studied and Vedic *Sandhya* was performed daily. He was given the "sacred thread" at the age of eight and was taught to recite the *gayatri-mantra*. At the age of fourteen, he had memorized most of the *Yajur-veda*, and started studying Vedic terms and their meaning in the old text books, the *Nighantu* and the *Nirukta*. Needless to say, this participation in ancestral Vedic learning and rituals made him a staunch believer and interpreter of the Veda in his later days.

2. After much wandering as a *sanyasi*, he found the *guru* after his heart in Swami Virajānand. The key idea of this *guru's* teaching is this: the present degeneration of Hinduism is due to the evil influence of the later writers who were mere men (and not *ṛsis* or seers); the real and authoritative source of Hinduism is to be found in the books composed by our ancient *ṛsis*. Virajānand did not specify which particular books should be regarded as written by *ṛsis*. He left this to his famous disciple to find out by study and reflection.

3. As Swami Dayānand's study progressed, his list of the authoritative books (*Pramāṇa granthas*) became shorter and shorter. First,

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the *Tantras* were rejected, for they contained immoral teachings. Then the *Purānas* were thrown out, for they contained mythological stories. Later parts of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahā Bhārata* were found to contain some objectionable teachings. These parts were held to be spurious; the rest of these epics were accepted as possessing a sort of "secondary authority." Still later, the *Brāhmanas* and the *Upaniṣads* (which are generally regarded as a part of the Vedic revelation) were also put in the category of "secondary authority." Ultimately, only the Vedic Hymns (the *mantra-samhitas*) were retained and recognized as the works of God, possessing authority in their own right (*svataḥ pramāṇa*).

4. The Christian Fundamentalists' view regarding the Bible and the Muslim Fundamentalists' view regarding the Quran, so popular in the nineteenth century, influenced Swami Dayānand in arriving at a similar fundamentalist view with regard to the Veda. Christians and Muslims were saying that true religion has its origin in God, who reveals his teaching in the Book (Bible or Quran). In a similar vein Swami Dayānand holds that the Veda is the word which God has uttered. It is inspired verbally. There is no error in the Veda. If a person finds worship of many gods in the Veda then surely such a person is misunderstanding, mistranslating and misinterpreting the Veda. Indeed, Swami Dayānand goes a step further than the above mentioned missionaries, when he asserts the claim that the Veda is the repository of all knowledge, even scientific knowledge.

5. Swami Dayānand came into contact with the Brāhma Samāj through Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and Sri Keshab Chandra Sen. These great leaders, together with their followers in various branches of the Brāhma Samāj, had rejected almost unanimously the authority of the Veda. Foreign Christian missionaries and the native Pandits of Varanasi had convinced them that the Veda taught worship of many gods, black magic and so on. Swami Dayānand felt that by rejecting faith in the Vedas, the Brāhma Samāj had lost contact with the Indian masses and become outlandish in its own country. Further, lacking an authoritative scripture, the Samāj had fallen victim to subjectivism and divisive tendencies.

Swami Dayānand was requested several times to write a commentary on the Veda. He replied somewhat like this: "I possess neither the intellectual qualification nor the spiritual experience of a realized yogi to embark on such a task." But after coming into contact with the Brāhma Samāj, he felt that he should undertake this task. It seemed to him that the medieval Indian commentators on the Veda, like Sāyaṇ and Mahidhar, as well as modern Vedic scholars of the West, had gone wrong in their understanding of the Veda. The Veda does not teach polytheism. It does not contain mythological stories. The Veda, being eternal, can have no reference to historical events. It does not teach black magic, rather it teaches higher science and mathematics. He hoped to prove all these ideas by writing his commentary on the Veda.

The Method of Commenting

The Swami follows a clear well-defined procedure in his commentary on the Veda. First, he analyses the composite words according to the rules of *Sandhi*. Secondly, he gives the *padārtha*, the systematic explanation of these components, indicating their meaning. Thirdly, he constructs the whole sentence in a straightforward grammatical form. Finally, he gives the *bhāvārtha* which explains the purport of the text, indicating whether it is an injunction, a statement of principle or some kind of comparison.

His Theological Presuppositions

All this is quite clear. But it is also very clear that the interpretation which he arrives at is not simply the result of the above mentioned analysis. There are other powerful factors directing every step which the Swami takes in his commentary, namely his own theological presuppositions. There are four such basic assumptions.

1. Since, according to the Swami, the Vedas contain eternal wisdom of God, all statements have to be of universal nature. Therefore, they could not possibly refer to historical and geographical data. A number of Vedic texts are thought by scholars to contain historical references. But Dayānand excludes historical considerations *a priori*. He goes to great lengths of semantic contortions to explain away these texts. What other commentators consider to be statements of facts, Dayānand explains as statements of principles or injunctions.

2. A second assumption of Swami Dayānand is that the Vedas proclaim a pure monotheism. Therefore, he reinterprets names of *devas* to suit this idea. Agni means five different things in the opening verses of the *Rgveda*.

3. The Vedas, as divine books, cannot possibly contain anything that offends reason or morality. The Swami regards all myths and miracles as irrational, so he demythologizes these. An interesting example is his interpretation of the myth of the fight between Indra and Vritra so often referred to in the hymns. According to him, this episode has two levels of meaning: (a) it explains the scientific truth about the interaction of sun and clouds; (b) it proposes rules of conduct for battle. In other words, the myth has nothing to do with divinity as such or with his relation to the cosmos.

4. A final assumption that directs Swami's interpretation is his unique doctrine that the Vedas are the repository of scientific truth as well. His knowledge of science was rudimentary: this aspect was only rarely elaborated.¹

These basic assumptions are overruling factors in Dayānand's interpretation. The western orientalist had looked on the Vedas as historical documents and had attempted to unravel the meaning of these ancient texts using not only tools like grammar but also methods

¹ About telegraphy and navigation, see *Rigvedadi Bhashya Bhomika*, pp. 198-209.

involving proto-historical data, comparative philology, internal dating and so on. In Dayānand's view only linguistic tools are appropriate because he holds that the documents are *not* of a historical nature.

Evaluation

In a way Swami Dayānand's commentaries are very similar to the great commentaries of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Like them he also manipulates the sacred texts with subtle tools of linguistics and forces them to yield the meaning that fits with his theological presuppositions. But Dayānand goes a step further. The classical commentators are not committed to the views that the sacred texts of the Veda contain total and infallible revelation of scientific truths. Swami Dayānand is committed to this view.

What is the lasting value of Swami Dayānand's Vedic commentary? I think his interpretation is regarded by scholars outside Ārya Samājic circles as sectarian. It is not studied for deciphering the meaning of the Vedic text. But his *Bhashya* has a claim to greatness because it brings the Vedas out of the sanctuary of Brahmin dominance and makes them accessible to all Hindus. Lastly, Swami's great commentary has a value from the point of view of "Hindu nationalism." It symbolizes the Vedic Golden Age, the superiority of Hinduism, the greatness of ancient India—ideas that have become, thanks to Swami Dayānand, an integral part of a nationalist spirit, the strong echo of which one can hear in India even today.

PART II: S. RADHAKRISHNAN

For Radhakrishnan "the records of the experiences of the great seers who have expressed their sense of the inner meaning of the world through their intense insight and deep imagination are the Scriptures."² He interprets the Vedas as records of "the intuitions of the perfected souls;"³ they are "the experiences of the seers."⁴ Hence in order to understand his conception of Scripture, the most important point to be understood is his conception of intuition or integral experience. In intuition reality is directly known; the sense of reality penetrates our own consciousness and becomes one with us internally; and thus the subject-object distinction vanishes and the subject gains an unmediated immediate knowledge of the intuited object.

Intuition is not emotion but the claim to certain knowledge. It gives us a sense of divine reality as a thing immediately contained and directly known. The sense of God penetrates

² S. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sūtra. The Philosophy of Spiritual Life*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960, p. 113.

³ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1927, p. 17.

⁴ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I. Second Edition, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956, p. 51.

the seer's consciousness but it does not come like the light of day, something external, something out there in space. The barrier that separates the seer from the divine life is broken down. It is the aim of the seer to live in the light and inspiration of this experience, to be one with God in an abiding union.⁵

Or to quote again:

Intuitive consciousness....has the characteristics of immediacy and clarity. It is independent of perception and inference.... It is different from sense-observation, mathematical and logical reasoning. It comes in a flash as distinct from patient observation or logical analysis. We cannot foresee it or consciously prepare for it. It is creativity. It reveals the central nature of the intuited object. The subject and the object in intuition tend to coalesce. We thus gain an unmediated immediate knowledge and not the mediated, inadequate and always uncertain cognition or idea derived from the sense-perception or logical reasoning. It deals with the reality and not the appearance of the object.⁶

The Vedas record the spiritual experiences of souls strongly endowed with the sense for reality and they are inspired and revelatory only in this sense. They do not suggest anything miraculous or supernatural. They do not refer to a doctrine based on faith or revelation, but refer to a higher knowledge attained through a process of intuition or seeing. They are held to be authoritative merely on the ground that they express the experiences of the experts in the field of religion.

The Vedas which constitute the essential foundation of the entire spiritual tradition of India are based on integral experience. The term Veda derived from the root *vid* refers to a doctrine based not on faith or revelation but on a higher knowledge attained through a process of intuition or seeing. The Vedas are seen by the *ṛsis*, the seers of the earliest time.⁷

Or see again how emphatic Radhakrishnan is on this point:

Though the Hindu apologists of a later day offer ingenious interpretations in support of Vedic authority, still, so far as the Vedic seers are concerned, they mean by it the highest truth revealed to a pure mind. 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.' The *ṛsi* of the Vedic hymns calls himself not so much the composer of the hymns as the seer of them. It is seeing with the mind's eye or intuitive seeing. The *ṛsi* has his eye unblinded by the fumes of passion, and so can see the:

⁵ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Religions*, Delhi: Vision Books, 1979, pp. 19-20.

⁶ *The Brahma Sūtra. The Philosophy of Spiritual Life*, pp. 106-107.

⁷ *Indian Religions*, p. 20.

truth which is not evident to the senses. He only transmits the truth which he sees but does not make.... The poet's soul hears or has revealed to it the truth in its inspired condition, when the mind is lifted above the narrow places of the discursive consciousness. According to the Vedic seers, the contents of the hymns are inspired and revelatory only in this sense. It is not their intention to suggest anything miraculous or supernatural.⁸

Radhakrishnan rejects the doctrine of the infallibility of the Scriptures. The doctrine of the infallibility of the *śruti* is a later development of the Brahmanic period. "The attitude of the Upanishads is not favourable to the sacredness of the Vedas."⁹ The doctrine of infallibility developed through attaching sanctity to the Vedas in oral transmission in order "to ensure respect."¹⁰ "The Vedas are neither infallible nor all-inclusive. Spiritual truth is a far greater thing than the Scriptures."¹¹ "The old days when the Scriptures were accepted on trust that God was their author are no more.... We do not accept Scriptural documents as books apart from other books, unquestionable in their accuracy and advice."¹² "However valuable the testimony of past ages may be, it cannot deprive the present age of its right to inquire and sift the evidence."¹³ "Scriptures contain many survivals of crude, imperfect and undeveloped images. These are to be refined and improved in the light of our present knowledge."¹⁴ "Our interpretation of religious experience must be in conformity with the findings of science."¹⁵

Or to quote again:

Scriptures are not infallible in all they say. Truth is eternal validity and is timeless apart from the texts which may be dated. The truths which are apprehended are timeless though the act of apprehension like all activity is a temporal event. The eternity of the Vedas, 'the timelessness of the *dharma*' of the Buddhists, the eternity of the Divine Word of Christians refer not to the texts but to the truths enshrined in them.¹⁶

We are called upon to accept the Vedic statements which are *apta-vacana* or sayings of the wise, if only we feel convinced that those wise

⁸ *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 128.

⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1924, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 129. Cf also S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953, p. 29.

¹¹ *Indian Religions*, p. 20.

¹² K. M. Munshi etc. (eds.), *Radhakrishnan Reader. An Anthology*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969, p. 291.

¹³ *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 18.

¹⁴ *The Brahma Sūtra. The Philosophy of Spiritual Life*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁵ *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 19.

¹⁶ *The Brahma Sūtra. The Philosophy of Spiritual Life*, p. 115.

men had better means of forming a judgement. The intuitional experiences of the seers are within the possibility of all men if they will to have them and thus we are in a position to test the validity of the Vedas; and hence the appeal to the authoritativeness of the Vedas does not involve any reference to an extra-philosophical standard.¹⁷ As an educated person cannot rest his faith on the infallibility of the Scriptures or a miraculous revelation in the past, "the ultimate basis of religious trust must be found in personal experience."¹⁸ Today, we require a spiritual religion developed by souls of large spiritual compass who work for a world community. In that world community the Scriptures of all religions have a claim to our allegiance insofar as their statements are not dated and they transcend geographical and ecclesiastical limits.¹⁹

¹⁷ *The Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 1, p. 51.

¹⁸ *The Brahma Sūtra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.