

The Chronology of the Gopatha Brāhmaṇa: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

The *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* occupies a distinctive position within the Vedic corpus as the sole Brāhmaṇa text associated with the Atharvaveda. Despite its importance, the question of its chronology remains a subject of scholarly debate due to its composite structure, heterogeneous content, and relatively late recognition in Vedic studies. This paper examines the chronology of the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* through a critical analysis of internal linguistic features, doctrinal developments, ritual descriptions, and intertextual references to other Vedic and post-Vedic literature. By comparing its language and concepts with those of earlier Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads, and Śrauta and Gṛhya traditions, the study argues that the text reflects multiple layers of composition rather than a single period of authorship. The presence of speculative tendencies, symbolic interpretations of sacrifice, and references to philosophical ideas suggest a transitional phase between the late Brāhmaṇa period and the early Upaniṣadic age. On the basis of textual and comparative evidence, the paper proposes that the core portions of the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* may be dated to approximately the 8th–6th centuries BCE, with subsequent interpolations extending into a later period. The study thus contributes to a clearer understanding of the historical placement of the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* and its role in the evolution of Vedic ritual and thought.

Keywords: Chronology, Philosophical, Transitional, Mythological, Astronomical.

any scholars have tried to explore their views on the origin of the Veda by providing various evidences. But it is very difficult to ascertain that how and when the Veda was revealed to us or when it was available in literary form. If we look into the Puruṣa-sūkta it can be observed about the origin of Veda. The Veda is considered as divine revelations. In the course of time it was orally transmitted to the successive generation of the Ṛṣi families. It is an admitted fact that the opinions even of the best scholars in this field of study differ not to the extent of centuries but to the extent of thousands of years. The historians frankly admit that it is very difficult to fix even approximately, the date of the Vedas. The chronology of the history of the vast Vedic literature is shrouded in truly terrifying darkness and most of the riddles, the historians are confronted within their search of truth in this respect will ever remain unsolved. But nevertheless, scholars both the Eastern and the Western have tried to short out a tentative date of this ancient literature on the basis of various grounds of evidences. An attempt is made in this paper to focus on “*Chronology of Gopatha-brāhmaṇa: An Assessment*” which shall be analyzed.

The *Gopathabrāhmaṇa* (G.Br.) is the only *brāhmaṇa* text representing all the recensions of the *Atharvaveda* (AV). It is divided into two books, the first containing five and the second six chapters. Its contents are mostly borrowed from other *Brāhmaṇas*, particularly the *Aitareya* and *Kauṣitaki Brāhmaṇas*, with a few passages from the *Śatapatha* and the *Pañcaviṃśa*. The *Gopatha* also contains certain passages from the *Maitrāyaṇi* and the *Taittirīya Samhitās*. The passages quoted are slightly modified, and without acknowledgement and the *Gopatha*'s link with AV is not readily perceptible. It gives the impression of being so late that Bloomfield declared it to be more recent than even the *Śrauta-sūtra* (*Vaitāna*) and the *Gṛhya-sūtra* (*Kauśika*) of the AV.

It is very difficult to decide the accurate date of Veda. The calculation of date of Veda is the contribution of Western scholars. Observation about the date of Veda in general through various evidences viz., archeological, astronomical, literary, mythological and historical etc. and particularly to ascertain the date of *G. Br.* is controversial. Scholars both the East and the West may have opined their view from different angles by proposing various evidences, but to reach at a certain conclusion about the accurate date of it is debatable. The most of context of this *Brāhmaṇa* is borrowed from different Vedic texts. (To quote a stanza- *iti ha smāha kauṣītakiḥ* 2.3.11). whatever literary evidences we come across those are made by modern scholars by their comparative study of research in this field. In fact, it can be said the date of *G.Br.* after certain comparative study and research. *Brāhmaṇas* are the explanatory notes on *Samhitā*. *G. Br.* is considered as the source of *Atharvaveda*.

Rajendralal Mitra, Kṣemakaraṇadas Trivedi, Prajñādevī, Medhādevī etc. have discussed on the date of this *Brāhmaṇa* in general from various points of view. Bloomfield in his book '*The Atharvaveda and Gopathabrāhmaṇa*' has discussed in this context and stated that this text is very later in compare with other Vedic literature and it is not composed in a particular time. It is composed in different times. There is a reference of Lord Śiva (*salilasya pṛṣṭhe śivo bhyatapat G.Br.* 1.2.8). On this basis he views that this *Brāhmaṇa* belongs to *Puraṇic* age. In other place he quotes a word '*doṣapati*' and opines that this text is after Buddhist era. In Buddha period there was a demon named '*duṣiṇa*'. in some places he states that it is after *upaniṣadic* period. He has clearly stated that the date of this *Brāhmaṇa* is later Vedic even after *Vedāṅga*, *Kauṣika Sūtra*, *Vaiāna Sūtra* etc. He has no clearly stated a particular date of this text. But to some extents it may be stated after *Samhitā* and their concerned *Brāhmaṇa* *G.Br.* came to the consideration which was borrowed various subject matters from other *Brāhmaṇas*.

Moreover, considering the context of *G. Br.*, it is clear that the entire subject matter of this text is not assemble in a particular time. Apart from this the context of this text is borrowed from *Samhitā*, other *Brāhmaṇa* viz.; *Aitareya*, *Śatapatha*, *Chāndogya*, *Kauṣītaki*, *Pañcaviṃśa*, *Taittirīya* etc. hence, it later of all these texts. The stanza of *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* occurs in *G. Br.* 2.3.11 (*iti ha smāha kauṣītaki*). It seems that *G.Br.* is after *Kauṣītaki*. In this manner we come across a lot of stanzas of *Aitareya* and *Śatapatha* which has been place in *G.Br.* so, it is very later of this text.

If we compare *G.Br.* with *Upaniṣads*, we find that the context of the first part of *G.Br.* is similar with later *Upaniṣads*. For example, the discussion on *omkāra* (1.1.16-30), about *Gāyatrī* (1.1.31-38), about significance of *brahacarya* (1.2.1-8) etc. which are mentioned in *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣads*. Historians and Vedic scholars thinks that compose of the Vedic literature along with *Upaniṣads* are completed within 500 B.C. Of course the *Brāhmaṇas* are before *Upaniṣadic* texts. The time of *Brāhmaṇas* are to be considered between 700-600 B.C. If *G.Br.* is considered to be after *Brāhmaṇa* texts then the tentative date of *G.Br.* can be stated between 700-600 B.C.

If we look into Patañjali (tentative date 100 B.C) *Mahābhāṣya* where we find on the basis of Pāṇini's *Sūtra* (1.1.38) the term '*avyayam*' which is found in *G.Br.* 1.1.26). if the context if not directly meant to our intended sense but nevertheless the philosophical concept and idea is similar. The *avyayatva* of *brahma-omkāra* has been intensified by Mahābhāṣyakāra Patañjali (*evam tathoktam*). (vide: S.D. Joshi, (ed.), *Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali, 1st Khaṇḍa, p. 355). In *G.Br.* 1.2.8, '*viṃśino ṅgirasa ṛṣīn niramimīta*', here it is intended that Brahma created twenty ṅgirasa sages through one ṅgirā sage. The creation of *Atharvaveda* is discussed. Patañjali in his *Vārtika* on Pāṇini *Sūtra*. 5.2.37 '*śanstorḍini rvartavyaḥ*' '*ḍini*' + *in* (suffix), he mentions '*viṃśino ṅgirasah*', *viṃśin ḍini* (*in*). We do not find this discussed in any other text. In this context H.C. Patyal, English translation of *G.Br.* with an elaborate introduction states that – It may naturally lead one to think that in all probability, Patañjali, the

‘Mahābhāṣyakāra’ might have borrowed it from this (G.Br.) text”. So G.Br. is before Patañjali there is no doubt.

Let us have another point where Bloomfield opines that G.Br. is considered to be after *Nirukta* (500 B.C.) on the basis of the word ‘makha’ (vide: H.C. Patyal, English translation of G.Br. with an elaborate introduction p. 119) In G.Br. 2.2.5) “*makha ityetad yajñanāmadheyam chidrapraṭiṣedhasāmarthyāt, chidram khamityuktam, tasya meti praṭiṣedhaḥ, mā yajñam chidram kariṣyati iti*). But L.N. Swarup in his edition on *Nirukta* states that *Nirukta* is after G.Br. (Vide : *Nirukta* I-1, pp.261-263). In G.Br. (2.2.6;2.4.2) “*etadvai yajñasya samṛddham yad rūpasamṛddham yatkarma kriyamānam yajurvābhivadati*’. *Nirukta* 1.16 mentions this stanza and ends with ‘*iti ca brāhmaṇam*’. From this it is clear that it is borrowed from a *Brāhmaṇa* text. In *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* this quotation is found (1.4; 1.13; 1.16 etc. but it is not found like ‘*yat kriyamānamṛgabhidati*’. G.Br. 2.3.4 stanza is similar with *Nirukta* 8.22. In *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (3.8.1) also we find this stanza but ‘*manasā*’ word is omitted, but in G.Br. ‘*manasā*’ word is there. So *Nirukta* has followed *Brahmaṇa* texts. This *manasā* is very significant because when the context of Veda trayī comes it intends that Brahmā performs *yajña* though three Vedas one side in other side through *Atharvaveda* he performs *yajña*. It is his *mānasa*. To quote the stanza – *sa vā eṣa tribhirvedairyajñasyānyataraḥ pakṣaḥ saṁskriyate, manasaiva brahmā yajñasyānyataram pakṣam saṁskaroti* -1.3.2. *manasā caiva hi vācā ca yajño vartate* (1.3.2. Considering this point A. B. Keith opines that –‘It is hardly open to doubt that the form (*manasā*) found in G.Br. must have been before Yāska’s mind. Keith A.B., foot notes. P.25-26.

The G.Br., *Aitareya, Śatapatha* and other *Brāhmaṇa* texts are before *Nirukta*. The mention of words viz.; *putra, jāyā, samudra, Varuṇa, Bhṛgu, Atharvā, Aṅgirā* etc. is found in *Nirukta*. So G.Br. is obviously before *Nirukta*. The famous Linguist P.D.Gune opines that G.Br. is anterior to *Nirukta*. (Gune, ‘*Brāhmaṇa* quotations in *Nirukta*’, Bhandarkar Commemorial Vol. pp.43-53, ibid. H.C. Patyal. Introduction, p.45. If the date of *Nirukta* is considered as 500 B.C. then the date of G.Br. is anterior to *Nirukta*, means the date of G.Br. can be considered between 700-600 B.C.

Furthermore, internal evidence reveals stratification within the text itself. Certain sections preserve archaic ritual traditions consistent with early *Brāhmaṇa* thought, while others display theological synthesis and systematization characteristic of later Vedic literature. This internal diversity strongly supports the view that the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* is not the product of a single period but rather the result of gradual compilation and redaction over time.

On the basis of comparative textual analysis, most scholars tend to place the composition of the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* between the late *Brāhmaṇa* and early Upaniṣadic periods, though absolute dating remains elusive. Its chronological position thus marks it as a crucial link between ritual-centric *Brāhmaṇa* literature and the emerging speculative traditions that would later find fuller expression in the Upaniṣads.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* occupies a significant yet distinctive position within the Vedic corpus. Its chronology not only illuminates the historical development of Atharvavedic tradition but also contributes to a broader understanding of the dynamic transformation of Vedic thought—from ritual formalism toward philosophical reflection. As such, the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* deserves continued scholarly attention as a key witness to the transitional phases of early Indian intellectual history.

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