

### Cezary Galewicz

*A Commentator in Service of the Empire: Sāyaṇa and the Royal Project of Commenting on the Whole of the Veda* (De Nobili Research Library 35), Wien: Sammlung de Nobili, Institut für Südasien-, Tibet- und Buddhismuskunde, 2010, 327 pp. ISBN 978-3-900-27141-1. € 39,00.

It is a difficult task, when working on ancient Indian sources, especially on the *Śruti*, to know how, through which network, or in which favourable conjuncture, these texts entered into the pan-Indian heritage, at which moment they earned the prestige which brought them out of a narrow circle to become *canonical* texts. We know that the oral transmission of the Veda in India has been, for centuries, an extremely refined practice, and we owe to the extraordinary memory of the brahmins, admirably kept from master to pupil long before a written tradition, the access to these sources. We are less aware of the progress of their interpretation and reception. After having published a series of articles on the subject,<sup>1</sup> in this monograph Galewicz presents a careful overview on Sāyaṇa's work through the historical and intellectual context of his time.

Sāyaṇa was undoubtedly a central figure in the history of Vedic exegesis. Yet, the long favourable consideration for his work, started with F. Max Müller's edition of the *R̥gveda* (1890), was regularly nuanced in the twentieth century: Sāyaṇa's commentaries, and particularly his *R̥gvedabhāṣya* was mainly considered a "traditional" work (p. 36), reflecting an anachronistic or biased approach, condensed in the expression "ritualistic point of view" (p. 37). Indeed, it is impossible to neglect this point of view, since in Sāyaṇa's opinion the ritual context of the *mantras* is an essential element of their purpose-and-meaning (*artha*). Yet, besides the "conventionality" of Sāyaṇa's glosses, the philologist has more reason to reproach the Commentator. Renou's appreciation in his essay on the Masters of Vedic philology, *Les maîtres de la philologie védique*, is quite eloquent on this point:

Sāyaṇa's work appears at first as most worthy: it is a continuous paraphrase of the *R̥k*, mixed with short tales in order to shed light on the mythological allusions of the text; there follow, where necessary, gram-

<sup>1</sup> Besides the articles mentioned in the bibliography of the volume, I would also mention C. Galewicz, "Changing Canons: What Did Sāyaṇa Think He Commented upon", in: P. Balcerowicz & M. Mejer (eds.), *On the Understanding of Other Cultures*, (Studia Indologica, 7), Warsaw, Oriental Institute—Warsaw University, [2000] 2004, pp. 137–145 (now in: P. Balcerowicz & M. Mejer (eds.), *Essays in Indian Philosophy, Religion and Literature*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, pp. 35–44).

matical and etymological notes, based on Pāṇini and Yāska, and some indications from phonetic treatises or from the Brāhmaṇas. Each hymn is preceded by an introduction mentioning the ṛṣi, the meter, the deity and the ritual employment. Sāyaṇa quotes his predecessors, by name or by the name of their schools, or even by an anonymous allusion; he mentions less often his opponents. Finally the commentary of the Ṛk is completed by the commentaries by Sāyaṇa himself on the *Atharvaveda* and the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, by Mahīdhara on the *Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā*, and by a considerable group of works. All this seems to be trustworthy; yet, one who has the courage to closely examine these compilations is soon deceived: words are glossed in a vague and allusive way; grammatical constructions are impossible to adjust to the extreme linguistic possibilities; no care is taken, once the words are explained one by one, to render in a persuasive way the set of ideas: a sequence of formal equivalences which, put one after the other, often do not give any coherent meaning. There are even more serious deficiencies: Sāyaṇa's interpretation is partly adapted to that of classic Sanskrit (and sometimes from a later period): the contradictions are abundant, not only from one text to another, but also between two close passages: it seems sometimes that the author's initiative is confined to a casual distribution of Vedic and classic meanings: let us recall the story of the word *ari-* [...].<sup>2</sup>

Historiography is the locus of a possible understanding of the past, as M. de Certeau—quoted *in exergo*—states, and Galewicz's cheerful monograph is mainly the result of an historiographical inquiry, moving primarily in the field of "textual studies," from M. de Certeau to R. Chartier, from J. Goody to S. Pollock: from the materiality of textual transmission (history of books) to its relation to power and religion (books in history). Given the immense impact of Sāyaṇa for the reception of Vedic texts, and more generally for the history of Indian culture, this monograph sheds light on a decisive moment of Indian history: the rise of the Vijayanagar Empire.

Fourteenth century India was marked by major cultural changes. The increase in the circulation of manuscripts attests both the establishment of a tradition and the "political" role of writing, supported by new centres of learning (*paṭha*) tied to the structure (construction and control) of power. It is a change of context, reflecting a deeper cultural transformation, from the oral to a written

2 L. Renou, *Les maîtres de la philologie védique*, Paris, P. Geuthner (Annales du Musée Guimet—Bibliothèque d'études: 38), 1928, p. 8.

tradition—a change which had also an undeniable impact on the difficult question of authorship: “The ontological status of the text, however, cannot be fully grasped until seen as belonging as much to the author(s) as to other agents represented here by the redactor and editor(s) to whom probably goes at least a part of the credit for furnishing the texts with preambles made up of a shifting number of stanzas, built around a recurring nexus and enriched by additional ones suitably to the occasion” (p. 26). Viewed through this lens, Sāyaṇa appears to be a perfect example of “a certain type of transformation in the textual culture referring to a scriptural body that has been functioning in a given textual community in a more or less canonical way” (p. 28).

There was a deep relation of interdependence between Sāyaṇa, his school—Galewicz supports the hypothesis that Sāyaṇa was a master working with a team of scholars in the monastery of Śṛṅgeri, an active centre of manuscript culture—and king Bukka I, who materially supported the learned team. From the beginning of the monograph (Ch. 1: “The Quest for the Author: Looking for Sāyaṇa”), Galewicz shows how Sāyaṇa’s commentarial work goes hand in hand with the affirmation of the imperial project. This may explain why so little is known about him, as his role is one and the same as his identity. The divinity of royal status (*kṣatra*) cannot be dissociated from religious power—the “influence of the temple (*kṣetra*)”—and the brahmanic elite supporting the king: “the dependence of the king’s divine charisma upon that of the spiritual guru [the *rājaguru*] by his side” is a firm institution of Hindu society since the seventh and eighth centuries, “when first big temples appeared in South India”, and becomes particularly important during the early Vijayanagar empire, where the presence of temples, and the related protection of a textual tradition becomes an element of the royal prestige (Ch. 2: “Images of Power and Legitimacy”). In relation to this approach, opening stanzas, preambles, recurring formulas, colophons, often neglected because of their conventionality, acquire their full meaning (see also Ch. 7: “On the Fringes of the Text”): each preamble mentions royal patronage, as do the colophons, where the divine status attributed to the king transcends the limits of a literary topos to enlighten and reaffirm the intimate relation between political and religious power. Here the parallel with the divinized king in medieval Europe is tempting; yet Galewicz does not content himself with a bare parallelism, and rather searches in the texts themselves for the expression of a peculiar structure of authority. In all the versified preambles to Sāyaṇa’s commentaries, the king ultimately appears as an image (*murti*) of Lord Mahesvara, himself “embodied in the person of the ascetic guru Vidyātīrtha with a view to authoritatively order the task of ‘shedding light on the meaning of the Veda’ (*vedārthaparakāśana*)” (p. 70). Both divinized, the king and Vidyātīrtha, the revered guru of Śṛṅgeri (who was probably no more



alive at the time of the *Bhāṣyas*' composition), are legitimating Sāyaṇa's work. The Śṛṅgeri *matha*, placing itself in the tradition of the great advaitin Śaṅkara, seems also to have been at the beginning of "a revival of Hindu orthodoxy"; yet, the vast imperial project of Vedic commentaries is "just one of a number of strategies on the part of the rulers [...] for the much broader and ambitious project of creating a new imperial identity" (p. 90). In this regard, the argument Galewicz often proposed in the past to explain the emergence of Vijayanagar religious project as "the rescue of the Hindu world from the challenge of Muslim power" appears today too simplistic (p. 75).

Sāyaṇa was by far the most prolific commentator on the Veda. Eighteen Vedic commentaries are traditionally ascribed to him, mostly composed under the patronage of king Bukka I (1356–1377) and a small number under his successor Harihara II (1377–1404): the *Bhāṣyas* on the *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā*, *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa*, *Taittirīya-Āraṇyaka*, *Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa*, *Aitareya-Āraṇyaka*, numerous other *Brāhmaṇas*, including the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, along with the *Saṃhitās* of the *R̥gveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. Galewicz also lists five dubious *dīpikās* on various *Upaniṣads*, and seven other works on poetics, rhetoric, ritual, and *Āyurveda*. This impressive exegetic production reflects a unitary plan, "a general project of which each and every commentarial work was purposefully made to appear as part of and as exemplary at the same time" (p. 20). The Commentaries composed by Sāyaṇa receive their full significance in the larger context of the transmission and the history of texts (Ch. 3: "Books, Texts and Communities"). The circulation of commentaries, and more generally the *vyākhyāna* tradition, is "an attempt to bridge the oral realm of Vedic 'scripture' and ritual praxis on one hand, and the literate (written) realm of medieval śāstric discourse (with its usual practice of oral performance) on the other." As Galewicz demonstrates, this process of "rationalization" of the Veda in order to preserve memorisation while promoting a process of understanding, keeping at the same time the authority of the Veda and the remoteness (if not the esoterism) of its meaning, is beyond a challenging task: "This *aporia* of a never-to-be conciliated pair of perfecting-memorizing and reading-understanding might also refer to the duality of the oral and written in medieval Vedic education and study. [...] The commentaries of Sāyaṇa belong to the world of writing and manuscripts but refer to the double world of the Veda itself (oral) and its explanatory studies (using sources committed to writing)" (p. 114). This argument is further developed in Ch. 8, where the intriguing question of the two *Mīmāṃsās* referred to in Sāyaṇa's own exegetic work is put forward: this is perhaps a real point of "syncretism" in Sāyaṇa's work, attempting to reconcile the Veda as expression of the *dharma* and the more Vedāntic practice of hermeneutics as a quest for *artha* apart from Vedic prescriptions (*vidhi*).

The method adopted by Sāyaṇa is thus described as a “crossing the boundaries of śāstric disciplines” (p. 116), which better suits his work than the label of “eclectic” commentator. Two approaches are at work at the same time: the *upadeśa* tradition, the oral-mnemonic transmission of the Vedic text, and the *vedārthaprakāśa*, that is an explanation in accordance to the six *vedāṅgas*, as announced by Sāyaṇa himself in the *Bhūmikā* of his *Ṛgbhāṣya*. His “canonical” commentary is a combination of existing methods of exegesis. Even without supposing a strong caesura, as in Galewicz’s hypothesis, between the oral and the written paradigm of knowledge, Sāyaṇa’s work undoubtedly embodies a new attitude towards the Veda. The difference in both approaches consists in the stress placed on the Vedic text:

The [*Vedārtha-*] *Prakāśa* is to supply a qualified ritualist practitioner with what is lacking in the system of Vedic transmission (in itself a powerful tool of the working of tradition): he should not be allowed, or even induced, to offer a random and haphazardous interpretation of Vedic passages by himself. What the system itself is lacking (and what in reality is supplied differently by the different religious traditions of medieval Hinduism) is the instruction in the above sense. The latter is needed to account for the profound meanings of the *mantras* in particular and the Veda in general (here Sāyaṇa takes a decidedly different stance from that of Yāska), at least where it pertains to the realm of higher knowledge (*paravidyā*) corresponding to the *brahmakāṇḍa* of the Veda. The latter appears in Sāyaṇa’s mind to be preceded by the whole wide realm of knowledge of *dharma*, which, after all, is what the *mantras* are somehow to embody and express (p. 116).

All these features of Sāyaṇa’s work are programmatically gathered in the introduction. Here the global view dominates his entire work as *bhāṣyakāra*:

In the vision of the unitary Veda drawn by Sāyaṇa in his [*Ṛksamhitā-bhāṣya-bhūmikā*], the old model of *vedāṅgas* once developed for the preservation of the Vedic ‘scripture’ and later turned into *śāstras* is reestablished and reorganized for the purpose of *vedārthaprakāśana*. With the new commentary, the Vedic legacy is re-defined with the ideas of influential religious thinkers to suit the political aspirations of the kingly patrons. It is a holistic vision, and the Veda after Sāyaṇa will no longer be the same, not in the sense of its textual shape, which should not change, but as a type of social and cultural experience regulated by methodological norms now legitimized by the form of a canonical commentary (pp. 117–118).

Sāyaṇa was not alone in his gigantic enterprise. He worked in the shadow of his elder brother, Mādhava (Ch. 4: “A Charismatic Teacher and a Vedic Scholar”). In the relation between Mādhava and Sāyaṇa, synthesized by the expression “charisma and scholarship” (pp. 123–126), two “cultural models” are at work; the two brothers had a similar task, yet with different approaches: to Mādhava was conferred the *vedārthaparakāśana*; to Sāyaṇa the *vyākhyāna*, the exposition of the “literal” meaning. In other words, they embodied respectively the higher knowledge (*brahman*) and the “lower”, worldly one (*dharma*).

Galewicz presents and analyzes more particularly Sāyaṇa’s introduction to his *Ṛksaṃhitābhāṣya* (Ch. 5: “Presenting the Commentary: Here Comes the *Bhūmikā*”), which appears to be a powerful mirror of the cultural changes at work, and allows a better mapping of the royal project underlying his work. The scope of the *Bhūmikā* goes beyond the limits of the *Ṛksaṃhitā*, as Sāyaṇa presents it in the frame of the whole Veda; the reference to other texts and branches of the Veda within the introduction—its intertextuality—is a main feature of this canonical work (Ch. 6: “A Canonical Commentary in the Making”). Galewicz examines the internal organisation of the *Ṛgbhāṣya*, where each textual section (mnemonic unit) of the *Samhitā* (*aṣṭakas*, *adhyāyas*, *vargas*) is signalled by introductory and closing formulas (*maṅgalaślokas*, colophons, etc.), the (modern) division in *maṅdalas*, *anuvākas*, and *sūktas* being used only for internal references. Probably Sāyaṇa’s commentarial work was meant for “educational institutions,” using the former divisions of the Vedic text (p. 151). The same can be said for the colophons and closing formulas (p. 168). In this context, the question of the purpose of the *Bhāṣya* takes on all its value. From the analysis of the *Bhūmikā* it clearly appears that the distinction Sāyaṇa operates between two forms of knowledge, *dharma* and *brahman*, which are said to be respectively the core of *aparavidyā* and *paravidyā*, encounter the need for a “rationalisation” and a hierarchical order of knowledge. The influence of the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā dominates his conception of the Veda as “a sort of textual reservoir of elements rearranged to fit the ritual ideology.” This may explain the use of another pair of notions mentioned in the *Bhūmikā*: *yajña* and *brahman* (p. 185). Yet, following the Mīmāṃsā tradition, the ritual cannot be approached without a perfect textual knowledge. Thus, Sāyaṇa’s commentary “must have been intended to answer the needs of those who shared that kind of commitment towards the Veda in the first place. In line with such an attitude was his image of the Veda as an object to be explained through commentary” (p. 204). In this perspective, the *bhāṣya* becomes a necessary step to a higher knowledge, the *brahmajñāna* reserved to ascetics and *gurus*. At the end of the eighth chapter (Ch. 8: “The Rationalized ‘Scripture’ of the Veda”) Galewicz thus addresses the question of the influence of Vedānta on Sāyaṇa’s exegesis, and formulates

the hypothesis that he was less influenced by Śaṅkara than by other Vedāntic schools, admitting “the necessity of Vedic rituals leading to *dharmajñāna* (as in Rāmānuja school)” (p. 212). This hypothesis, based on statements found in the *Rgbhāṣya-bhūmikā* (1.1.5), should be however corroborated through an investigation on the body of Sāyaṇa’s work, as introductions appear to be a genre *per se* in the history of Sanskrit literature, with their own traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Among the traditional elements evoked by Sāyaṇa in his work, the equipment of the *bhāṣyakāra* as *vedavid* has a special place (Ch. 9: “The Commentary and the Quest for Knowledge”). The fourteen branches of knowledge (*vidyāsthāna*) are a “recurrent motif in traditionalistic literature of medieval India and reaches back to the Vedic period. [...]” (p. 227); it is found in the Mīmāṃsā tradition (Kumārila); yet, in Sāyaṇa’s *Bhūmikā*, this motif harks back to the *Jājñavalkya-smṛti* (p. 236). More generally, grammar and the other *vedāṅgas* are designed for “the own meaning of words” (*svaśabdārtham*), while the (two) Mīmāṃsā for “the true purport [of statements]” (*tātparyam*). Here Galewicz insists on the ideological ground of Sāyaṇa’s “canonical” work: in a hierarchical vision of knowledge, the commentary becomes in itself the proper door to access the ultimate knowledge of the Veda. The *phalaśruti* formulae (preceding the colophons) describing the commentary itself as a way to “the fulfilment of all the goals to be desired by men (*puruṣārtha*)” seem to come from the same ideology (p. 243).

One more central question addressed by Galewicz is the relation between knowledge and ritual, and ultimately the status of the Veda itself (Ch. 10: “Making Sense of the Vedic Textual Corpus”). If ritual knowledge precedes intellectual knowledge of the Veda—according to a deeply rooted Vedic tradition, long before the Mīmāṃsā (p. 245)—as it is certainly the case for Sāyaṇa, what about the portion of the Vedic text which is not directly involved in the ritual? The argument of the double knowledge of the Veda (*dharma* and *brahman*) enters now in Sāyaṇa’s defence of the textual integrity of the Veda: the interrelation of the two, along with the need for a compassionate *guru* to access the knowledge of *brahman*—the ultimate secret of the Veda—goes hand in hand with the defence of the traditional transmission of knowledge, the personal relation with a master in the *guru-śiṣya* model, which is also reaffirmed.

3 The commented passages from the *jñānasūkta* (RS X 71) included by Sāyaṇa in the *Bhūmikā*—and quoted by Galewicz *passim*—are perhaps the best proof that “introduction” is a *genre per se*, and a genre ‘of circumstance’. The same stanza (4) commented on by Sāyaṇa in the body of his *Bhāṣya* and in the *Bhūmikā* refers respectively to the poet and to the *vedavid* as interpreter of the Veda (and ultimately, to the commentator himself).

The volume contains four Appendices, reproducing, respectively 1) the “verified preambles to Sāyaṇa’s *bhūmikās* in a (most probable) chronological sequence”; a “list of works attributed to Sāyaṇa in probable historical sequence”; a “graphic representation of the architecture of the *Ṛgvedasamhitabhāṣya*”; and a manuscript folio showing the first *mantra* of the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*. It also includes a detailed “General Index.”

Galewicz’s sketch of the historical context of fourteenth century India invites us to reconsider the inner values of Sāyaṇa’s *Bhāṣyas*. The “anachronism” which has been often ascribed to his glosses, seems to be only partly correct: Sāyaṇa was conscious of semantics as a process of “meaning construction” historically determined, with its continuities and transformations. The unusual perspective, the method and the organisation of the argument could appear a bit puzzling; in the style of a “micro-history,” Galewicz’s analysis gives us a plethora of invaluable information not only about Sāyaṇa and the peculiar context of his work, but also about the history of books on the threshold of modernity.

*Silvia D’Intino*

CNRS, Paris