

Celestial interpretation of the Aśva Sūkta in the Ṛgveda

H.S. Sudarshan, Research Associate, CAHC, JAIN University
R.N. Iyengar, Distinguished Professor, CAHC, JAIN University

From Yāska's Nirukta, we notice the ancient tradition of understanding some hymns of the Ṛgveda in three ways. These are the adhyātma, where the locus is the Self, the adhiyajña where the locus is the yajña ritual and the adhidaivata where the locus is the dyouḥ or the visible sky. While commentators like Sāyaṇa interpret RV mainly from the adhiyajña point of view, Aurobindo and his followers have highlighted the adhyātma dimension of RV forcefully. It follows that RV hymns that contain description of the sky are amenable for adhidaivata meaning, wherein celestial objects are lauded. Iyengar (2010) has explored such a possibility with the Ṛgvedic word dhūmaketu to demonstrate that some RV hymns may describe comets and meteors. There are several other cases where both Yāska and Sāyaṇa indicate possible adhidaivata meanings. Typical is the case of Soma which is taken to be a herb of that name in the yājñika meaning, but Yāska points out that depending on the context this is the visible moon as per the adhidaivata meaning.

The famous Aśva Sūkta of the Ṛgveda (1.162 & 1.163) by Aucathya are traditionally taken to refer to the Aśvamedha yajña (horse sacrifice) ritual. The prime object and the event described is adhidaivata approach here. The medhyāśva (sacrificial horse) is said to have born out of Tvaṣṭṛ (the divine carpenter), seen among the gods and was killed by them, just as the terrestrial horse will be sacrificed by humans on earth. Sāyaṇa, in his commentary, describing the celestial horse's flight, proposes two meanings – the yājñika meaning of the horse climbing up to the heaven, as well as the direct textual meaning of a divine horse flying down from heaven to earth. The divine horse is said to be near a location in the sky called cow's foot (ā pade goḥ), which can be understood as the starry region later known as proṣṭapada with the same meaning (Pegasi). Sāyaṇa on the other hand takes the location as referring to the terrestrial location where the sacrifice takes place. The further picturesque description of a group of celestial horses flying like a line of swans perhaps points to bright meteorites traversing the sky.

The hymns as per the adhidaivata interpretation are relatable with one or more bright horse-like objects in the sky as observed from the earth. Such observations, it may be argued have lead to regular sky watching by the Vedic people, with associated ritualistic connotations.

1. Iyengar, R.N. (2010). Comets and meteoritic showers in the Rgveda and their significance. Indian Journal of History of Science, 45(1).