

On the Translation of Sanskrit Terms

In his *The Hebraic Tongue Restored* (translation by Nayan Redfield) Fabre D'Olivet has written:

“Among the ancient idioms of Asia are **three** that it is absolutely imperative to understand if one would proceed with assurance in the field of etymology and rise by degrees to the sounds of language. These idioms, that I can justly call tongues, in the restricted meaning which one has given to this word, are Chinese, Sanskrit and Hebrew.” (p. 7)

With this statement let us retrace our steps. I have said that the Chinese, isolated from their birth, having departed from the simplest perceptions of the senses, had reached by development the loftiest conceptions of intelligence; it was quite the contrary with the Hebrew; this distinct idiom, entirely formed from a most highly perfected tongue, composed wholly of expressions universal, intelligible and abstract, delivered in this state to a sturdy but ignorant people, had, in its hands fallen from degeneracy to degeneracy, and from restriction to restriction, to its most material elements; all that was intelligible had become sentient, all that was universal had become particular.

“Sanskrit, holding a sort of mean between the two, since it was the result of a formed tongue, grafted upon an unformed idiom, unfolded itself at first with admirable promptness; but after having, like the Chinese and the Hebrew, given its divine fruits, it has been unable to repress the luxury of its productions; its astonishing flexibility has become the source of an excess which necessarily has brought about its downfall. The Hindu writers, abusing the facility which they had of composing words, have made them of an excessive length, not only of ten, fifteen and twenty syllables, but they have pushed the extravagance to the point of containing in simple inscriptions, terms which extend to one hundred and even one hundred and fifty. Their vagabond imagination has followed the intemperance of their elocution, an impenetrable obscurity has spread itself over their writings; their tongue has disappeared.

“But this tongue displays in the **Vedas** an economical richness. It is there that one can examine its native flexibility and compare it with the rigidity of the Hebrew, which beyond the amalgamation of root and sign, does not admit of any composition or, compared with the facility with which the Chinese allows its words, all monosyllables, to be joined without ever being confused. The principle beauties of this last idiom consist in its characters....” (pp. 16-18)

The work of Fabre D'Olivet consisted in part of the restoration of the meanings of terms in the Sepher of Moses which he regarded, **esoterically**, as identical with the Egyptian wisdom. The Egyptian Wisdom had at least three levels of interpretation, viz. literal, figurative and esoteric. The Jewish Kabbalah added another, between the literal and figurative, called, in translation, **anagogical**.

Primitive Christianity **historically** appeared **later** than Jewish Mysticism, but its literary renditions appear **earlier**. Thus in the New Testament and the Gnostic Writings (presumably borrowed at least in part from Egypt), we have the terms **sarkikos**, **psychikos** and **pneumatikos**, rendered roughly as **physical**, **psychical** and **spiritual**. These correspond exactly to the Egyptian phases of literal, figurative and hieroglyphical or esoteric.

The great failures of **esoteric** religion come from two sources; (a) the presumption that scriptures have only one meaning; (b) the inability or ineptitude of followers to attain the experiences of their predecessors or to retain the wisdom derived therefrom. In the Hadith one reads; “The Qur’an

was sent down in seven dialects; and in every one of its sentences, there is an external and internal meaning.”

Today we have the world divided into two camps; (1) the warring groups of sects of all kinds holding forth generally to some very literal interpretation of holy writ; (2) the equally warring cults who, while holding to more than one interpretation differ from the number they are actually able to sustain; or, simply use a number as a ruse, offering no actual objective method of showing how any passage actually has three or four or more meanings.

Above and beyond all these stands a single figure, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, the grand rishi of the age, not by any title bestowed by less developed followers, but by actual function. Sri Aurobindo has done with the Sanskrit tongue exactly those things which Fabre D'Olivet has predicted, and has, in each instance, given the various meanings or renditions.

But there is a very difficult problem to face when we read or study Aurobindo. Despite all his emphasis upon Purna Yoga and the accompanying integral philosophy and metaphysics, all of his critics and many of his followers fall into an analytical interpretation of his works. These give one an incomplete picture just as a circle gives an incomplete (not false) picture of a sphere, or a sphere does of Einsteinium space (which comparison fits pretty exactly here).

The **sanatana dharma**, that timeless offering of truth to humanity through the spiritual realization of one or many souls, presents us a picture of cosmic evolution of which there are many phases. These have been offered in the art-forms of the wheel-of-life. We may give to the grades of evolution the terms of naraka, preta, tirthiga-yoni (or raksha), asura, manusha, etc. Now, if we take any term in Sanskrit, utilized in the Vedas, this term may have overtones. Thus in the Hebrew tests words like water, raven, angel, etc. have many degrees of interpretation.

Before coming to Sri Aurobindo's approach we must face the fact that there is an insuperable hiatus between the Mimansic interpretation and that of scholars. The later, zealous, superficial, or profound, have too often been enamored with comparative philosophy that they have neglected psychology in all its aspects. The comparative efforts to translate speeches at the United Nations should make us realize that comparative philology becomes a dangerous snare before pragmatic psychology. If, with all the facts and factors in our possession, we reach a series of impasses, how much more likely when we have gaps of time, geography and tradition?

Sri Aurobindo and Fabre D'Olivet, working over a century apart, and with no visible outward connections, have given us exactly the same theories of poetry, and, by implication of the use and repetition of sacred words. The literary form of the Vedas, in this sense, is poetry rather than prose. The Mimansa school has leaned over backwards in its acceptance of the sacred nature of the text and its usage, rather than the interpretations thereof. These seem too mental and not pragmatic enough. Their position is enhanced when they see, with dismay, a group of foreign scholars coming to their land, making literary but not devotional translations and then coming out with scholastic authority and telling the world the meaning of the Vedas.

This position becomes exaggerated when we see the mistake of scholars as to the fixation of times. When we find them insisting upon the foundation of **all** the cultures of India upon the Vedas. When they acclaim another victory when ruins are uncovered at Harappa or Mohenjo-daro. When they find more and more evidence to show extremely high Dravidian culture, etc. All these are

victories (!) for the scholars, for science, etc, and all the time the timid efforts of Hindus of all schools are received with a supercilious attitude. But when an East Indian has mastered all the basis of Occidental teaching, also accomplished all the disciplines that his own people have to offer, and worked with harmony with investigating scientists of his own day, we have a new chance to re-evaluate the Vedas. We can do this by an integrating method which will in no way overlook all the proposals of the Mimansas and even accept other **astika** schools without patronage; we need not limit ourselves to their interpretations and we shall find, in the ultimate that the Purna interpretation of the Vedas will open up one of the most magnificent vistas that the world has ever experienced.

Sri Aurobindo has written at length on the translation of the Sanskrit **go** as both “cow” and “light.” Here we shall expand this, which expansion, however, is thoroughly consistent with both the intensive and extensive views of Aurobindo’s teachings.

The great religions of the world have been divided, if we will, into “cow”-religions, and “lamb”-religions. In ancient Egypt, in Zarathustrian Iran, and among the Saivites and Krishnavis the cow stands foremost. But in Judaism, Christianity, ancient Orphic teachings and the Rama-followers in India, the lamb or ram stands uppermost. Indeed the tale of Abraham offering his son Isaac in the Bible has its exact parallel in Brahma offering his son Ikshvaku in the Puranas.

On the lowest level **go** is cow. These two words are connected etymologically. On the whole those who had cows were more sedentary and less nomadic than the sheep people. And all that is said about the cow in literature may be accepted at its own level. The cow is an animal, whose “soul” needs be at the tirthiga-yoni level.

At the asuric level we have the English word “to cow,” which is not a very pleasant term and which originally meant to behave like a cow, to run away or be afraid in the presence of enemies. So offhand we can see that many words, and certainly this type of word has correspondences at other levels.

Omitting all references to Sanskrit, when we come to the manushic level, we have all kinds of terms. Thus “figuratively” **cow** might stand for butter, cheese, milk, yogurt, also for leather, hoof, meat, etc. The English word “butter” is derived, for instance, from two Greek words, the former of which means “cow.” But one can also throw down a number of words which do not seem to resemble “cow” in the least. To jump to an extreme—and this is most important in examining Sri Aurobindo’s views—we have two words which outwardly seem to resemble each other, but intellectually do not: **peculiar**, and **pecuniary**.

The word “peculiar” comes from the Latin **pecus**, cattle, and also referred, at least by inference to the skin or cowhide. This was something unusual, exceptional, special. So its meaning was enhanced until today there is no resemblance to anything in the cattle industry. The same is true concerning “pecuniary,” which resembles neither the word “peculiar” nor the cowhide or portion thereof, which was its original referent.

When we pass from the manushic to the next level with its various stages of **pitra**, **peri**, **gandharva**, **genius** etc., which Sri Aurobindo has called the stage of the Overman or Overmind, we find it still more difficult to bring together all the facets of cow-derivatives. But we find ourselves very definitely going in the direction pointed out by Aurobindo that at the highest level **go** means “light.”

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The first word of the Hebrew alphabet is **Aleph**. On the lowest plane it means **ox**—which corresponds, to some degree, with cow. But the Hebrew alphabet differs from ours in that all the letters are themselves **words**. And these words have **meanings**, and not only do they have **meanings**, they have hieroglyphical significances. So the Aleph stands for all these things:

Ox, sign of Taurus in the Zodiac and all its interpretations; the original ray of light; upright character; that which existed before Creation; one or unity.

The same is equally true of the Zarathustrian traditions with their emphasis upon the “soul of the kine.” This has no possible sensible literal interpretation. The modern Mazdaznians insist it must be taken esoterically, and no doubt they have their view. Upon its examinations it comes every close to that of Sri Aurobindo.

Now we come to the next stage, that of the deva, or Supermind or Superman. According to his view the **go** is a ray of light. Krishna dancing with the gopis may have had a hysterical origin, but in its cosmic overtones it has a significance of meaning which cannot easily be thrown off.

We find a parallel in Apollo and the Horas. Now this word “horas” we have translated as “hours,” which does not tell us too much. The word “hour” which we use today was not the unit of time among the ancients as we have it now. The syllable “hor” among Mediterranean languages meant “ray-of-light,” “mountains,” “conception,” “elevation,” etc. We find it in the Egyptian “Horus” who in later days was personified as a **bull**. The Arabic term **hourî** which we like to consider as a fair young maiden, also originally meant “ray-of-light.”