

Vedic Interpretation by Western Scholars: Relevant for Multidimensional Study

Dr. Shashi Tiwari

Abstract

The Vedic interpretation has a glorious tradition of at least five thousand years. Several interpretations presented by ancient and modern Indian commentators, as well as by medieval and modern western scholars illustrate the importance and depth of the meaning of Vedic verses and texts. There are many direct or indirect theories available today for Vedic interpretation. Here an attempt has been made to give a brief account of some important western scholars of European countries who worked in the field of Vedic interpretation and research for last three centuries. They paid immense attention on Vedic knowledge from eighteenth century onward and have tried to understand Vedas in context of history, myths, customs and popular religious notions of the Vedic people. Many scholars of Europe took great effort for understanding the adequate shades of meaning of the Vedic Mantras and Vedic texts. H. H. Wilson, student of Indologist, Colebrooke did path-breaking publication in his English-translation of the R̥gveda. He was follower of Sāyana and took Friedrich Max Muller's edition of R̥gveda as a safe authority for commentary. Theoder Benfey, W. R. Von Roth, L. Von Schroeder, Albrecht Weber, Alfred Hillebrandt, Karl Geldner, Hermann Oldenberg, and few others from Germany; William Dwight Whitney, David Frawley from USA; Maurice Bloomfield from Austria; Louis Renou from France; A.A. Macdonell, A.B. Keith, Ralph T.H. Griffith from England; Jan Gonda from Netherlands; Milena Bratoeva from Bulgaria are some prominent Indologists. Extensive venture of western scholars for the revival of Vedic study and research is unparalleled.

Full Paper

The word 'Veda' does not refer to one single literary work, but indicates a whole literature, which has been handed down from one generation to another generation by verbal transmission. Veda is the name given to the Mantras, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads. Among them Mantra-part is the main part of the Veda, compiled into four books named as four Vedas- R̥gveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda. Vedas reveal deep knowledge and truth in its most difficult language and symbolic style. They had been seen and heard in the inner experience of inspired and semi-divine thinkers 'the ṛṣis'. The sublimity in conceptual arena as well as the structural phenomena has necessitated the origin of Vedic interpretation. The Vedic interpretation is regarded the foundation of Indian thought. It has a glorious tradition of at least five thousand years. Several interpretations presented by ancient and modern Indian commentators, as well as by medieval and modern western scholars illustrate the importance and depth of the meaning of Vedic verses and texts. There are many direct or indirect theories available today for interpretation of Vedas among intellectuals.

A group of ancient Indian interpreters, like Sākalya, Ātreya, Narāyaṇa, Uvāṇa, Mahīdhara, Sāyana etc. wrote commentaries on Vedic Texts and related Vedic-concepts with mythology and sacrificial ceremonies. Ancient Indian tradition of interpretation reaches its acme in the commentary of Sāyana who has taken all aspects of meaning, in order to justify his ritualistic and sacrificial interpretation. Among modern theories, Vedic interpretation of Shri Aurobindo and Swami Dayananda Sarasvati can be called *ādhyātmic* or spiritual interpretation, though they basically differ in nature. Besides this, some other methods adopted by scholars are - symbolic interpretation, scientific interpretation, and comparative interpretation.

I. Western Method of Vedic Interpretation

According to a number of western scholars of Europe during last three centuries 'historical method' or 'comparative method' should be adopted for the interpretation of Vedic verses and texts. The base of this theory is linguistic unity of many ancient languages such as Greek, Latin, German, Slavonic,

Persian, Avestan, Gothic, Old Irish, and Vedic Sanskrit. These ancient languages have many similarities of structure and meanings. Looking at this point, they assumed a family of 'Indo-European language.' Accordingly, there was a time when different people were living together and were speaking same language; later due to certain reasons they migrated and got separated but took cultural similarities altogether. So to understand the meaning of ancient scriptures called Vedas; one should study rituals, myths and cultural traditions of other ancient civilizations as well. Comparative religion and mythology, comparative linguistics and semantic should be considered as the foundation of Vedic interpretation. Few Vedic words having doubtful meanings could be explained etymologically in comparison with the similar words found in other ancient languages. This comparative or historical method for understanding meaning of Vedic verses had a scientific and rational background, so European scholars adopted it widely. It is also important to note that few scholars opposed this method, and emphasized on the significance to be acquainted with the early Indian traditional ways and ancient Indian commentaries for interpreting Vedic concepts, deities, meaning of verses and words; if not totally, than partially.

Western scholars paid immense attention on this deep knowledge from eighteenth century onward and tried to understand these texts in context of history, myths, customs and popular religious notions of the Vedic people. Many western scholars of different countries, especially of England, Germany, Holland, France, and Italy took great effort for understanding the adequate shades of meaning of the Vedic Mantras and Vedic texts. They edited, translated, explained, analyzed, published several texts and prepared huge indexes in reference to Vedic literature. A number of manuscripts were collected, edited, corrected and made readable. They did commendable work in the field of Vedic interpretation through writing translation, or commentary. They published books on language, grammar, religion, philosophy, ritual, history, mythology and culture of the Vedas. Here an attempt has been made to give a brief account of some important western scholars who worked in the field of Vedic interpretation and research during last three centuries.

II. Western Scholars of Vedic Studies

1. *Vedic Studies by English Scholars:*

H. T. Colebrook, born in London on 1765, is adorned with the rare distinction of being the first western scholar ever to write about Vedas. For the first time, in the history of Indology, Colebrooke published his essay '*On the Vedas, or sacred writings of the Hindus*' in 1805 in the eighth volume of the '*Asiatic Researches*'. In this paper he referred many important Vedic texts such as Aitareya Braṁhmana, Sāṁkhyāyana Braṁhmana, Śatapatha Braṁhmana, had spoken about *ṛsis*, and had talked about the manuscripts collected by him of the Ṛgveda ; hence it arose curiosity in the western world to know more about Vedas. He collected huge number of Sanskrit manuscripts. This gave an impetus to further Vedic researches and created an interest in the minds of the later generations who started to know Vedas through English or other European languages.

J. Stevenson, British Indologist brought out first edition of Sāmaveda in 1843, even when F. Max Muller was yet to publish his monumental edition of the Ṛgveda. His complete translation of Sāmaveda in English was brought six years before the publication of Ṛgveda. He had a very strong edifice of Sāmavedic studies.

H. H. Wilson (b.London, 1786-1860) had Indologist Colebrooke as his teacher. He served many institutions in India and also worked as a Sanskrit scholar, writer and editor of several Sanskrit books. He was the president of the Royal Asiatic Society for 23 years. He left Calcutta in 1832 to join as the Boden Professor in Oxford. The most distinguished and path-breaking publication of Wilson is his complete English translation of the Ṛgveda which is the first of its kind. It gave new twist to the study of Rigveda. He took Max Muller's edition of Ṛgveda as a safe authority in this regards. Secondly, he followed Sāyana's commentary which is again a faithful commentary. Wilson is known in the field of Vedic interpretation as a follower of great scholar Sāyana of fourteenth century A.D. who was Prime Minister at the court of the King of Vijaynagar, now in the Indian state of Karnataka. It is a prose translation with

notes. Wilson has emphasized that Indian traditions alone should be the basis for understanding the meanings of the Vedas. Views of earlier European scholars about Vedic interpretations were not acceptable to him to some extent and, therefore, he had translated the whole *Samhitā* according to the *Sāyaṇa-bhāṣya*.

Ralph Thomas Hotchkin Griffith (1826-1906), a well-known English scholar of the Veda, Sanskrit and Indology, was son of Rev R. C. Griffith (Chaplain to the Marquis of Bath 1830). He worked in India as the Principal of Kashi Government Sanskrit College, Varanasi from 1861 to 1878. R.T.H. Griffith translated major Vedic scriptures into English. He also produced English translations of some Sanskrit texts, including a verse version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Kumāra-Sambhava* of Kalidāsa. His major works are: *The Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki (published 1870), *Hymns of the Ṛgveda* (published 1889), *Hymns of the Sāmaveda* (published 1893), *Hymns of the Atharvaveda* (published 1896), and the *Texts of the White Yajurveda* (published 1899). He has translated all the four Vedas in the poetic form. R. T. H. Griffith is the last English Commentator of the *Ṛgveda* after H.H. Wilson who has translated complete *Ṛk-samhitā*. Griffith was the student of H.H. Wilson. He followed the *Bhāṣya* of Sāyaṇa as well as the translation done by Wilson. His outlook about the Vedic interpretation was moderate which makes his work of immense value. In the preface of his *Ṛgvedic Translation*, Griffith has mentioned, “My translation, is partly based on the commentary of Sāyaṇa, corrected and regulated by rational probability, context and inter comparison of similar words and passages.” On the source of his translation he has written, “My translation, which follows the text of Max Muller’s splendid six-volume edition, is partly based on the work of the great scholiast Sāyaṇa. Sāyaṇa’s commentary has been consulted and carefully considered for the general sense of every verse and for the meaning of every word, and his interpretation has been followed whenever it seemed rational, and consistent with the context, and with other passages in which the same word or words occur.” It means Griffith was not taking Sāyaṇa’s opinion word by word. This is the reason he has mentioned views of other recognized scholars in the notes. His consultation of English and German scholars has enhanced the value of his translation entitled ‘*The Hymns of the Rigveda*’, making it a combination of Indian tradition and modern views. Now copies of his translation of the *Ṛgveda*, *Samaveda*, *White Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda* and *Rāmāyaṇa* are available on the internet.

Arthur Anthony Macdonell (b. Gottingen, 1854-1930) was a distinguished western scholar of Vedic Studies who worked in Oxford and Calcutta and published valuable books as *Vedic Mythology*, *Vedic Grammar*, and also *A Vedic Reader* for students. He authored jointly with A.B. Keith the book named ‘*Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*’, a landmark in the field of Vedic studies. His translation of selected hymns from *Ṛgveda* is also quite popular. **Arthur B. Keith** (b. Edinburgh, 1879-1944) did English translation of several Vedic texts including *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* and *Taittirīya Samhitā* which are excellent monuments of comprehensive scholarship. His noteworthy publication is ‘*Religion and Philosophy of Vedas and Upanishads*’.

2. *Vedic Studies by German Scholars:*

The knowledge of Sanskrit in Germany was first received at the hands of Friedrich Schlegel when he went to Paris and met an English naval officer Alexander Hamilton, at that time the only person in European continent having knowledge of Sanskrit. In 1808 Friedrich Schlegel published “*Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*.” Friedrich Schlegel’s brother August Wilhelm Von Schlegel (1767-1845) was appointed on the chair of Indology in the University of Bonn in 1818. Wilhelm Von Humboldt (1767-1835), Franz Bopp (1791- 1867), Herman Brockhaus (1806-1877), Friedrich Rockert (1788-1866) were stalwarts who created strong traditions of Indological researches in Germany. Afterwards many scholars from Germany showed interest in Indology, Sanskrit and Vedic Studies. Some, who got famous for their contribution in Vedic studies, are to be discussed here.

Friedrich Rosan, German Scholar, (1805-1837) can be considered first to work on Vedic texts. His working place was British Museum of London. He started Latin translation of First book of *Ṛgveda* in 1830, on the basis of manuscript collected by H. T. Colebrooke. He followed mainly commentary of

Sāyana for his translation. His work stopped due to his death in 1837. This translation was measured as important because through it French, Vedic-teacher, E. Burnouf taught Vedic *Vidyā* to his students, Roth and Max Muller at Paris.

Theoder Benfey's edition of *Sāmaveda* was brought out in 1848. **Walter Rudolf Von Roth** (b. Stuttgart, 1821-1895) did, edition of *Atharvaveda* with his American pupil William Dwight Whitney. **Albrecht Weber** brought out edition of *Yajurveda* for the first time in 1852 along with *Vājasaneyi Saṁhitā* and few other Vedic texts. **Julius Eggeling** (b. Hecklingen, 1842-1918) translated whole *Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa* into English in five volumes which took him a time of twenty years. This is considered a unique translation even today. **Alfred Hillebrandt** (b. Grossnaedlitz, 1853-1930) occupied an exalted position among the scholars of Vedic religion and mythology. A noteworthy characteristic of Hillebrandt's mythology was his philosophical interpretation of Vedic texts in his grand book *Veidsche Mythologie* in two volumes. The most striking feature of Hillebrandt's exposition of Vedic mythology is his affirmation that moon was the very centre of Vedic religious ideology. He did detailed interpretation of certain Vedic Gods. His other important works are on Vedic Rituals.

Leopold Von Schroeder (b. Estonia, 1851-1920), German Indologist worked on Vedic religion, and edited four volumes of *Maitrayaṇī Saṁhitā* in five years with exhaustive introduction and notes in German. Beside other writings, he wrote a historical drama and translated *Gīṭā*, and *Dhammapada*. **Karl F. Geldner** (b. Berlin, 1852-1929), a student of Roth, was a versatile scholar of both Vedic and Avestan studies who is known for his writing on Vedic studies, and mythology. He did translation of some *Rigvedic* hymns with Adolf Kaegi in German language on the basis of comparative method. **Hermann Oldenberg** (b. Keil, 1854-1920) is regarded as a great Indologist who was particularly interested in the study of Vedic religion and mythological research. He published '*Hymns of the Rgveda*' in 1888 where he translated Vedic verses on the basis of linguist method and comparative mythology. His study on Vedic gods and Vedic ritual is related with Avestan religion to some extent. **Alfred Ludwig** (1832-1910) published independent translation of complete *Rgveda* in German with useful notes and others' views by the name '*Der Rgveda*.' He was student of Weber, therefore followed mainly comparative linguistic as his basis for Vedic interpretation and opposed Indian method for understanding meaning of Vedic Verses.

Friedrich Max Muller (b. Dessau, 1823-1900) rather *Mokshamūlāra*- the giver of the root of salvation, as the oriental tradition regards him, was a *ṛṣi* (seer) in the truest sense of the term. He is credited with the honour of being the first scholar to publish *Rgveda*, to translate a multitude of basic Sanskrit and Vedic Texts, to initiate a truly critical discussion on comparative mythology, philology and philosophy, and to write on various subjects of Indian studies. Germany had become a great centre of Sanskrit studies when Max Muller was born. During his stay in Paris in 1845, he came across Burnouf who initially implanted the idea of editing the *Rgveda* in his mind. Then Max Muller started copying the manuscript of *Rgveda* with *Sāyana-Bhāṣya* given to him by Burnouf. He worked single-handedly on *Rigveda* for years. He came to Oxford in 1847 and devoted himself to preparing and publishing the first complete edition of *Rgveda* with Sāyana's commentary. This publication was an epoch-making event in the world history. The four volumes of *Rgveda* were brought out between 1849 and 1975. This publication is regarded as most significant event, as it initiated a meaningful dialogue between the East and West. Besides other publications, his chief work in the field of history of religion is the publication of a series of volumes under *The Sacred Books of the East*. The series comprised 51 volumes affording ample insight into the Oriental Philosophy.

These are a few important names of some German scholars who dedicated their lives for the study of Sanskrit and Indology and worked extensively in the field of Vedic interpretation, translation, edition or research, mostly with their own ideas and historical method. Their translations and interpretations are mostly literary translations so essence of Vedic wisdom seems untouched there. Even then, extensive venture of western scholars for the revival of Vedic study and research is unparalleled in the history of Indological studies.

3. *Vedic Studies by French Scholars:*

Louis Renou (b. Paris, 1896-1966), French Indologist has contributed enormously to the field of Vedic studies. He prepared *Bibliographic Vedique* in 1931 which is almost a complete record of all writings published in the field of Vedic studies up to that time. He is of the view that there is no relation between the Indus Civilization and Vedic Civilization. He translated many passages of Ṛgveda, Atharvaveda and Yajurveda with a balance vision about Indian and western methods of interpretation.

4. *Vedic Studies by Italian Scholars:*

Angelo de Gubernatis, Italian scholar was a comparative mythologist who worked in the later part of nineteenth century on the naturalistic interpretation of Vedic legends, fables and deities; and declared the Ṛgveda as the bible of Āryans. **Prof. Oscar Botto**, founder of Institute of Indology and Oriental Institute at Turin is recognized as a great Orientalist of our times who prepared many oriental editions and Italian translations of Sanskrit texts with the help of other scholars.

5. *Vedic Studies by Dutch Scholar:*

Jan Gonda (b.1905-1991) from Netherlands is regarded as the Max Muller of twentieth century. He is credited to be a serious scholar who went deep into Vedic Literature. He wrote several books mainly related to Vedic religion, mythology, linguistics, and culture. He thought that it is wrong to speak of 'secular' hymns in Ṛgveda, for, broadly speaking, there is nothing exclusively 'secular' or 'profane' in the modern sense of the words. He was elected as President of All India Oriental Conference, Poona but could not come to attend.

6. *Vedic Studies by American Scholars:*

Maurice Bloomfield was born on 1855, at Austria, but got education in Chicago, USA from his childhood. He was keen to know comparative philology and Indology, particularly the Vedas. He traveled to Europe for his studies in the influence of Albrecht Weber, Hermann Oldenberg, H. Zimmer etc. His study of Atharvaveda began with interpretation and translation of certain Atharvavedic Hymns for the '*Sacred Book of the East*' series (1890). *Vedic Concordance* (1910) and *Rigvedic Repetitions* (1916) are his scholarly contribution to Vedic studies. Bloomfield is regarded as great Atharvanist of his times. In modern times, **Dr. David Frawley**, **Dr Robert P. Goldman** and few others are well recognized scholars in USA who are sincerely engaged in Indological and Vedic researches.

7. *Vedic Studies by Other European Scholars:*

In many European universities, departments or centers are found today for East-Asian Studies, Religious studies, and Eastern Languages studies where Indian or Vedic studies are included to some extent. Among the scholars working in the field of Indian religion, Vedic and Sanskrit subjects, **Dr. Koenraad Elst** from Leuven (Belgium); **Dr Nicholas Kazanas** from Athens (Greece); and **Dr. Milena Bratoeva** from Bulgaria are few names to be mentioned who are doing sincere contribution in the field of Indology and Sanskrit by their writings and research. Western Scholars have keen interest in Yoga, Āyurveda, and the spiritual heritage of India. The Indology Departments are established at few Universities of Europe and America. The students here promote a better understanding of Indian culture through a multidimensional study of some texts.

III. Conclusion

This paper gives a glimpse of the rich, vast and continuous contribution of Western Indologists in the field of Vedic studies, particularly of the Vedic interpretation. Existing translations of Vedic texts, however etymologically “accurate” are too often unintelligible or unconvincing. Neither the ‘*Sacred Books of the East*’ nor for example such translations of the R̥gveda by A. Ludwig, or Karl Geldner and of the Upanishads by R. E. Hume or Roer, recently reprinted, even approach the standards. The orthodox and traditional interpretation of the Vedas is essentially *Adhyātmic* or spiritual. In order to be able to do justice with the interpretation, and for being nearest to its true meaning, the interpreter must be in the minds of our Vedic *R̥ṣis*, or at least in the state of *sthiti-prajñā*. It is very evident that for an understanding of the Veda, knowledge of Sanskrit, however profound, is insufficient. There are many other factors which should be clear to interpreters.

Western scholars no doubt have spent infinite efforts on handling the Vedic texts and interpreting them, but they were more inclined towards its structure, history and language. They were eager to know comparative philology and Indology, with the meaning of Mantras. When the interpretation of Vedic thought confronts them with difficulty, the language of the hymns is declared to be obscure, and most of the mystical expressions are taken to be incoherent on account of the imperfect understanding of the grammar of philosophic ideas behind them. Besides, it was through the publications and researches of these scholars that the disciplines like comparative religion, comparative mythology, and comparative philology emerged and strength was given to Indo-European linguistics. Even if they could not get the essential concepts of Vedic wisdom, their efforts did the revival of Vedic study and research. Thus a multidimensional study of Vedic texts begin.

Finally, this brief survey shows that the Vedic study is a well-liked subject in the field of knowledge and education in western academic world. These studies have two prominent sides. Firstly, they give an idea about the deep research oriented attitude of scholars towards certain Vedic texts and their specific aspects. Especially the questions related to historicity of Vedas and origin of Vedic civilization are attracting the attention of the scholars. Secondly, these studies expose that scholars are taking interest in the practical aspects of Vedic wisdom and, therefore, interpret it in the context of present knowledge systems. The wide contribution of Western scholars in Vedic interpretation must be considered quite relevant to the academic world today and should be analyzed in depth for various research systems by future Indian scholars .

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