

Meeting 1: Vratá-s, Satyá, & Mitrá–Váruṇa

The Vedic conception of oath-keeping

Nikhil Surya Dwibhashyam, Rohan Pandey

20 February 2022

Meeting agenda

- Introduction to discussion group
- Today's meeting topic
- Free discussion

Why a Véda discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
 - Sámhitā-s
 - Bráhmaṇa-s
 - Others?

Why a Vēda discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
 - Sāmhita-s
 - Brāhmaṇa-s
 - Others?
- Vēda-s vs. Vedānta & Upaniṣād-s
 - Later monism (ādvāita) vs. earlier dualism (dvāitā)
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature

Why a Vēda discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
 - Sámhitā-s
 - Bráhmaṇa-s
 - Others?
- Vēda-s vs. Vedánta & Upaniṣád-s
 - Later monism (ádvaīta) vs. earlier dualism (dvāitá)
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature
- What is there to discuss?
 - History & linguistics
 - Metaphysics of religion
 - Exegesis (e.g. countering western narratives)
 - Moral principles
 - Nuances of Śrāutá ritual

Our plans

- Weekly meetings
- Different topic/aspect/angle discussed in depth every meeting
- Format:
 - Præsentations
 - Free-form discussions
- Eventually something more?

Let's introduce ourselves!

- Name
- School
- Background/interest in Hinduism & Vedic literature

Today's topic: Vratá-s, Satyá, & Mitrá–Váruṇa

vratá n. (MW on ṚV)

- will, command, law, ordinance, rule
- sphere of action, function, mode or manner of life, conduct, manner, usage, custom
- a religious vow or practice, any pious observance, meritorious act of devotion or austerity, solemn vow, rule, holy practice

Today's topic: Vratá-s, Satyá, & Mitrá–Váruṇa

vratá n. (MW on ṚV)

- will, command, law, ordinance, rule
- sphere of action, function, mode or manner of life, conduct, manner, usage, custom
- a religious vow or practice, any pious observance, meritorious act of devotion or austerity, solemn vow, rule, holy practice

satyá n. (MW)

- truth, reality (ṚV &c)
- a solemn asseveration, vow, promise, oath (AV &c)

Some questions to consider

- What is uniquely Vedic about the vratá?
- What are the religious & social consequences of breaking an oath?
- Why is the oath so fundamentally important to the Árya?
- What oaths must an Árya make?
- What are the implications of strict oath-keeping on our personal lives? on social organization?
- We'll return to these at the end!

The best place to start

- Usually a concordance!
- e.g. searching `.*vrat.*` in Graßmann's dictionary
 - *ánu-vrata, anyá-vrata, avratá, ..., su-vratá*
 - vṛdd^{hi}-ed form also useful: `.*vrāt.*`
- VedaWeb also a good resource
- What do we notice from the words' contexts?

Are oaths fundamental to the *Árya* identity?

- *Árya*: a *vṛddhi*-ed form of *aryá* (Graßmann: *treu, ergeben, fromm*)?

Are oaths fundamental to the Árya identity?

- *Árya*: a vǫdd^{hi}-ed form of *aryá* (Graßmann: treu, ergeben, fromm)?
- *Aryá* probably from *arí* (MW: faithul, devoted, pious), not to be confused with *ári* (enemy!)

Are oaths fundamental to the Árya identity?

- *Árya*: a vǫdd^{hi}-ed form of *aryá* (Graßmann: treu, ergeben, fromm)?
- *Aryá* probably from *arí* (MW: faithul, devoted, pious), not to be confused with *ári* (enemy!)
- Loyalty/faithfulness (quā oath-keeping) as a distinguishing trait of ethno-religious Árya identity?

Are oaths fundamental to the Árya identity?

Ánu-vratāya · rand^háyann ápa-vratān
āb^húb^hir Índraḥ · ṣnat^háyann ánāb^huvaḥ.

*Subduing the oath-breaking for the oath-following,
Índra destroys the strengthless by the strong.*

—RV 1.51.9ab

- 1.51.8 makes clear: former are Dásyu-s, latter are Árya-s
- Herrenmoral? but also! piousness, loyalty

Are oaths fundamental to the Árya identity?

- The enemies of the Vedic religion are distinguished most of all by their oath-breaking/lawlessness.
- Famous verse on the Dásyu:

Akarmá Dásyur · ab^hí no amantúḥ
anyá-vrato ámānuṣaḥ.
Tuám tásyā amitrahan
vád^har Dāsásya damb^haya!

*All around us is the Dásyu, wicked, mindless,
alien of oath, inhuman.
O thou foe-slayer,
destroy that Dāsá's weapon!*

The gods & dæmons, too, are bound by vratá-s.

Ná yásya Índro · Váruṇo ná Mitráḥ
vratám Aryamá · ná minánti Rudráḥ
ná árātayas, · tám idám suastí
hué devám · Savitáram námob^hiḥ.

*Whose oath neither Índra nor Váruṇa nor Mitrá
nor Aryamán nor Rudrá violates,
nor dæmons: for welfare, that very
god Savitṛ I invoke with salutations.*

—RV 2.38.9

Vedic duality: avratá & asatyá

- Álp^ha-privative often just as informative as the word itself
- We already saw *avratá*, as well as:
 - *ápa-vrata*, *anyá-vrata*
- Asatyá (once in ṚV but illuminating):

Vedic duality: avratá & asatyá

Prá tá Agnír · bab^hasat tigmá-jamb^haḥ
tápiṣṭ^hena · ṣociṣā yáḥ surád^hāḥ,
prá yé minánti · Váruṇasya dháma
priyá Mitrásya · cétato dhruvāṇi.

*May sharp-toothed generous Agní
consume with the hottest flame
those who violate the laws of Váruṇa,
the dear steadfast (laws) of wise Mitrá.*

Ab^hrātáro ná · yóṣaṇo viántaḥ
pati-rípo ná · jánayo durévāḥ
pāpāsaḥ sánto · Anṛtá asatyāḥ
idám padám · ajanatā gab^hīrám.

*Like brotherless maidens, straying,
like husband-betraying women, wicked,
those who are sinful, against Ṛtá, untrue,
have brought forth this deep place
[hell?].*

Vedic duality: Mitrá–Váruṇa

- Mitrá and Váruṇa as a dvaṁ-dvá: guardians of divine law

D^hármaṇā Mitrā–Varuṇā vipaścītā
vratá rakṣet^he · ásurasya māyáyā.
Ṛtēna víśvam · b^húvanam ví rājat^haḥ.
Súryam á d^hatt^ho · diví cítriam rát^ham.

*O wisdom-inspired Mitrá–Váruṇa, with the law
and with the power of the divine ye guard oaths.*

*Ye govern all existence by Ṛtá.
Ye set the Sun in heaven as a bright chariot.*

—ṚV 5.63.7

The structure of the Vedic religion

(My own theory!)

- R̥tá
 - Dhárman ($\sqrt{d^hr}$)
 - Vratá-s
 - Satyá (\sqrt{as})
 - Vratá-s
- Savitṛ (prīnum movēns, $\sqrt{sū}$)
 - Mitrá-Váruṇa
 - Sūrya
- Índra (king), Agní (commander)
 - Víṣve devás
 - Árya-s &c

What happens to the avratá-s?

- The vratá is a choice: derived from \sqrt{vr} “choose”
 - One can, and many do, choose to break oaths. What then?
- Natural consequences:

Su-gáḥ panthā anṛkṣaráḥ
Ádityāsa Ṛtām yaté.
N' átr' āva-khādáv asti vaḥ.

*Easy and thornless is the path,
O sons of Áditi, for the follower of Ṛtá.
Not then is there cause to anger for ye.*

—RV 1.41.4

- Also hints at wrath of gods: earthly? hell?
 - Hard to tell

Vrátya-s, Brāhmaṇá-s & the vratá: social organization

vráta m. (MW on RV)

- a multitude, flock, assemblage, troop, swarm, group, host, association, guild
- The Vrátya-s?
- Priestly oaths to serve god: the basis for the later *vrata* concept
- Oaths as a means of binding people(s) together
 - Husband and wife
 - Teacher and student
 - Different Aryan tribes

The vratá as a profession

Nānānām vá u no dhíyaḥ
ví vratáni jánānaam.
Tákṣā riṣṭám rutám b^{hi}ṣák
brahmá sunvántam icc^hati.

*Diverse indeed are our thoughts,
and so the oaths of men.
The builder seeks the broken, the doctor the injured,
the priest the worshiper.*

—RV 9.112.1a–d

The vrata in later literature

- More ritual-focused (ironically!)
- Vows of fasting, chastity, silence, etc.
- Central meaning still retained, e.g.:

Su-b^hagā b^hoga-saṁpannā
yajña-patnī sv-anu-vratā.

*Fortunate, endowed with joy,
(be) the wife at the sacrifice, keeping well (thy) oaths.*

—MB^h 1.191.7cd

Some questions to consider

- What is uniquely Vedic about the vratá?
- What are the religious & social consequences of breaking an oath?
- Why is the oath so fundamentally important to the Árya?
- What oaths must an Árya make?
- What are the implications of strict oath-keeping on our personal lives? on social organization?
- We'll return to these at the end!