



LVI-2

Madhvacharya's commentary on "Rg. Veda Samhita"

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Eventhough the 'spiritual' interpretation of Vedas, as distinct from the 'ritualistic' interpretation of them by Sayana, became popular with the works of Dayananda Sarasvati, Aurobindo, Kapali Sastry and others, this approach has a long history. Yaska's 'Nirukta' provides enough inputs to attempt alternative interpretations. Further Upanishads have provided metaphysical interpretation of several apparently simplistic passages of Samhitas. Ramanuja (11th century), who popularised Visishtadvaita school of Vedanta, gave a theistic interpretation to Vedic passages by stating that Pranava was the heart of Vedas, (प्रणवविकारो वेदः) and stated that Pranava stood for Lord Narayana. His stand was that the Vedas were devoted to the exposition of Narayana's glory.

Madhvacharya also called Anandatirtha (13th century), the founder of Dvaita school of Vedanta was the first to write a formal commentary on Rk. Samhita (though it was limited to first 40 hymns) and thus start a new trend, nearly two centuries before Sayana. The methodology explained by him in the introduction to his seminal work 'Rk. Bhasyam' stood the test of time and served as guideline to later scholars. Dayananda Sarasvati, in his commentary on Rk. Samhita, acknowledges his debt to Madhva and Raghavendra Swami, a major commentator of Madhva's works, belonging to 17th century. An humble attempt is made here to explain the contribution of Madhva to the study of Vedas and also highlight some scientific facts appearing in Madhva's works.

II. Approach of Madhva

1) Madhva shared the stand of Vedanta school owing its allegiance to Badarayana viz. that Vedas were not composed by anybody (अपौरुषेय) and are eternal (अनादि). However, unlike others, Madhva emphasized the importance of understanding the meaning of Vedic passages, for they contained invaluable wisdom for the guidance of humanity. We have on the subject, the authority of Rk. Samhita itself:

उत्तमं सख्ये स्थिरपीतुं नैनम् हि न्वन्त्यपि वाजिनेषु ।

अथेन्वा चरति माययैषः वाचम् सुश्रुवान् अफलामपुष्पम् ।

(Rk. Samhita X-71-5)

(He who knows the meaning of Veda well is described as the person of great wisdom. Nobody can match him in knowledge. On the other hand he who learns only to recite Vedas without knowing their meaning which is its flower and fruit, is going by a deceptive cow instead of a milking cow.)

Madhva also advocates that in the process of correct understanding of Vedas, if some passages appear to contain mundane matters or contradict our worldly experience, it is for us to search for the underlying truth behind them, based on the directions provided by Vedangas.

2) Based on various references in Upanishads and Puranas on the subject of evolution of Vedic literature, Madhva explained the process as follows. To start with i.e. at the beginning of creation, Vedas appeared as a single mass of words. This form of Vedas was called by Madhva as 'Moola Veda'. Since people were unable to comprehend the mass of undifferentiated literature, Vedavyasa divided the mass into 4 parts viz. Rk., Yajur, Sama, and Atharvana Vedas based on the type of passages. This re-grouped Vedic literature has been given the name of 'Upa Veda'. When it was found that even this mass of literature was too huge, Vedavyasa further divided them into Sakhas and within that into Suktas and also Anuvakas and Vargas. This third and final stage of Samhita (as is available to us to-day) is called 'Avaantara Veda'. However during this process of evolution of Vedas neither the order of passages (क्रम) nor the contents have been disturbed.

3) Madhva took a stand, contradistinct with other schools of Vedanta, that the division of Vedas into Karma Kanda (ritualistic) and Gnana Kanda (metaphysical) was artificial and the entire Vedic literature should be taken as a composite whole.

4) As per the ancient tradition quoted in Skanda Purana, Vedas carried three meanings, Maha Bharata ten meanings, and Vishnu Sahasranama 100 meanings:

In terms of this tradition, Madhva felt that Vedic passages carried three meanings viz. a) as applicable to the specific deity under reference, b) with reference to Supreme God, and c) metaphysical. These are called आदिभौतिक, आदिदेवत, आध्यत्मिक respectively. Out of the three meanings, Madhva gives primacy to the second which refers to the Supreme God. In so far as the metaphysical meaning is concerned Madhva felt that 'Yagna' of Vedas referred both to normal sacrifice which he calls बाह्य यग्न and the internal one referring to the spiritual effort of the devotees in understanding the Ultimate Reality.

5) Though Madhva often quotes Yaska's 'Nirukta', he primarily depended on an extinct work 'Badarayana Nirukta' for his interpretation of Vedic passages. He also quotes some other authorities on the subjects of Grammar, Etymology and Phonetics.

6) Another important feature of Madhva's approach is the special significance of the accents given to the letters in Vedic passages. Accordingly a letter with Anudatta accent indicates that the meaning conveyed by the word (in which the accented letter occurs) is unalterable. Similarly Udaatta and Svarita indicate that the meaning conveyed by the word attracts higher and lower emphasis respectively.

III. Madhva's contribution to understanding of Rk. Samhita**1) New Definitions of "Rishi", "Devata" and "Chandas"**

Vedas which are eternal and un-created remain same in their contents and order all the time. At the time of total dissolution of the world (Pralaya) they remain in their subtle form inside the body of Vishnu along with other eternal entities like Souls, Matter etc. When the new cycle of life commences, Vishnu teaches Brahma the Vedas as they existed prior to dissolution. Brahma, in turn taught Vedas to Rudra, Sesha, Garuda, these in turn taught them to Indra and other gods.



While this is the line of Rishis for the undivided MoolaVeda, for the divided Upa Vedas, specific deities have been nominated. Accordingly, Indra, Surya, Soma and Agni are the Rishis for four Vedas respectively. The human seers come into picture when the individual hymns are identified in the Avantara Vedas. Thus there are four levels of Rishis viz Vishnu, Brahma, Individual deities and human Rishis. The human Rishis also received the Vedic lore from their line of Gurus, the only difference was that they had a direct vision of a group of hymns. Thus their names got attached to a group of hymns. They were not the 'authors' of these hymns but only 'propagators'. This stand of Madhva is logical if we consider the fact that these human Rishis could not have visualised the hymns ahead of Brahma and other gods.

In so far as "Devata" is concerned Madhva refers to Yaska's Nirukta that gives alternative meanings that can be derived by taking the Verb root as दा (to grant, say gifts or boons) or दीप् (to shine) or द्युत् (to belong to heaven i.e whose sphere of operation is heaven). He supplements it with injunctions from Badarayana's Nirukta and states: 'All letters, words and hymns of Vedas are reflections of the forms of Vishnu and other deities. Vedavyasa rearranged the Vedic hymns and nominated specific deities (Devathas of the hymns) with a view to remind us about the specific forms of the Almighty to be worshipped depending upon the context. 'Madhva links up this with hierarchy of deities and states that Supreme God Narayana is the primary Devatha for all the hymns, Lakshmi for all hymns excepting those like 'Purusha Sukta' specifically addressed to Narayana. The other deities follow as per their position in the hierarchy. Since it is the most important concept in Madhva's approach, he justifies the hierarchy by quoting extensively from Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aaranyakas and Puranas.

In so far as Chandas is concerned Madhva felt that it not only refers to the prosody of passages but also to the deities presiding over them. Accordingly while Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Bharati are, as a rule, the presiding deities of all passages, the deities mentioned against each hymn are specific to the hymn.

2) Alternative Definitions to important deities appearing in Rk.Samhita

In line with the approach mentioned earlier, Madhva derived alternative meanings to important deities. Two of them are mentioned below as illustrations:

a) **Vayu:** i) One who is known for his physical prowess, works as life line for the people of the world (from the verb root वाति (to move), लोकस्य प्राण धारण हेतुः, ii) one who grants knowledge to people by taking the second meaning of वाति, ज्ञानकर्तृत्वात्, iii) One who releases people from the meshes of worldly life, by deriving meaning from the verb root वय-बन्धन. iv) Since the verb वय also stands for श्रेष्ठत्वात्, the meaning is 'he who is superior to other deities.

b) **Indra:** i) one who enjoys, ii) one who gives us the power of vision to see the world, iii) one who is effulgent. Similarly Madhva gives new definitions to deities like Mitra, Varuna, Asvini etc.

In all these cases, Madhva holds that the primary reference is to the Supreme God Narayana and secondarily to the specific deities.

3) Clarifications given to obscure passages

a) There are a number of passages which Griffith and others found obscure in their meaning. From Madhva's interpretation we are able to get a better meaning of these passages. Two cases are given below as illustrations:

a) Following stanza appears as I-7-9 of Rk.Samhita :

य एकः चर्षणीनाम् वसूनमिरज्यति । इन्द्रः पञ्चक्षितीनाम् ।

Griffith's translation of the passage reads as follows :

'Indra who rules with single sway men, riches, and the five-fold race, Of those who dwell upon the earth.'

Here the word पञ्चक्षितीनाम् has been interpreted differently by different scholars. Sayana translates it as 'those who are fit for habitation', but he does not say anything about the word 'five'. Benfey interprets it as 'five tribes' or 'five Aryan settlements' but he does not explain the repetition of 'people'. Madhva's translation of the the passage runs as follows:

'One Indra controls (इरज्यति) men (चर्षणीनाम्), riches (वसूनाम्) and also the five-fold group of Devatas, Gandharvas, Daityas, Pitrus, and Manushyas (human beings).

b) Following passage addressed to Indra occurs as

I-10-1 in Rk.Samhita:

गायन्ति त्वा गायत्रिणोऽर्चन्त्यर्कमर्किणः ।

ब्रह्मणस्त्वा शतक्रत उद्गन्धमिव येमिरे ।

Griffith translates it as follows :

'The chanters hymn thee, they who say the word of praise magnify thee

The priests have raised thee up on high, O Satakratau, like a pole.'

It is rather odd that Indra should be raised like a pole especially after he has been praised by people who are adepts in usage of words. According to Madhva the prayer is basically addressed to Supreme God Vishnu and it's meaning is as follows :

'O Enlightened Lord of infinite bliss. Sama priests sing your glory, priests following Rg.Veda worship you, and Brahma hoists your flag.'

(The reference is to Garuda Dhvaj, the flag of Vishnu)

Similarly Madhva's interpretation throws new light on I-13-8, I-16-1, I-27-5, I-27-13, I-28-5 of Rk.Samhita.

c) Madhva has made some new suggestions with regard to reconciliation of some passages of Rk.Samhita. Three passages of hymn X-133 fall short of letters to satisfy the rules of Atishakkari Chandas. Madhva, in his 'Karma Nirnaya' has given a solution to this problem based on the instructions given in Aitareya Brahmana.

d) Madhva revived interest in one of the ancient sacrifices called 'Brihatisahasra' based on the injunctions in Aitareya Aranyaka.

He identified 1000 Richas that have to be recited during the sacrifice. Sri Raghunathatirtha, 17th century, belonging to Madhva tradition has written a detailed commentary on these 1000 'richas' and he also has shown how these 1000 passages of 'Brihatisahasra' represent the 1000 names of Vishnu given in the popular 'Vishnu Sahasranama Stotra' appearing in Maha Bharata.



4) Three meanings to Vedic passages

Madhva's approach in this regard has been mentioned earlier. As an illustration the three meanings to the first Rk. viz अग्निमीळे पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमुत्विजम् होतारं रत्नधातमम् are given below as an illustration.

a) With reference to Fire-God Agni

"I offer my prayer to the effulgent god Agni who is physically present at the place of sacrifices, who grants the title of 'Hotru' to the followers of Rg. Veda, and who grants riches to the performers of sacrifices."

b) With reference to Supreme Lord Narayana

"I offer my prayer to that worshipful Supreme Lord Narayana who is the foremost among all gods, the benefactor and controller of human beings from time immemorial, the possessor of infinite bliss and who is specially present at the place of Yagnas."

c) The philosophical meaning

"I offer my prayer to that Supreme Lord who by His presence in our bodies, activates and controls our organs, who as the real benefactor of human beings grants us the wisdom that gives us happiness in this world as well as in the other." (For want of space, the meaning of individual words and their derivations are not given here but these are done as per the rules of Grammar and Etymology.)

IV Some Scientific facts in Madhva's works

Though Madhva lived seven hundred years ago he made several observations, based on Vedas, Brahmanas and Aaranyakas, Maha Bharata and some Puranas, which are surprisingly modern in their contents. A few of them are given below:

- It is necessary for man to understand the world in which he lives as a first step in his search for the Ultimate Truth. The world and the universe is so huge and complex, it is not humanly possible to understand it in its totality, still one can understand it to the extent of his capacity.
- The world and the universe in which we live are real and existed even before the appearance of man and are independent of man's cognition.
- The primordial Matter, the building material of the universe, is eternal and God used it for creation of the world. Universe passes through cycles of dissolution and creation and the process is eternal. This view is in sharp contrast with Christian theology that God created world out of nothing.
- There are two levels of creation: i) creation of the universe that takes place at longer intervals, and ii) creation of life forms etc. at specific points of the universe (say planets) which takes place at much shorter intervals.
- As opposed to many thinkers of Middle Ages who took Atom as the smallest unit of Matter, Madhva propounded that even Atom has parts, a fact that came to be discovered later.
- 'Space' is defined in accordance with this two-levels of creation. The blue sky around our planet is confined to it only, the bigger space is different and black in appearance. Simi-

larly the idea of directions viz. North, South etc. are confined to earth only and meant as a reference point to help understand the movement of Sun.

g) Time is eternal. This view differs from the current thinking that Time took birth moments after the Big Bang. Still we need a temporal medium or unit to describe the period prior to the Big Bang.

h) Birth of life forms on Earth is an independent activity, a view distinct from Darwin's theory of Evolution, but favoured by many scientists.

i) Physical and mental attributes and capabilities of individuals differ from person to person based on the unique combination of elements (Satva, Rajas, Tamas, and other factors) that go into the birth of the person. Some reports say that even cloned subjects differ from their parent bodies in some attributes.

j) Dreams are creations of God and carry a purpose (may be a message or signal of future events) behind them.

k) Each individual is blessed with a specific capacity of cognition and comprehension as per his merit. The Universe is so huge in terms of space and time, only God can understand it in its totality. God, however, wants each individual to understand the world as per his capacity of comprehension and use it as a stepping-stone in his search for the Ultimate Reality. This unique nature of each individual and differences between them is the cardinal principle of Madhva's philosophy and has several implications that can be considered by different disciplines dealing with human nature and organisation of human affairs.

It is worthwhile pursuing the approach suggested by Madhva to unravel more scientific facts and new interpretations of the Scriptures.

V Conclusion

From the above brief account of Madhva's contribution to understanding Rk. Samhita, we may conclude that Madhva was the first major Acharya to write a formal commentary on Rk. Samhita much before Sayana, he gave shape to the idea of alternative interpretations to Vedic passages mentioned in Puranas, his interpretation throws new light on some obscure passages of the Samhita, he brought reconciliation between Aranyakas and Samhita in the matter of interpretation of some passages, revived the interest in the ancient Brihati Sahasra Yaga, and above all he threw light on a number of scientific facts found in Vedas.

Some of the books consulted:

- 'Rg. Bhashyam' of Sri Anandatirtha with 6 commentaries - 2 Vol, (Sanskrit) Ed, Prof. K. T. Pandurangi - Dvaita Vendanta Studies & Research Foundation, Bangalore.
- 'Hymns of the Rg. Veda' - Ralph T. H. Griffith - Munshilal Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi
- 'Brihati Sahasram' with two commentaries (Sanskrit) - Sri Madhvasidhantannohini Sabha, Tiruchanoor, Tirupati.