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INTERPRETING THE VEDIC TRADITION

I. The Sarasvatī, Like the Ganges, Flows from Heaven

The Sarasvatī River is lauded in the *Rgveda* (hence, *RV*) as being a mighty river flowing from the mountains to what has been interpreted as the sea. Fully three hymns are addressed exclusively to her (*RV* 6.61, 7.95, and 7.96), and she is mentioned in many others as well (as, for instance, in *RV* 10.75.5-6 and 3.23.4). She is likened to a deity (*RV* 5.43.11, 2.41.16, 5.46.2, and 1.13.9, for instance), and her munificence is lauded (*RV* 1.164.49, for instance; see Lal 2002: 4-6).

It is generally agreed today that the R̥gvedic Sarasvatī River is to be identified with a river known variously as the Sarasvatī (or, Sarsūti) in Haryana, the Ghaggar in northern Rajasthan, and the Hakra in the Cholistan region of Pakistan. Today it is a mostly dry riverbed, its waters having been captured, it would seem, by the Sutlej and Yamunā Rivers (see Flam 1999: 64b; Possehl 1997: 446, 1998: 341, 343, 345-347).

While this is the generally held opinion today, there are still some scholars who argue for a comparatively late arrival of the Vedic Indo-Aryans into northwestern India, who argue that the R̥gvedic Sarasvatī River is to be identified as the Haraḥvaitī River of the *Avesta*, the modern-day Helmand River in Afghanistan, the Avestan name of which is a reflex of the Vedic Sanskrit “Sarasvatī”; or who still argue that the Sarasvatī is to be identified with the Indus River. For a good response to these latter opinions, and their history in brief, see Lal (2002: 1-17).

Variations on these opinions exist as well.

Maurer (1986: 196-197) argues that the name of the Afghanistani river was transferred to the Indus River, perhaps as an epithet, when the Vedic Indo-Aryans arrived in northwestern India.

Witzel (2002: 172-173) similarly argues that the name was transferred from the name of the Afghanistani river. But he argues it was transferred to the no longer mighty Ghaggar-Hakra complex – which like its Afghanistani counterpart arose in the mountains and terminated in lakes in the desert. (Witzel, following Monier-Williams 1899: 1182b and Macdonell and Keith 1912/2: 434 n. 1, for example, translates “Sarasvatī” as ‘she who has ponds/lakes’. Maurer 1986: 196 translates it as ‘abounding in water’.) Witzel appears to argue (p. 173) that the laudations regarding the mightiness of the Sarasvatī River are typical Rgvedic hyperbole.

On the other hand, Possehl (1998: 341) has noted that in the context of the importance of the Sarasvatī River in the *RV*, on the basis of the dating of the drying up of the Sarasvatī, the usual Western dating for the *RV* seems to be too late. (See Dandekar 1958: 1 – composition of the *RV* ca. 1200 - 900 BCE, composition of the earliest hymns of the *RV* ca. 1500 - 1200 BCE; see Levitt 2003: 341a-342b, and In press¹.)

From an archeological point of view, during Hakra Ware times (3800 - 3200 BCE) and Mature Harappan times (2500 - 1900 BCE) human settlement along her shores, particularly in an inland delta that she formed in the Derawar Fort area, was particularly dense, less so in Early Harappan (Kot Dijian) times (3200 - 2600 BCE) and Post-Urban Harappan (Cemetery H) times (1900 - 1700[?] BCE); and it was especially more sparse in Painted Gray Ware (early Iron Age) times (1000[?] - 500 BCE) (Possehl 1997: 442-447, esp. table II and figs. 9-13; 1998: 340 [fig. 1], 347-350, 352-354 [figs. 5-7]).

Lal (2002: 14-16, fig. 2.2), citing Flam (1999: 58, 65), argues that the Hakra River flowed into the Nara River, and as the Nara River into the Arabian Sea. Flam (1999: 56b-58b), though, is referring to very ancient and pre-historic times. Of the

connection between the Hakra and Nara Rivers in the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE, Flam (1999: 58a) writes:

“There is little doubt and little disagreement that the Hakra-Nara Nadī was a *seasonal river* [italics mine] with perennial characteristics during the fourth and third millennia B.C.”

In different words, the full course of the combined river was already drying up. Possehl (1998: 350), a bit more conservatively, and considering human habitation data for the Dewarar Fort area writes:

“It might be that the river once did flow to the sea, in very ancient times prior to the Hakra ware Stage (3800 - 3200 B.C.), but even this is not certain. ... In spite of the alignment of the Sarasvatī with the Eastern Nara it may well be that these two rivers were never one.”

More recently, Sharma, Gupta, and Bhadra (2005-2006: 189b; see also 192b) concluded on the basis of multi-spectral modern-day satellite data:

“The present findings indicate that the Saraswati flowed as an independent river system parallel to the Indus river and did not change its course and in all probability did not drain through the Nara. ... The present mapped course of the Saraswati is about 40 km east of the river Nara ([see] Gupta *et al.* 2004).”

Further, while they do mention a few channels *originating* from the Sarasvatī that *seem* to meet the Gulf of Kutch, they concluded (190b-191a):

“Prima-facie a look at the channels delineated from IRS WIFS data indicates the Saraswati ending in the Rann of Kachchh in Pakistan area; ... At the present level of evidence and understanding it is difficult to visualize that the Vedic Saraswati itself discharged to the Gulf of

Kuchchh but at the same time one cannot totally rule out the possibility.”

Of late, there has been a great deal of contention with regard to the passage in *RV* 7.95.2 that says that the Sarasvatī River flows from the mountains to the ocean. The passage in question reads:

*ékācetat sárasvatī nadīnāṃ śúcir yatí giribhya ā
samudrāt /
rāyás cétantī bhūvanasya bhūrer ghṛtām páyo duduhe
nāhuṣāya // 2 //*

In the translation of Wilson (1850-88/5: 189-190):

“2. Sarasvatī, chief and purest of rivers, flowing from the mountains to the ocean, understood the request of Nāhusa, and distributing riches among the many existing beings, milked for him butter and water.”

In the translation of Griffith (1896-97; new rev. ed., 1973: 381a):

“2. Pure in her course from mountains to the ocean, alone of streams Sarasvatī has listened. Thinking of wealth and the great world of creatures, she poured for Nāhuṣa her milk and fatness.”

In the translation of Geldner (1951-57/2: 265):

“2. Einzig unter den Strömen hat sich Sarasvatī hervorgetan, von den Bergen zum Meere klar fließend, den Reichtum der vielgestaltigen Welt kennend, spendete sie Schmalz und Milch dem Nahusstamm.”

In the very recent translation of Jamison and Brereton (2014/2: 1003):

“2. Alone of the rivers, Sarasvatī shows clear, as she goes gleaming from the mountains all the way to the sea.

Taking note of the abundant wealth of the world, she has milked out ghee and milk for the Nāhuṣa.”

With regard to the word translated as ‘ocean’, or ‘sea’, *samudrá*, Witzel (2003: 168-169, incl. n. 95) refers to several possible meanings, etymologizing the word as *sam-udr-a* ‘a collection of waters’. So also, Monier-Williams 1899: 1066c gives a translation from a strictly etymological vantage, ‘gathering together of waters’. In the context here, Witzel prefers a meaning ‘terminal lake’ in the desert (p. 170), which he sees as agreeing with Possehl (2002).

Kazanas (2002: 310-314 [2009 ptg., pp. 45-50], 2003: 228-229 [incl. §449(a)], 2007: 30-31, for instance) sees the Sarasvatī flowing to the *samudra*, for which he accepts the usual meaning as ‘ocean’, or ‘sea’, to support his pre-Harappan dating of the *RV* as it was only from such a time that evidence indicates the Sarasvatī might have flowed to the sea.

Thomson (2009: 30-33, 2010: 424-427) has recently argued, on the other hand, that the text is being misconstrued all around. She notes that *samudrāt* is an ablative, and that in all fifteen other instances in the *RV* in which *samudrá* appears in the ablative as *samudrāt*, or *samudrād* before a vowel, the meaning ‘from the *samudrá*’ is intended. *ā*, she argues, an adposition which followed by an ablative in the later *Brāhmaṇa* texts means ‘up to, until’, is not to be construed here with the following *samudrāt*, but with the preceding *girībhyas* (the final *-s* being dropped in the text for reasons of euphonic combination). Adpositions in the *RV*, she notes, are invariably, if not always, postpositions, not prepositions. In this case, a postposition *ā* would add emphasis to the preceding ablative, as happens regularly in the *RV*. She quite correctly notes that the syntax here troubled Wilson so much in his translation of the *RV* that he noted in a footnote, “*Yatī girībhyā ā samudrāt* is the text” (Wilson 1850-88/5: 190 n. 1), for his translation “flowing from the mountains to the ocean”. Thomson construes the phrase as meaning “pure, travelling down from the mountains, from the gathering place of waters” (2009: 33), adopting the strictly etymological translation of *samudrá*, and what she says

is Witzel's translation of *samudrá* as 'together-waters' (with regard to which, see Thomson 2009: 29). Her translation of *samudrá in this context* seems forced to me, though.

Kazanas (2010), has argued against her interpretation as it counters his position that this verse supports his contention that the *RV* is pre-Harappan.

As Witzel (2003: 167) has noted, it is generally under-emphasized that the Sarasvatī, like the Ganges River later on, flows from heaven, which he notes he has discussed in detail in Witzel (1984). As Grassmann (1873: 1483) notes of *samudrá*, "m. *Ansammlung der Wasser, Meer, auch bildlich von Luftraume, ...*". So also, Monier-Williams (1899: 1166c) notes of *samudrá*, "in Veda also 'the aerial waters', 'atmospheric ocean or sky'". Quoting Konrad Klaus, Witzel (2003: 168) gives as one of the possible meanings of *samudrá*, 'heavenly "pond", heavenly "ocean"'. Thus, *RV* 7.6.7 speaks of two oceans, lower and upper; *RV* 10.98.5-6 speaks of a heavenly ocean where gathered together the waters being brought down, stood. *RV* 10.136.5 speaks metaphorically of two oceans.

To relate this more specifically to the Sarasvatī, *RV* 6.61.11 speaks of the Sarasvatī as both on earth and in the firmament, and *RV* 6.61.12 speaks of her as having a three-fold source, which Griffith (1896-97; new rev. ed., 1973: 323b) annotates, "'abiding in the three worlds', that is, pervading heaven, earth, and hell, according to Sāyaṇa, like Gaṅgā in later times". Geldner (1951-57/2: 163 n. to vs. 12a) has a comparable annotation.

In the context of Thomson's observation regarding the syntax here, a more logical translation than hers – or, perhaps, a more explicit translation of the intent, would be, "pure, travelling down from the mountains, *from the heavenly ocean*".

II. The Date of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* on the Basis of *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 2.1.2.3.

Achar (1999), using what he refers to as “Planetarium Software”, has followed through on an earlier observation of Hermann Jacobi with regard to a passage in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (hence, *ŚPBr*) which states that the Pleiades never swerve from the east. But like Shankar B. Dikshit in 1895, and others, he has used the data that he marshals to arrive at a date of *ca.* 3000 BCE for the *ŚPBr*.

Witzel (1999), in response to Achar argues not entirely without force that this was traditional lore passed down, the usage of which was retained in ritual context. He argues, as well, that the traditional lore was still generally correct at the time of the composition of the *ŚPBr* which he argues is an iron age text, which age starts around 1200 BCE in India, from a period when the Vedic Aryans had moved on to central north and eastern India. On the basis of linguistic and other reasons, Witzel would date the *ŚPBr* to just before the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, to just before the time of the Buddha. I think Witzel’s dating of the text to just before the middle of the 1st millennium BCE is way too late. I would date the *Brāhmaṇas* to sometime after the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE to the 1st millennium BCE, *i.e.* 1500-1000 BCE roughly, in large part on the basis of Ancient Mesopotamian parallels, after which we get the *Upaniṣads* (see Levitt 2003: 352a-354b, and In press¹).¹

¹ Further, as I pointed out in Levitt (In press¹), and as I pointed out earlier in Levitt (1995-96: 232), which latter paper was marred by an abundance of printer’s errors, we can gain a comparative textual handle on the dating of the *Brāhmaṇas*, in which the highest god is the late Ṛgvedic world creator Prajāpati, in that Iranian material on the later *Avesta* Verethragna may be related to material developed for the first time in the Indian tradition, in the *Brāhmaṇas*. I am thinking here of the Pahlavi gloss for Av. *vərəθra* as ‘victory’, which gloss seems to fit the attestations, in the context of *ŚPBr* 5.2.3.7. The passage begins, “And on the following day he prepares a cake on eleven potsherds for Agni and Soma, and offers it in the same way as an (ordinary) *ishṭi* for it was **thereby Indra slew Vṛitra**, and thereby he gained that universal conquest which now is his. And in like manner does this (king, the Sacrificer) slay his wicked, hateful enemy, and **in like manner does he gain victory**. ... [boldface mine]” (Eggeling 1882-1900/3: 45; for text see *ŚPBr* 5.2.2.7 in Chinnaśwāmī Śāstrī, Pattābhirāma Śāstrī, and Rāmanātha Dikṣita 1984: 435).

Kazanas (2002: 294-295 [2009 ptg., pp. 24-26]), on the other hand, accepts Achar's archaeoastronomical dating of the *ŚPBr* to *ca.* 3000 BCE at face value, and with it his conclusion that the *ŚPBr* was composed during Indus Valley civilization times for this and other reasons.

Witzel (2003: 174-175) has responded to Kazanas.

In Levitt (In press¹), I referred to still a different interpretation of the data by the astronomer A. Prey of the German University of Prague, who arrived at a date of *ca.* 1100 BCE for the observation mentioned in *ŚPBr* 2.1.2.3, which is reported in Winternitz (1927/1: 298, together with n. 2). Winternitz thinks that this latter interpretation of the text is proven correct by *Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra* 27.5. This date, by coincidence, would be more in line with my dating of the *ŚPBr*. As no one will probably take the trouble to reference Winternitz's discussion, I reproduce it here:

“... The passage [Śat. Br. II.1,2,3. ...] in which we read that the Pleiades “do not swerve from the East” should probably not be interpreted as meaning that they rose “due east” (which would have been the case in the third millenary B.C., and would point to a knowledge of the vernal equinox): the correct interpretation is more likely that they remain visible in the eastern region for a considerable time – during several hours – every night, which was the case about 1100 B.C. [I am indebted for this explanation to Professor A. Prey, the astronomer of our University, who informed me that, in about 1100 B.C. the Pleiades rose approximately 13° to the north of the east point, approaching nearer and nearer the east line, and crossing it as late as 2^h 11^m after their rise, at a height of 29°, when seen from a place situated at 25° North latitude. They thus remain almost due east long enough to serve as a convenient basis for orientation. This interpretation of the passage is proved to be the correct one, by *Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra* 27,5 (cf. W. Caland, *Über das rituelle Sūtra des Baudhāyana*, Leipzig 1903, pp. 37 ff.), where it is prescribed that the supporting beams of a hut on the place of sacrifice shall

face east, and that this direction shall be fixed after the Pleiades appear, as the latter “do not depart from the eastern region.” It is true that, about 2100 B.C. or about 3100 B.C., the Pleiades touched the east line earlier, but they proceeded southwards so rapidly that they were not suitable for orientation.] ...”.

For the context of this discussion, should there be an interest, I must still forward the reader to Winternitz’s *opus*, pp. 294-299.

Kak (2000: 36), I might note, with regard to *ŚPBr* 2.1.2.3 cautiously states that it “points to an earlier epoch”.

III. The Meaning of *āditi* in *Ṛgveda* 1.89.10.

Several Ṛgvedic hymns are used in context in the *Pāṭityagrāmanirṇaya* (hence, *PGN*), a separable section of the *uttarārdha* of the *Sahyādrīkhaṇḍa* (hence, *Skh.u.*), the *uttarārdha* of which text appears to have accreted various chapters at various times, even within the *PGN* (see Levitt 1982, 1992: 1-2, and In press²). In total, five Ṛgvedic hymns are referred to in *PGN* chapter 9 (*Skh.u.* 17) and in the various manuscripts of this chapter.

It is my contention that seeing the Ṛgvedic hymns in context as used in the Hindu tradition helps us understand better their import. For instance, it is clear from the usage of *RV* 1.89 that it has to do specifically with communal well-being and longevity, which the translation of Wilson (1850-88/1: 227-230) in particular makes abundantly clear. So also, Jamison and Brereton (2014/1: 221) emphasize that the hymn refers to “the favors that the gods will bestow on the properly worshipping humans” and that “the particular favor we desire from them is to secure our proper length of life”.

One verse at the end of this latter hymn, *RV* 1.89.10, Brereton (1981: 248-249), for instance, finds it difficult to interpret either in light of other references to Aditi in the *RV*, or the later Vedic characterization of the goddess. Brereton

considers this verse to be a later addition to the hymn, as had Grassmann (1876-77/2: 445). Similarly, Maurer (1986: 235-237, n. to vs. 10) notes:

“10. This stanza has nothing to do with the rest of the hymn from whose tenor it differs markedly. As it merges everything in Aditi conceived as a universal substrate, it foreshadows the concept of Brahman later to be elaborated in the Vedānta.”

With regard to its content, Geldner (1951-57/1: 114 n.) commented “Theopantistische Strophe”, and Griffith (1896-97; new rev. ed., 1973: 57a, n.) commented “*Aditi*: the Infinite, infinite Nature”. The 14th c. CE commentator Sāyaṇa had noted, “Aditi is hymned as the same with the universe”. Whereas the ancient commentator Yāska, in *Nirukta* 4.23, opined that the hymn declared the might of Aditi. (See Wilson 1850-88/1: 230 n. for the comments of Sāyaṇa and Yāska.)

Very recently, Brereton has backpedaled from his earlier view. Jamison and Brereton (2014/1: 221) view *RV* 1.89.10 to echo *RV* 1.89.3, which refers to Aditi and the various Ādityas, or ‘children of Aditi’. They see *RV* 1.89.10 to identify Aditi “with the most important cosmic features, kinship relations, and beings”, echoing in part Brereton’s earlier characterization of the Ādityas as gods of social principles (1981: viii). Jamison and Brereton (2014/1: 221) see this hymn to have “a pleasing symmetry, especially at the beginning and end”. This goes against the earlier opinions of Grassmann (1876-77), Brereton himself, and Maurer.

This verse, *RV* 1.89.10, in the translation of Brereton (1981: 248) reads:

“Heaven is Aditi. The mid-space is Aditi. Mother, father, and son is Aditi. Aditi is all the gods and the five peoples. What is born is Aditi and what is yet to be born.”

In the more recent translation of Witzel and Gotō (2007: 156-157):

“10. Aditi ist der Himmel. Aditi ist der Laufraum.
Aditi ist die Mutter. Sie ist der Vater. Sie ist der Sohn,
Aditi ist alle Götter, die fünf Völker.
Aditi ist das Geborene. Aditi ist, was geboren werden
wird.”

And in the translation of Jamison and Brereton (2014/1: 222):

“10. Aditi is heaven. Aditi is the midspace. Aditi is the
mother; she is the father, she is the son.
Aditi is the All Gods, the five peoples. Aditi is what has
been born, Aditi what is to be born.”

In context, though, it makes more sense to translate *áditi* in a more basic meaning not as the name of the goddess, but as ‘boundless (in time, might and/or munificence, wealth)’, or just ‘unending’, ‘forever’. Thus:

Heaven is boundless. The *antárikṣa* is boundless. The
mother is boundless. Such is the father. Such is the son.
All the gods are boundless. The five groupings of beings
(or perhaps, the five peoples) are boundless. Those born
and to be born are boundless.

Similarly, Grassmann (1873: 36) translates here, “das *Unendliche*, die *Unendlichkeit*”, perhaps followed by Griffith (1896-97; new rev. ed., 1973: 57a, n.) in his comment regarding this verse mentioned immediately above. But in Grassmann (1876-77/2: 445), where Grassmann suggests that this verse is a later addition, Grassmann translates “Aditi”.

It would seem that usage of this hymn in context, in which it is clear that it refers to communal well-being and longevity, makes the point of this verse clear, and suggests along with Jamison and Brereton (2014/1: 221) that it is not at all a later addition, but is rather an integral culmination of the import of

the hymn; and further that it does not refer to the goddess Aditi, but simply to longevity, might, and munificence.

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