

Sri Gurubhyo Namaha

Vedic Chanting – a Perfectly Formulated Oral Tradition

Dr. S. YEGNASUBRAMANIAN

Our tradition believes that the Vedas are the breath of God Himself!

यस्य निश्चितं वेदाः।

With that belief, our Rishis exercised enormous care to preserve the Vedas in its original form without the infiltration of any errors. Especially in the absence of writing, and through only an oral transmission from father-to-son or teacher-to-disciple, for thousands of years, this is an accomplishment of unimaginable proportion! Considering the vast magnitude of mantras contained in the vedas, such a preservation, with built-in safeguards, is mind boggling!

It is believed that the complete benefit of Veda mantras could be achieved only when the following conditions are met:

.. Correct pronunciation of letters (words)

– अक्षर शुद्धिः

.. Correct duration for utterance of letters (words) –

मात्रा शुद्धिः and,

.. Correct intonation of letters, स्वर शुद्धिः

Our Rishis prescribed several fool-proof methods to correctly recite the veda mantras. Six ways of recitation were considered incorrect and they are :

गीती शीघ्री शिरःकंपी तथा लिखितपाठकः।
अनर्थज्ञः अल्पकण्ठश्च षडैते पाठकाधमाः॥

One who chants in a sing-song fashion (गीती), who chants fast (शीघ्री), who nods his head up and down without actually raising or lowering the pitch (शिरःकंपी), who reads from a book (लिखितपाठकः), who chants without knowing the meaning (अनर्थज्ञः), and who chants in a feeble voice (अल्पकण्ठः), are considered

incorrect (*lowest ! अधमः*).

They believed that altering the pitch even (without any change in words and duration), might lead to diametrically opposite effects, as related in the story of Vrtra who, instead of killing Indra, got killed by Indra by just a change in the intonation alone of the mantras chanted by Vrtra's father, Tvashta.

The rules of correct pronunciation and articulation of sounds are given in the *Vedanga*, known as **Seeksha**.

शिक्षां व्याख्यास्यामः। वर्णस्वरः। मात्रा बलं।
साम सन्तानः। इत्युक्त शिक्षाहायः॥

Seeksha deals with *varNa* (letters), *svara*: (pitch); [there are essentially three *svaras*, namely, *anudatta* (gravely accented or low pitched), *udatta* (high pitched or acutely accented), *svarita* (circumflexly accented)] *maatras* (duration – a prosodial unit of time); *balam* (strength or force of articulation); *saama* (uniformity); and *santaana*: (continuity) during recitation.

Our ancestors devised unique methods to protect and maintain the basic Veda mantras in its original form through various patterns and combinations of recitation. The basic mantra is called *vakya or samhita paatha* (वाक्य or संगित पाठ) which is a full sentence.

Splitting them word by word is known as *pada paatha* (पद पाठ), which gives the knowledge of each word to the student. Next is *krama paatha* (क्रम पाठ), where the first word of the mantra is added to the second, the second to the third and so on, until the whole mantra is completed. This method enables the student not only to know individual words but also how to combine words in recitation and the changes in *svara* that occur as a result of such combination. Both *Pada* and *Krama* methods of chanting retain the natural order of words of the *samhita paatha* and so, are known as *prakrti* (प्रकृति) or natural. For example, if we take sentence consisting of six words a-b-c-d-e-f, in *samhita paatha*, it will be chanted as six separate words a, b, c, d, e and f in *pada paatha* will be recited as a-b, b-c, c-d, d-e, and e-f in *krama paatha*. Actually, a reciter proficient in chanting in the *krama* format is honored as a *kramavit* (क्रमवित्)!

Samhita paatha

ओषधयः सं व्रदन्ते सोमेन सह राज्ञी ।

Pada paatha

ओषधयः। सं। वदन्ते। सोमेन। सह। राज्ञी॥

Krama paatha

ओषधयः सं। सं वदन्ते। वदन्ते सोमेन ।
सोमेन सह। सह राज्ञी। राज्ञेति राज्ञी ॥

In addition, they devised eight other combinations which do not follow the natural order, and are known as *vikriti* (विकृति) or artificial order. The *vikritis* are given in the following verse:

जटा माला शिखा रेखा ध्वजो दण्डो रथो नः।
इत्यष्टा विकृतयः प्रोक्ताः क्रमपूर्वा महर्षिभिः

They are, *jataa*, *maalaa*, *sikhaa*, *rekhaa*, *dhwaja*, *danda*, *ratha* and *ghana*. Among these only *jataa* and *ghana* are prevalent (or, only !) practices in the Krishna Yajur Veda which is mostly predominant in the South. In Sukla Yajur Veda, which is mostly predominant in Banaras and in the North, (the Madhyandina and Kanva schools) all the eight *vikritis* were practiced. However, today, there may not be any scholars at all who might know all these *vikritis*

Jataa (braid) paatha

In the above example, the six words in the line, when chanted in the *jataa* format becomes, a-b-b-a-a-b; b-c-c-b-b-c; c-d-d-c-c-d; d-e-e-d-d-e; e-f-f-e-e-f and so on. As can be seen, the forward-reverse-forward arrangement of words resemble the way ladies braid their hair, and so this practice of chanting is termed *jataa*!

ओषधयः सं सं ओषधयः ओषधयः सम् ।
सं वदन्ते वदन्ते सं सं वदन्ते ।
वदन्ते सोमेन सोमेन वदन्ते वदन्ते सोमेन ।
सोमेन सह सह सोमेन सोमेन सह ।
सह राज्ञा राज्ञी सह सह राज्ञी ।
राज्ञेति राज्ञी ॥

Maalaa sikhaa, rekhaa, dhwaja, danda, and ratha paathas

Two types of *maalaa* (garland) exist: a) *krama maalaa* and b)

pushpa maalaa. This is simialr to krama paatha in that two-word units with the characteristic overlapping are the foundation. *sikhaa* (top knot) is similar to *jataa* except that, instead of two words being repeated forwards and backwards, three words are linked. Recitations in *rekhaa* (row), *dhwaja* (flag), *dand* (staff), and *ratha* (chariot) are more complex and the reader can refer to Wayne Howard [2] for details. Mention can be made here that there are three of *ratha*, namely, *dvipaada* (two wheels), *tripaada* (three wheels) and *catuspaada* (4 wheels). Each wheel corresponds to a quarter verse (*paada*) of the text. Among these, *dvipaada catuspaada* varieties are the *ratha* types most widely cultivated today.

Ghana (bell) paatha

This is one of the most popular format of recitations and requires years of learning and practice by the student. A scholar proficient in recitation in this format is honored as a *ghana paathi*

(घन पाठी). Here the arrangement of words take the shape of a bell.

For example, the group of words a-b-c-d-e-f mentioned earlier, when chanted in the *ghana* format will be, a-b-b-a-a-b-c-c-b-a-a-b-c; b-c-c-b-b-c-d-d-c-b-b-d; and so on.

The earliar illustration of six words, when written in ghana format will appear as follows:

ओषधयः सं सं ओषधयः ओषधयः सं वदन्ते
 वदन्ते सं ओषधयः ओषधयः सं वदन्ते ।
 सं वदन्ते वदन्ते सं सं वदन्ते सोमेन
 सोमेन वदन्ते सं सं वदन्ते सोमेन ।
 वदन्ते सोमेन सोमेन वदन्ते वदन्ते सोमेन सह
 सह सोमेन वदन्ते वदन्ते सोमेन सह ।
 सोमेन सह सह सोमेन सोमेन सह राज्ञी
 सह राज्ञा राज्ञी सह सह राज्ञी ।
 राज्ञेति राज्ञी ॥

Please note that, what was originally six words in the *samhita*, evolve in to about sixty words in the *ghana* format – a ten fold increase in this case – that gives an idea of how complex the chanting can become with larger sections of the mantras !! We can now appreciate the rigor a *ghana pathi* has to go through in his education to learn, by heart, the thousands of mantras, to be able to recite in *ghana* format.

Our Rishis devised all these elaborate and complicated system of chanting in order to preserve the purity of the sound, word, pronunciation, intonation, pitch and sound combination of the veda mantras which are the foundation for our *sanaatana dharma* itself. Also, repetition of words in many ways, the correct tally of words was also maintained which ensured the purity. They also believed that higher merits (*punya*) accompany greater complexities in chanting – for example, a ghana recitation is several orders higher in merit than *jataa* recitation, which is higher in merit than *krama* recitation and so on.

Wayne Howard [2] noted in the preface of his book, "Vedic Recitation in Varanasi", "The four Vedas (Rg, Yajur, Sama and Atharva) are not "books" in the usual sense, though within the past hundred years each veda has appeared in several printed editions. They are comprised rather of tonally accented verses and hypnotic, abstruse melodies whose proper realizations demand oral instead of visual transmission. They are robbed of their essence when transferred to paper, for without the human element the innumerable nuances and fine intonations – inseparable and necessary components of all four compilations - are lost completely. The ultimate authority in Vedic matters is never the printed page but rather the few members ... who are today keeping the centuries-old traditions alive."

It is unfortunate that there is very little subscription to this education these days and it is an important duty of all of us to ensure that this education is encouraged and adequate support is given to promote and propagate it.

References

1. "The Vedas", Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1988.
2. "Veda Recitation in Varanasi", Wayne Howard, Motilal Banarasi Dass, Delhi 1986.

- *Dr. S. Yegnasubramanian (President, SVBF) is a scientist at Bell Labs., NJ. He has been teaching vedic recitation & vedanta for several years.*

Feature Article of Next Issue

The Vedangas

(Organs of the Vedas)

