

VIṢṆU IN THE VEDA

By

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Five whole hymns and part of one are devoted to विष्णु in the ऋग्वेद. The view of scholars has been that विष्णु represents सूर्य the sun itself or as the deity in it. The actions and exploits described in the hymns are explained in terms of the sun's course. Sanskrit and IE-related etymologies are given in support of this view. The lacunae in this interpretation have also been brought out by some. They lead us to consider some other phenomenon behind the myth of विष्णु. As the Veda was composed in India and as विष्णु has attained prime importance in the common Indian culture, etymologies are sought nearer home, in the Indian languages including the South Indian ones; they support the alternative view of Viṣṇu as comet, which provides consistent coordination with the epic and puranic stories relating to the deity.

1. Introduction

Viṣṇu in the R̥gveda would be a deity only of the fourth rank, celebrated in five whole hymns and in part of another, and his name occurring about 100 times altogether (p. 37-42, Vedic Mythology, A. A. Macdonell, 1889 referred hereafter also). The special traits and characters of the deity are said to be :

* He takes three strides, of which two are visible; the third is beyond the light of birds or mortal ken. He is *urugāya* 'wide going' and *urukrama* 'wide-striding' (1.155, 7.99). He dwells far from this space (7.100).

* In taking the three strides, *viṣṇu* observes laws (1.22). He is both ancient and recent (1.156).

* He is *giriṣit* 'mountain-dwelling' and *giriṣṭhā* 'mountain-abiding', also along with *Indra* (1.154, 155).

* He is allied with *Indra* (only) in his fight with *Vṛtra*, destroyed *Śambara's* 99 castles and conquered the hosts of *Varcin* (6.69, 7.99, 1.155).

* He is associated with *Maruts*, with whom he speeds along (5.87, 2.34, 8.20).

* He has different forms (7.100). He is protector of embryos (7.36, 10.184).

* He takes the three steps for men in distress (6.49, 8.69).

The purely naturalistic interpretation takes 'the three strides or steps' to mean the rising, culmination and setting of the sun. However, the third step, being the highest, shows no trace of being connected with sunset. Alternatively, they are taken as the course of the sun through the three divisions of the universe. Oldenberg thinks that every definite trace of solar character is lacking in विष्णु, who is conceived only as a traverser of wide space (pp. 38-39 *ibid*).

More evidence against the *viṣṇu*-sun equation can be given. The statement about *Viṣṇu*'s three strides is in the past tense, while the course of the sun is visible every day. (त्रिर्विः पृथिवीमेष एतां वि चक्रमे । ६.४९.१३ । यो रजांसि विममे पार्थिवानि । वि चक्रमे यत्र देवासो मवन्ति । ८.१९.७ ।). There are other hymns devoted to *Sūrya* by name, in which the symbolism is obvious and the statements are in the present tense.

One of the exploits of *urugāya Viṣṇu* is stated to be the creation of the sun, the dawns and fire (त्रिण्येक उरुगायो जनयन्ता सूर्यपुषासमक्रिम् । ७.९९.४). *Viṣṇu* must therefore be different from these three. The sun is the same visible size throughout his course; *Viṣṇu* is said to have increased in size by his weird powers (परो माम्वा तन्वा वृधान । ७.९९.१ ।)

Etymology

According to Sāyaṇa, *Sūrya* stimulates or drives (इ प्रेरणे । सुवतीति सूर्यः ।), while *Viṣṇu* pervades (व्यापकत्वात् विष्णुः।). Macdonell infers that विष्णु was originally conceived as the sun, as the personified swiftly moving luminary by derivation from the root विश् 'to be active' (p. 39, italics supplied); त्रिविक्रम is sought from वि-क्रम् 'to take strides' ऊर् in the epithets उरुगाय, उरुक्रम is taken to mean 'wide'.

The phrase 'by derivation from the root' is worthy of careful attention. Words in a language are not derived from roots. Roots, particularly in the Sanskrit etymological tradition, are phonetic abstractions from words. They are assigned meanings to be consistent with the known or imagined meanings of the words. That is how a familiar word like सूर्य would be derived from two roots : सृ 'to move' and सू 'to drive, stimulate.' Nineteenth century phonology carried the tradition forward by relating सूर्य to the root स्वर 'to shine' to Greek *helios* Latin *sol* as cognates. The root स्वर applies also to स्वर्ग 'heaven', the Greek word relates to brightness and Latin *sol* is present in words denoting *solitude*, loneliness or *sole-ness*. Detailed rules for phonetic relationships between IE languages have no doubt been worked out; the semiotics of the roots or words are however not related.

In spite of acceptance of the premise, that (Vedic) Sanskrit was developed in India in an environment of indigenous languages, etymological relations of Sanskrit words with those in the Indian languages have not been even conceptually consid-

ered, let alone being investigated. The division into language families has especially blocked any scholarly approach to this area. Within the sub-family of IA languages, the traffic of etyma has always been considered one-way: from Sanskrit to the living Indian languages, through degeneration (अपभ्रंश) as per philology and through 'diachronic change' as per modern linguistics. South Indian languages clubbed as 'Dravidian' have been left out of the purview of phonetic and semantic consideration of Sanskrit words. Burrow did initiate their inclusion, but only for those words, for which 'satisfactory' etymologies were not available within the accepted framework.

We can consider the word *Sūrya* itself. From Burrow and Emeneau's Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (DED), Tamil *cār* pronounced *sūr* means 'to revolve' and there is a whole list of related words in so many SI languages, Ta. *cūriyan* (pr. *sūriyan*) 'sun', considered a borrowing from Sanskrit, does not find place in the DED. Semiotically, however, 'the revolving' is a far more apt and correct pre-literate description of the sun, than the 'stimulator, driver' of the erudite philosophers.

With reference to *Viṣṇu* we can similarly consider the following DED entries :

- Ta. *Vip* 'sky, heaven' *viṇṇavar* 'celestial being'
 Ta. *vimmu*, *viṅku* 'become enlarged' Ma. *viṇṇuka* 'to swell'
 Ta. *Vicu* 'lengthen, stretch' Ma *viṇṇi* 'fan' (*c* is pronounced *s* also)
 Ta. *tiri* 'to turn, revolve, wander about, move, return' *tirivu* 'change'
 Ta. *viṅkam* 'enlargement'
 Ta. *uru* 'to assume a form, issue forth'
 uruḷ 'to revolve' (as a wheel)
 Ta. *urai* 'to be reduced into a powder'
 ula 'to become diminished'

With slight phonetic variations in forming *udbhramśas* (Sanskrit-sounding forms of borrowings) we can get from the above, the 'Sanskrit' *viṣṇu trivikrama urugāya* to mean 'a celestial being, moving in the sky, enlarging like a fan, being reduced to powder, changing, diminishing, wandering about and returning....', that is, a *comet* (and *not the sun*). It will be seen, that the Sanskrit roots *viś* or *vi* are conceived by analyzing a word formed from nominal words joined together in an agglutinative language. Comprehension of the hymns has been made difficult by the etymological apparatus adopted, as the *udbhramśa* words are used in the hymns in their original sense.

VISṆU, the Comet

The correspondence of *visṇu* with the comet is not sought to be justified merely by the etymology of the name. The mythical exploits in the hymns can also be explained properly on this basis. Sun, Moon, the stars and planets are familiar appearances in the sky or heaven. It is the *comet*, that appears as a surprise, takes strides, revolves around the sun taking strides and often growing like a fan or diminishing and passing through *three* stages of striding toward the sun, away from the sun and disappearance behind the sun or far away into space, to return later. Quite naturally, the comet became a venerable object of praise and worship. They myth-making metaphors emphasized one or the other of its aspects:

विष्णोर्नु कं वीर्याणि प्र वोचं यः पर्यियानि विममे रजांसि ।

यो अस्कमायदुत्तरं सघस्यं विचक्रमाणल्लेधोरुमायः । १.१५४.१ ।

What exploits may one speak of विष्णु, who raised material dusts

Who scaled the higher region, wheeling round, in thrice changed form.

परो मात्रया तन्वा वृधान न ते महित्वमन्वश्नुवन्ति । ७.९९.१ ।

With body growing beyond measure, mortals do not grasp your magnitude.

(This is the most important difference from the sun, that suggests Vishnu being the comet).

दाघर्थं पृथिवीमभितो मयूखैः । ७.९९.३ ।

You held the earth with rays around.

(Sāyaṇa translates mayūkha as mountain, though the generally accepted sense is ray).

प्र तद् विष्णुः स्तवते वीर्येण मृगो न भीमः कुचरो गिरिष्ठाः । १.१५४.२ ।

It is that विष्णु that is praised, who is awesome in valour like a lion, moving through rough country, a denizen of the mountains. (The simile implies analogy of the lion's mane to the comet's 'tail' or 'fan').

यस्योरुषु त्रिषु विक्रमणेष्वधिक्षियन्ति मुक्नानि विश्वा । १.१५४.२ ।

In whose three vast (changing) strides, all the worlds are contained.

द्वे इदस्य क्रमणे स्वदहसोऽभिल्याय मर्त्यो भुरण्यति ।

तृतीयमस्य न किरा दधर्षति वयश्चन पतयन्तः पतत्रिणः । १.१५५.५ ।

Two of the strides of this heavenly vision, mortal man talks of and praises

His third, no one grasps, nor meteros falling, nor birds flying.

(According to Sāyana, वयश्चन वेतारो मरुतोऽपि । वयश्चन means birds or *maruts* also *maruts* in the Veda are seen to be meteors ('of the air'). They are stated to be friends of विष्णु, which fits in well with विष्णु as a comet; for meteors are similar to comets in sudden bright appearance and a long spread of tail like extension, gushing through the sky. वि is said to mean 'bird'. From Ta. वि is to burn the alternative meaning 'meteor' could be justified).

चतुर्भिः साकं नवति च नामभिश्चक्रं न वृत्तं व्यतीस्वीविपत्
बृहच्छरीरो विमिमान ऋक्षभिर्युवाकुमारः प्रत्येत्याहवम् ।१.१५५.६ ।

Like a wheel with four by ninety names, is the revolving globe;
He of giant physique rushing towards it, returns as a fullgrown youth, at the call of our praises.

(This would apply to some comets that return periodically, once or more, within the lifetime of a generation).

यः पूर्व्याय वेधसे नवीसये सुमज्जानये विष्णवे ददासति
यो जातमस्य मरुतो महि ब्रवत्सेदु श्रवोभिर्युज्यं चिदभ्यसात् ।१.१५६.२ ।

He who, to the ancient, brave and ever-new born विष्णु, makes offerings. He who, of the birth of this mighty one speaks highly, leads his life provided with victuals.

प्र तते अथ शिपिविष्ट नामार्थः शंसामि वयुनानि विद्वान् ।
तं त्वा गुणामि तवसमतव्यान्क्षयन्तमस्य रजसः पराके ।३.१००.५ ।

Your name 'shell-closed', that I praise, I, master of things to be known.
To you, who are mighty, housed beyond this dust, speak I, devoid of might.

(Ta. *cippi* 'shell' Mar. *šipi* (rural), *šimpa(lā)* properly explain the controversial term *šipiviṣṭa* which applies to the state of sudden contraction (signified by *adya* 'today') of a comet to its tiny 'head' or nucleus. It is not worthwhile to connect it to *šepa*; firstly because the phallic depiction of *viṣṇu* cannot explain the exploit of three strides and secondly the word is far better connected to Mar. *šepa* 'tail', rather than to Latin *cippus* 'column' - a very tenuous analogy).

किमित्ते विष्णो परिचक्ष्य भूत्प्र यद् ववक्षे शिपिविष्टो अस्मि ।
मा वर्षो अस्मदप गृह एतबदन्यरूपः समिये वभूष ।३.१००.६ ।

What is your consideration, Vishnu, that you say, 'Shell-closed am I '?
Do not withhold your true form, for you were of different aspect in the encounter.

(The encounter of the comet is with the sun. The comet has a profoundly large aspect close to the sun and shrinks to a shell-closed form, away from it).

वषट् ते विष्णवाय आ कृणोमि तन्मे जुषस्व शिषिविष्ट हव्यम्
वर्धन्तु त्वा सुष्टुतयो गिरे मे यूयं पात स्वस्तिभिः सदा नः । ७.१००.७ ।

O, विष्णु, I make you offering; O shell-closed, accept the oblation.

May my eulogical utterings swell you; may you all protect us with your blessings for all time.

(This is prayer for re-growth of *Viṣṇu* shell-closed, or the comet reduced in size, like for the moon and sun 'in distress', during eclipses).

Correlations

Viṣṇu the deity does not stand alone; he is related with *Indra* and *Marut* in the *Veda*. Both *Vishnu* and *Indra* traversed, assuming forms (उरु चक्रमाथे । ६.६९.५). They ennobled the skies, scattered dusts for the good of the living (अकृणुतमन्तरिक्षं वरीयोऽप्रथतं जीवसे नो रजोसि । ६.६९.५). They are prone to growth (वाङ्मना । ६.६९.१). Being travelers, they are entreated to protect the devotees on safe roads (अरिष्टैर्नः पथिभिः पावयन्ता । ६.६९.१). These common points between the two lead us to identifying with the moon, which also grows, is seen at mountain tops (या समनि) releases the waters; In this task he is aided by the meteors (as hard as the *vajra* when they land on earth) whence they are his aides, as *Maruts*. This allegory is seen in the following :

इन्द्राविष्णुं दंष्टिताः शंभरस्य नव पुरो नवलिं च शनधिष्टम्
शतं बर्हिर्नः सहस्रं च साकं ह्यो अप्रत्यसुरस्य वीरान् । ७.९९.५ ।

Indra and *Viṣṇu*, thick friends, snatched ninety nine of the forts of *Śambara*. Unrivalled, they killed hundred thousands of the powerful warriors of the demon.

(The demons are the clouds. The numbers of forts and warriors are conventional).

अथाब्रवीद्वृत्रमिन्द्रो हनिष्यान्तसखे विष्णो वितरं वि क्रमस्व । ४.१८.११ ।

Then, *Indra* planning to kill *Vṛtra*, said, '*Viṣṇu*, dear, act with all valour'.

This statement shows, that the one great deed ascribed to *Indra* was not executed by him alone.

The mythical stories of killing of a demon by the gods then appear as variations of an archetypal stereotype.

Sāyaṇa's comment on this hymn proceeds on the basis of the narrative relat-

ing to Vamadeva in the सर्वानुक्रमणी. The 13 verses are supposed to constitute a dialogue between Vamadeva, Indra and Indra's mother Aditi. Aside from the supernatural details like Indra being borne in the womb for a thousand months...it is to be noted how totally new narratives are spun from the venerated text of the Veda. The epics and Purāṇas are replete with stories of this sort, built on whatever meaning the reciters and listeners of vedic chants could make out of and impose on the sacred words.

According to Sāyaṇa, *Indra, who was born in a cave, was considered inferior by his mother, who therefore equipped him with all the strength; then as he was born, he rose high in his own luster, filling heaven and earth with it* (अवधमिव मन्यमाना गुहाकरिन्द्रं माता वीर्येणा न्यूष्टम् । अर्थादित्यात्स्वयमत्कं वसान आ रोदसी अपृणाजायमानः । ४.१८.५ ।). (Vamadeva praises Indra), 'O Indra, the intoxicated demon *vyāmsa struck at your chin*' (ममच्च ते मध्वन्व्यसो निविधिवा अप हन् जघान । ४.१८.९ ।).

The three events (in italics above) have a very familiar ring, in the totally different context of Hanūmat's life-story in the Rāmāyaṇa. The characters are rather reversed: Hanūmat is born in a cave, he rises high towards the sun and Indra hits him on the chin (whence his name !). And later, *he* offers his friendship and services to incarnate Viṣṇu!

And yet the Rāmāyaṇa itself provides enough guidance to establish the identity of Viṣṇu, the comet with Hanūmat, the monkey. Pressing him to fly over the ocean, his senior Jambavan says, 'Take stride, speedy swift, like Vishnu took his three' (Kishkindha 66.37). Hanūmat himself exclaims, 'Flying over the sea, my aspect will be like, that of Viṣṇu taking three strides in younger age'. (भविष्यति हि मे रूपं प्लवमानस्य सागरम् । विष्णोः प्रक्रममाणस्य तदा त्रीन् विक्रमानिव । ६७.२५ ।). Starting with 'hairiness' there is more than enough of common characters between comets and meteors in nature and the monkeys in Rāmāyaṇa to convince us of the foundation of the myth.

Conclusion:

The Vedic hymns have to be read in the light of Indian, rather than Indo-European linguistics. Their traditional interpretations have to be reviewed by applying multidisciplinary knowledge. Transformations in mythology in the course of time have to be borne in mind. Acceptance of conclusions of such inquiries will usher into New Indology for the new century if not the new millennium.



