

The Various Aspects of Interpretation of the Yajurveda

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Abstract -

The Yajurveda, the third of the four Vedas, is primarily a ritual text concerned with the formulae, procedures, and mantras required for Vedic sacrifices or yajñas. Unlike the Rigveda's hymns of praise or the Samaveda's musical chants, the Yajurveda is pragmatic: it is the "manual" for the adhvaryu priest. Because of this functional nature, it has been interpreted across millennia through ritual, philosophical, grammatical, scientific, and social lenses. This paper examines five major aspects of Yajurvedic interpretation: 1) Ritual-Practical, 2) Philological-Linguistic, 3) Philosophical-Upanishadic, 4) Social-Historical, and 5) Modern-Scientific/Symbolic. By tracing commentaries from Yaska to Dayananda Saraswati to contemporary Indologists, we see how the Yajurveda shifted from being a sacrificial guide to a source of metaphysics, ethics, and cultural identity. The conclusion argues that the multiplicity of interpretations is not a contradiction but reflects the text's layered structure and the evolving needs of Indian civilization.

Keywords: *Yajurveda, Shukla Yajurveda, Krishna Yajurveda, Mimamsa, Upanishads, Dayananda, Ritual, Adhvaryu, Interpretation*

1. Introduction

The Yajurveda literally means "Veda of Yajus" — yajus meaning "prose formula" or "sacrificial utterance". It contains about 1975 mantras, most of which are also found in the Rigveda, but rearranged and in prose form for use in ritual.

It exists in two major recensions:

1. Shukla Yajurveda "White": Clear separation of mantra and Brahmana. Main branches: Vajasaneyi Madhyandina and Kanva. Associated with Ishopanishad and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.
2. Krishna Yajurveda "Black": Mantra and Brahmana are interwoven. Main branches: Taittiriya, Maitrayani, Katha, Kapishtala. Associated with Taittiriya, Katha, Shvetashvatara Upanishads.

Because the text is so closely tied to action, every generation has had to "interpret" what the mantras mean beyond their immediate ritual function. This paper maps those interpretations.

2. Aspect 1: The Ritual-Practical Interpretation

This is the earliest and most literal interpretation. The Yajurveda was composed for the adhvaryu priest, who physically performed the sacrifice.

2.1 The Yajna as Technology

In the Brahmana texts attached to Yajurveda — Shatapatha Brahmana for Shukla, Taittiriya Brahmana for Krishna — each mantra is mapped to a specific action: pouring ghee, laying bricks for the fire altar agni-cayana, measuring the sacrificial ground.

Example: Yajurveda 1.1 "Ishé tva..." is uttered while taking the barhis grass. The interpretation here is purely performative: correct pronunciation = correct result.

The Mimamsa school, especially Jaimini and Shabara, built an entire philosophy on this. Their principle: Veda is authorless and its purpose is injunction. A mantra's meaning = what it commands you to do. No need to ask "what does Agni symbolize?" Ask: "When do I offer to Agni?"

2.2 Significance

This interpretation kept Vedic ritual alive for 3000 years. It treats the Yajurveda as a precise operational code. Errors in recitation were believed to cause ritual failure. Thus interpretation = preservation of phonetics, meter, and sequence.

3. Aspect 2: The Philological-Linguistic Interpretation

From 5th century BCE onwards, scholars began asking: what do the words mean etymologically?

3.1 Yaska and Nirukta

Yaska's Nirukta is the first attempt to interpret difficult Vedic words. He classifies words into 4 types and gives etymologies. For Yajurveda terms like yupa "sacrificial post", purodasha "rice cake", he gives root derivations. The goal: to prevent misperformance due to linguistic drift.

3.2 Sayana's 14th Century Commentary

The most authoritative medieval commentary on all four Vedas is by Sayana of Vijayanagara. For Yajurveda, he wrote Vedartha Prakasha. His method:

1. Give pada-patha "word by word"
2. Give grammatical analysis
3. Give ritual context from Brahmana
4. Give brief philosophical gloss

Sayana's interpretation is conservative: he harmonizes mantra with Brahmana and ritual. He rarely goes beyond the text.

3.3 Modern Philology

19th-20th century European Indologists like Max Muller, A.B. Keith, and W.D. Whitney approached Yajurveda comparatively. They compared Vedic Sanskrit to Avestan, Greek, and Latin to reconstruct Indo-European ritual vocabulary. Their interpretation: Yajurveda preserves an Indo-European sacrificial culture. This shifted interpretation from theology to historical linguistics.

4. Aspect 3: The Philosophical-Upanishadic Interpretation

The Yajurveda is unique because its closing chapters directly become Upanishads. This allowed a jump from ritual to metaphysics.

4.1 Internal Upanishads

1. Ishopanishad: Last 18 verses of Shukla Yajurveda. Moves from "do the sacrifice" to "renounce and enjoy". Core idea: tena tyaktena bhunjitha "by renunciation enjoy". Interpretation: The external yajna must become internal yajna of detachment.
2. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: Attached to Shatapatha Brahmana. Interprets ritual terms as Atman-Brahman. Ashvamedha becomes a metaphor for the cosmic body. The horse = universe.
3. Taittiriya Upanishad: From Krishna Yajurveda. Introduces Pancha-kosha "five sheaths". Interprets man as a sacrifice to knowledge.
4. Katha Upanishad: Yama teaches Nachiketa that true agni is the Self.
5. Shvetashvatara Upanishad: Interprets Rudra in Yajurveda as the personal God, source of Maya.

4.2 Vedanta and Shankara

Adi Shankara quoted Yajurvedic Upanishads extensively to argue Advaita. For him, ritual passages of Yajurveda were karma-kanda for beginners, but the Upanishadic portion was jnana-kanda for the wise. Thus he interpreted Yajurveda hierarchically: ritual is preparatory, knowledge is final.

4.3 Tantric and Yogic Interpretation

Nath and Tantric traditions read Yajurveda's body references as subtle anatomy. Shatarudriya "100 names of Rudra" in Yajurveda 16 became a map of chakras. Fire altar bricks = energy centers. Thus ritual = inner yoga.

5. Aspect 4: The Social-Historical Interpretation

This approach asks: what does Yajurveda tell us about Vedic society?

5.1 Varna and Social Order

Purushasukta, repeated in Yajurveda 31, describes the four varnas arising from Purusha's body. Traditional interpretation: divine ordination of social roles.

19th century reformers reinterpreted it: Dayananda Saraswati in Satyarth Prakash argued varna = based on guna and karma, not birth. He used Yajurveda 26.2 yan me manas... "May I be dear to Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra" to argue for social equality.

5.2 Women and Ritual

Krishna Yajurveda mentions women's participation in yajna. Feminist scholars like Mandakranta Bose interpret this as evidence of greater Vedic women's agency compared to later smriti period.

5.3 Political Interpretation

Rajsuya and Ashvamedha mantras in Yajurveda were used by kings to legitimize rule. Thus interpretation = political ideology. Arthashastra and Yajurveda together formed statecraft.

6. Aspect 5: The Modern-Scientific and Symbolic Interpretation

From 19th century to present, Yajurveda has been read outside religious frameworks.

6.1 Dayananda Saraswati and Arya Samaj: "Back to the Vedas"

Dayananda rejected ritualism and idol worship. He interpreted Yajurveda entirely as science and ethics.

Example: Yajurveda 40.8 describing God as akayam avranam "bodiless, without veins" was used to argue monotheism. Yajurveda 12.5 on agriculture was read as a manual for scientific farming. For Dayananda, "yajna" = social welfare, not fire ritual.

6.2 Scientific Interpretation

Some modern authors interpret Yajurveda's cosmology and fire altar geometry as early mathematics. The agni-cayana altar uses area-preserving transformations — seen as precursor to Pythagoras. Yajurveda mentions numbers up to 10^{12} , interpreted as advanced numerical knowledge.

Critics argue this is anachronistic, but proponents claim the text encodes science in symbolic language.

6.3 Ecological Interpretation

Contemporary eco-scholars read Yajurveda mantras on earth, water, and plants as an environmental ethic. Yajurveda 36.17 "May the earth be free from disturbance" is quoted in modern environmental movements. Interpretation: Yajna = reciprocal relationship with nature, not exploitation.

6.4 Literary and Psychological Interpretation

Some read Yajurveda mantras as poetry of human aspiration. The repeated calls for shanti "peace", prajna "wisdom", bala "strength" are seen as universal prayers. Psychologists interpret the fire ritual as a model for transformation of inner desires.

7. Conflicts and Convergences Between Interpretations

School	What Yajurveda Is	Method	Goal
Mimamsa	Injunction manual	Ritual analysis	Dharma, heaven
Vedanta	Metaphysical text	Upanishadic exegesis	Moksha, knowledge
Philology	Historical document	Comparative linguistics	Reconstruct past
Arya Samaj	Scientific-ethical code	Rational reinterpretation	Social reform
Modern Spiritual	Symbolic psychology	Allegorical reading	Inner growth

The conflict is clear: Mimamsa says "don't allegorize", Vedanta says "allegorize everything". Yet they converge on one point: the text is authoritative. The difference is how it authorizes.

8. Conclusion: Why Multiple Interpretations Matter

The Yajurveda's structure itself invites multiple readings. It is 3-layered:

1. Mantra layer: Sound and formula
2. Brahmana layer: Ritual instruction
3. Upanishad layer: Philosophical reflection

No single interpretation exhausts it. The ritualist needs precision. The philosopher needs meaning. The historian needs context. The reformer needs relevance. In the 21st century, Yajurveda is no longer recited daily for sacrifices, but it is recited for shanti-path, for funerals, for cultural identity. Thus interpretation has shifted from "how to do" to "what it means to be".

As the Ishopanishad from Yajurveda says: vidyaya amritam ashnute "By knowledge one attains immortality". Perhaps the greatest interpretation of Yajurveda is that it survives because each age finds new knowledge in it.

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