

Hindu Worldview Through Folk Etymology in Vāyupurāṇa

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Abstract

It is noteworthy that some of the interesting characteristics in Indian texts are the way to see the world through folk-etymological analyses especially in Hinduism, which leads to the objective of this article: to study Hindu worldview in the text named *Vāyupurāṇa* (VP), one of the significantly early *Śaiva* Hindu texts. The research methodology is the folk etymological concept. The findings are as follows: VP reflects some natural perceptions by considering that each word in Sanskrit language has its root, which is the tiniest element. To consider the grammatical roots in each word is to understand the background of the world. In some cases, one word may be designated by many roots, contributed to the plausibility to understand the meaning of the same word in many ways and the text also does not claim which one is correct. The mentioned backgrounds are to be understood variously. Despite the sensible limits of human nature in ancient times and lack of reasonable linguistic consideration in the way that is acceptable in modern linguistic concept, it undeniably displays attempt to explain the world as understood. VP therefore is one of the texts to be regarded as Indian historical proofs of human imagination.

Keywords: Hindu, Folk Etymology, Sanskrit Literature

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Introduction

The folk etymology, or popular etymology, is a change resulting from the replacement of the unfamiliar with the familiar (Sirley, 2000). We can see many samples of folk etymology when it comes to some loanwords or terminology that is partly new to Thai society, for example, in Thai the word สัมมนา (sammana ‘seminar’) has been invented for the word seminar. The สัมมนา sounds Sanskrit and easily accepted in Thai society whereas you cannot find this word in any Sanskrit dictionary, although it can be analyzed to be ‘sam’ (‘together’) + mana ‘mind.’ Etymologically speaking, the word seminar has the same root as semen, which is relevant to seed and regarded as lost in translation. Mostly Thai people do not know this is the unfamiliar word less than 100 years, invented by the royal scholar team. They are willing to believe that สัมมนา means having mind together because this invention sounds familiar to Thai language especially in some extent influenced with Sanskrit long time ago, though this.

To Indian people, the folk etymology is ancient. It can be found in many classical texts as the way to understand and imagine the world as it is. For example, in Hindu mythology *gandharva* is a kind of heavenly musician. They are the servant of Indra, king of gods. Their couple are apsaras or the nymph. There is a belief that the *gandharva* is fragrant because of the word *gandha* in the word *gandharva* itself. Actually no one knows the real *gandharva*. But Indian people in ancient time link the word *gandharva* to the word *gandha* that is familiar to them and means the fragrance, as can be seen in the Hindu and Buddhist texts. Although the folk etymology is an approach that is less scientific than nowadays linguistic, its significance in the intellectual history of humankind is undeniable.

When it comes to the *Vāyupurāṇa*, undoubtedly it is one of the oldest texts in Śaiva Hinduism, composed around the 5th century. One thing that can prove its oldness is the use of the word Rudra more than Śiva. The word Rudra is to be found often in *Ṛgveda*, the oldest text in Hinduism, before the popularity of the word Śiva later. It is known that Śiva’s characteristics are from Paśupati and Rudra which are ancient in Indian society. Besides, there is no God Ganeśa in this text. Only Skanda is remembered as the son of Śiva and Pārvatī.

When considering the folk etymology throughout the text, it is interesting that there are many examples of attempt to understand the world as much as human in ancient time can do, leading to my objective; i.e., to investigate and study Hindu worldview through folk etymological analysis in *Vāyupurāṇa*. At least the study would illustrate that before the westernized linguistic scientific point of view, how we ever see the world.

Hindu Worldview in Vāyupurāṇa

Many Sanskritists believe that every word in Sanskrit has its root, which is the tiniest of the words and gives us the original meaning. Some are reasonable and some are hard to say if it is reasonable. For example, the word *śraddhā* could be divided into *śrad* ‘heart’ and *dhā* ‘to put’ so literally *śraddhā* means ‘to put something in the heart,’ which means faith or belief. However, *go* ‘cow’ is believed that it is derived from the root *gam* ‘to go,’ which I am not sure about it because many things can go like cow. This belief could be turned back to the time of *Pāṇini* the famous Sanskrit grammarian who lived around 450 B.C. There is a textbook dealing with this hypothesis named *Nirukta* composed by *Yāska*. It can be said this device to see the world is ancient and appears in Indian culture for a long time.

It is found many times that in *Vāyupurāṇa* there are a lot of folk etymological analyses as the important way to see the world. Although it seems like the composers find a root to the word later, it is undoubtedly the way to link the words to nature or the text to the context, or this is the text in the text again because it is the way to understand the meaning of the word itself. Let me give some examples in the *Vāyupurāṇa* about this:

The root *bhā* means to expand, to shine. Since it expands and shines, the water that goes everywhere is known in the name *ambhas*. //2.7.50

The root *tan* means to extend. Since it extends all over the earth, the water is well-known in the name *tanu*. //2.7.51

Since the sun while orbiting protects the three worlds. It is called *ravi* from the root *av* ‘to protect, to shine.’ //2.50.60

One who is expert in etymology said the world named *bhuvar* is from the root *bhū* ‘to be.’ *Bhuvar* is the name of the world in the second level; that is the sky. //2.64.14

The word *dvīpa* ‘continent’ is derived from having water surrounded two ways (dvi ‘two’). Also, the word *udadhi* meaning the ocean is derived from carrying water (ud ‘upward’ + dhā > dhi ‘to carry’). //2.49.131 (*because the water in river or ocean could be high tide*)

Since then, kings who have the right to punish were born. Because of delighting people, they got the name *rājā* (*rañj* ‘to be delighted’). //2.57.58

The planets, constellations, and all the stars that we know, as well as the whole universe have evolved from the sun. Since being imperishable of constellation, it is called *Nakshatra* (*na* ‘not’ *kṣi* ‘to perish’). //2.53.50

...and so on.

Sanskrit is the language rich in lexicon. We cannot conclude which one is correct or which explanation comes first or later, or maybe it comes spontaneously when composing the text. But we can see some attempts to understand the world by finding the root of the word. Although it is a matter of speculation, it nevertheless displays an attempt to understand the world.

In some cases, it can be found in *Vāyupurāṇa* the suggestion about the origin of the word more than one meaning. This might be doubtful when it comes to the linguistic knowledge in the present time that is familiar to us, that is, we try to find one conclusion that is clear and provable. The origin of any word, therefore, should not be diverse or hard to find conclusion. Folk-etymologically speaking, we can see that some words could be analyzed more than one origin. This leads us to understand the concept of Indian folk etymology that has human imagination as background of thought. For example:

Because of taking the sacrifice at first, the thing is called *āditya* ‘the sun.’ //2.12.35

Āditya ‘the sun’ is a constellation because the sun revives the downfallen land with its ray. //2.53.51

Because of removing darkness in the night in heaven and the world, it is called the sun.
//2.53.53

It can be seen one word ‘*āditya*’ that means the sun could traced back to the various origin. In 2.12.35 this links to the myth that Manu the first king of the world who is the son of the sun is one who makes sacrifice. That is why the sun takes the sacrifice at first. 2.53.51 and 53 refers to the Sanskrit root *dā* ‘to give’ when combined with prefix *ā*, the word means ‘to take something back, to remove’ and becomes the meaning of the sun folk-etymologically.

In addition, we can see the role and significance of the folk etymology in explaining the myth in *Vāyupurāṇa*, as can be seen from the story as follows:

In the darkness Lord Brahma is dominated by hunger. He creates another body. Therefore, the creature that is created at that time usually is hungry and tries to take water. //2.9.26

They said, ‘we are going to save this water.’ So, they are well-known in the world as *rākṣasa* the night-wanderer who are angry by nature. //2.9.27

The other group said to one another that ‘we are going to destroy the water’ and enjoy. They become *yakṣa* and the evil *guhya*. //2.9.28

The root *rakṣ* means to save, protect and root *kṣi* means to destroy. //2.9.29

Recently we have heard the international news that India might change the name of the country to be *Bhārata*, which is regarded long time ago as the original name of India. We found in *Vāyupurāṇa* one chapter dealing with *Bhārata* land or *Bhāratavarṣa* – the holy land in the South of *Meru* the central mountain, that is chapter 45 describing the circumstance landscape of *Bhārata* land. Folk-etymologically speaking the name *Bhārata* is from the word *Bharata* as follows:

Since the land is named *Bhārata*, the people here are called *Bhāratī* and *Manu* (the first king who rules the world) is called *Bharata* because he saves the people. //2.45.76

The composer links the name *Bhārata* to *Bharata* because the root *bhr* means to carry, to save, to take care of, though the name *Bharata* in *Vāyupurāṇa* is different from *Bharata* in the Lunar race, that is prevailingly believed in the present. *Bharata* here is the son of *Ṛṣabha* in the lineage of *Manu*, son of *Brahma*.

Ṛṣabha gave birth to the brave *Bharata* who was the elder brother of the other hundred sons. Having the son *Bharata* succeeded to the throne, *Ṛṣabha* ordained as a monk. //2.33.51

Ṛṣabha gave the southern land *Himāhava* (*Himālaya*) to *Bharata*. Thus, the learned person knows his land by the name *Bhārata*. //2.33.52

I do not want to decide absolutely whether we should go back to the name *Bhārata* or not because it is beyond my scope of study. We might need to reconsider the exact boundary of the *Bhārata* before, which is different from the present geography. Anyway, we can see that this

is the old name that has been appeared long time ago in the ancient text and already folk-etymologically explained.

Conclusion

To conclude, the folk etymology can shed the light to our understanding to Hindu concept in many ways, especially in terms of the origin of the meaning of the world and the Hindu myth, or we can say, although we are not sure whether this is the world as it is or not, this is the world that we want to be; that is the world full of imagination and respect to the nature.

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