Cezary Galewicz


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, 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 *Ṛgveda* (1890), was regularly nuanced in the twentieth century: Sāyaṇa’s commentaries, and particularly his *Ṛgvedabhaṣya* 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 mantra 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 Ṛk, mixed with short tales in order to shed light on the mythological allusions of the text; there follow, where necessary, gram-

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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 Rākṣ is completed by the commentaries by Sāyaṇa himself on the Atharvaveda and the Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa, by Mahidhara 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 in confined to a casual distribution of Vedic and classic meanings: let us recall the story of the word ari- [...].

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.

Fourteen 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 (patha) 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

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