The Rigveda

The Earliest Religious Poetry of India, 3 Volume Set

Editor(s): Stephanie W. Jamison, Joel P. Brereton
Review

Translating a Sanskrit text is a highly challenging task. The difficulty only gets compounded if it is a Vedic text, because the Vedas use a Sanskrit that is quite different from the Sanskrit used in other literature. To translate the *Rig Veda* into English requires great patience and great scholarship. Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton have successfully achieved this mammoth task. The earlier English translation of *Rig Veda* by Ralph T. H. Griffith was done without taking into account the innumerable nuances of the tradition within which the Vedas originated. Jamison and Brereton make it clear that Griffith’s translation “conceals rather than reveals the wonders” of the *Rig Veda* (1.3).

In the introduction, the translators discuss in detail the context of the text and its date. Scholarship on the *Rig Veda* and the various extant English translations are discussed in here. The text has been analyzed in terms of the poets who wrote it, the structure of the text, its grammar, and its use of language. One of the strong points of this translation is that the various deities found in the text are described in detail. The different classes of people mentioned in the text are also discussed. The translators acknowledge their gratitude to Patrick Olivelle, who requested them to undertake this translation fifteen years ago and they also acknowledge their indebtedness to their teacher, Stanley Insler, with whom they first read the *Rig Veda*.

Another striking feature of this translation is that there is an introduction to each hymn, which helps the reader to understand the context and appreciate the fact that every hymn is “the essential compositional unit” of the *Rig Veda* (1.81). The translators have divided the work of translations of the hymns among themselves and clearly indicate which hymns have been translated by whom. From the beginning, the translators make it very clear that though they have carefully studied the extant commentaries in Sanskrit, mainly that by Sayanacharya, they are not basing their translation on any commentary because they feel that there is no commentary close to the time of the writing of the original text. Sayanacharya, they note, is “temporally closer to our own age than to that of the Rgveda, and he was writing in a very different geographical, political, and religious landscape from that of the Rgveda” (1.19).

In their introduction, the translators discuss the various problems that they encountered while translating the text and also tell the reader how they addressed those problems. They say in their acknowledgements that they were impressed by their teacher’s style of “inventive interpretation
and imaginative reading.” They have boldly ventured to apply this method to their translation of the *Rig Veda*. It would have been better if the reader was given a more annotated translation alongside this “imaginative” one, as it would have helped to make better sense of the translation. But just as the original text has been dropped because of the obvious reason of length, annotations also could not be given. The translators have refrained from giving explanatory notes and point their readers to the copious notes in the German translation done by Karl Friedrich Geldner in 1951. While the language of Jamison and Brereton’s translation is brief and poetic for the most part, it fails to convey sense to the modern reader. Probably this compelled the translators to give annotations and commentary and make them available online for the benefit of the reader. This is still a work in progress. The reader is completely awestruck when going through this online commentary, which clarifies many of the missing links in the book.

The third volume contains a detailed bibliography and a tabulation of different hymns and their poets. This work is commendable not only because of its sheer volume and the labor put into it, but also because it will remind scholars to work on more accessible and legible translations of the *Rig Veda*. As far as this text is concerned, the translations have to be more, if the readings are to be merrier.

**About the Reviewer(s):**

Swami Narasimhananda is the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

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