

1.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOUND- STRUCTURE OF VEDIC VERSE

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Abstract: This article shows that Hinduism has its own provision for the recitation of its vedic verses. It examines the prescribed sound-structure for vedic verses on the basis of the concerned authentic book named Yagyavalkyashikshya and tries to compare these verses with poem and folk songs, which leads to an understanding that vedic verses have specific musical virtue that inspires both the reciter as well as the listeners to culture their minds and behavior.

1. Introduction

Hinduism has always been concerned with the welfare of all human beings. This nobility of thought in Hinduism gets finely expressed in the well-known phrases like “*satyamshivamsundaram*” (the true, the good and the beautiful), “*basudhaivakutumbakam*” (The Earth as one family), “*sarbebhavantusukhina*” (May all humans be happy), and so on. Being inspired with such sense of generosity, our ancient saints and sages released *vedic* verses with special sound waves so that they would further inspire human beings to be generous and sensitive to each other and to their environment.

The term *veda* is from Sanskrit root form *vid* that refers to knowledge. Defining the term, Swami Satyadev releases these words in his *Veda-Sara-Samuchchaya*: “*Veda* is what leads to the knowledge of religion and the Universal Soul”(1). He believes that the knowledge of religion and the Great Soul is not possible only through the five senses as they lie beyond these senses. What helps us approach the knowledge beyond the world of five senses is *Veda*. Of course, the religion that *Veda* refers to is the religion of humanity. In these *vedic* verses we find good and benevolent wishes for all human beings.(Shastri 22).

2. Importance of Hindu Rituals

A general assumption of Hindu religion is that all humans are born as *Shudra* who need to be cultured through various kinds of rituals. Such cultural process is to ensure the refinement of their body as well as thought and sound. It is also assumed that the cultivation of thought naturally results in the refinement of voice or sound. Among many rituals, the notable one is the ritual for a child’s schooling. It is performed when a child becomes five years old. In this ceremony the child’s father or a teacher or any respected person produces ‘*shree*’ ‘*om*’ and ‘*jayavagishworayanama*’ on a wooden board (Baral 43). After his/her schooling of *gurukul* system, he/she is expected to be a polite person respectful to the elders and kind and loving to the youngsters. Most important thing that he/she gains through this schooling is the strength of character which proves them to be the persons as solution, not as the problems, to their societies. One of the important effects of their education on them can be well observed in their beauty of voice: simple, soft, well-settled and polite.

Beauty of voice is an important sign of beauty of a person’s inner personality which is what Hinduism expects from its *gurukul* system. There are so many factors of *gurukul* education that contribute to the formation of this kind of character. However, my purpose here is not to analyse those factors but to emphasize the significance of the sound-structure prescribed for the pronunciation of *vedic* verse and see how it helps to culture an individual and the society as a whole.

3. Rationale for the Prescribed Sound of Vedic Verse

The ancient sage Yagyavalkyawas very much aware of how *vedic* verses were to be pronounced and recited so that it would ennoble the mind of the reciting person as well as that of the listeners. In this regard, he gives much importance to the personality and role of the reciter. He believes that those

people who are kind, polite and benevolent are capable of pronouncing the syllables of *vedic* verses appropriately (Jha 28). The recitation of these syllables should be free from the fourteen faults that Yagyavalkya has indicated in *Yagyavalkyashiksha*:

Shankitambheetamuddhrishtamabyaktamanunasikam
Kakaswarammoordighnagatamtathasthanavivarjitam
Viswaramvirasamchaivavishlishtamvishamahatam
Vyakulamtalaheenam cha pathadoshashchaturdasha

According to the instruction mentioned in the verse above, the pronunciation of *vedic* verse must be free from the clouds of doubt, fear and anger. The other faults of the recitation to be free from are: to produce indistinct sound; to pronounce non-nasal sound through the nose; to recite the verse as the crow sound; to express the incomplete words with loud sound; to pronounce the letter in their displaced positions; to recite the verse without correct scales; to produce the verse without euphonious tones; to express the characters stretched in wrong positions; to pronounce the short sounds as the long ones or vice versa; to produce the letters with opposite sounds; and to recite the verse without the intended beats. In short, correct pronunciation has a good and useful effect on the reciters and their society and can achieve the four ends of life: *dharmā, artha, kama, mokshya*. But a single slip in pronunciation may result in harm (ibid 28).

4. Categorizing Sounds Used in Vedic Verses

Gandharvaveda, the branch of *Samaveda*, has put sound into seven categories. They are *Shadja, rishabha, gandhara, madhyama, panchama, dhaivata* and *nishada*. However, *the Yajurveda* has its own system of classifying sounds. It has put the above mentioned seven sounds into three categories: *udatta, anudatta*, and *swarita*. *Udatta* includes *nishada* and *gandhara*; *anudatta* consists of *rishabha* and *dhaivata*; and *swarita* has the remaining three: *shadja, madhyama* and *panchama* (ibid 9). *Udatta* points to the rising sound; *anudatta* indicates the falling sound; and *swarita* suggests equilibrium, the state of balance (ibid 4). Pronouncing the given syllables of *vedic* verses cannot go successfully without paying attention to the prescribed posture of hand. Yagyavalkya believes that the hand-posture that goes simultaneously with pronunciation of the verse helps the reciter achieve the intended effect unfailingly. Thus, the recitation of the *vedic* verses is to be accomplished on the basis of some principles set by the ancient sages who wanted to encourage the followers to achieve what they are supposed to as human beings.

5. Anchoring *vani* to *Omkar*

What comes through our mouth in the form of what we call 'speech' (*vani*) is deeply connected to something that is beyond the world of syllables. According to Khaptadbaba, what is spoken through our mouth is called *vaikharivani*. Its root is fixed to *madhyamavani*, which is further anchored to the root of *pashyantiorpragyabeyond* which lies *paravani, the chaitanyatmakturiyavani* (the Universal Soul or Spirit). Khaptad baba believes that this *paravaniomkar* exists in all beings. Hence to recite a *vedic* verse is to connect oneself with the *Omkar* Sound (270-71).

In relation to the *chhanda* (metre) of *vedic* verses, *Chhandogyopanishad* argues that gods produced *mantra* with *chhanda* (metre) to save themselves from the fear of death (70). When they were not safe by the metre, they surrender themselves to the sound of *omkar*, the sound waves of *vedas*, the waves of eternal power to save themselves from death.

6. Specificity of the Sound-Structure of Vedic Verse

Vedic verses are singable and the way they are recited shows specific sound-structure. The recitation of all verses begins with the pronunciation of "Hari" and "Om", anchoring the mind of the reciter to the universal soul. Having established "Hari" in the mind, the reciter is to feel himself or herself well-disciplined and organized to move ahead with the balanced and controlled steps of pronunciation of the verses. The reciter is to follow the pattern of sound: rising (*udatta*), falling (*anudatta*) and equilibrium (*swarita*). Application of the rule for pronouncing the *vedic* verses is made perfect and unmistakable by the patterns of hand-posture. As a rule, short sounds are pronounced fast and long sounds naturally go slowly.

The reciter produces most of the *mantras* of *veda* giving time just for maintaining their normal discipline and stress-pattern. However, the sound-structure in *Samaveda* has its own specific feature. The level of musicality is higher in *Samaveda* than in other *Vedas*. Here the reciter is to produce *mantras* with the stretching of sounds and their musicality. The concentration of the reciter is so deep that he/she seems to be detached from the immediate worldly concerns. In *Samaveda*, *mantras* flow and slide slowly and steadily from the pacific and meditative mood of the reciter. In this slow and steady movement, even the small cell of the sound gets a chance to stretch and vibrate sufficiently. While singing the verses of *Samaveda*, the voice of the reciter makes its way into the deepest layer of human hearts and is capable of cleansing them and thus preparing them to be able to connect with what Hinduism calls universal soul. It is because of this distinctive virtue of *Samaveda* that Krishna claims it to be Himself in *Geeta*:

*VedanamSamavedosmidevanamasmivasava
Indriyanammanashchasmibhootanamasmichetana(10/22)*

The above couplet clearly suggests that among the *vedas*, *Samaveda* is Krishna Himself and He is the life-energy in all living beings. Acharya Vedanta Tirtha has held the idea more strongly and argues that *Samaveda* is the union of the trinity: living beings, the universe and the supreme spirits (5). These ideas and references to *Samaveda* have suggested the reason why it has specific sound virtues and structure. In other words, it is capable of connecting human beings to the ultimate source of their life.

7. Difference between a Poem and a Vedic Verse

Regarding *vedic* verses, Oso observes that *richa* is what releases in the state of meditation (72). *Vedic* verse is different from a poet's creation in the sense that they release from different sources. *Vedic* verse comes from sages who are supposed to be alive with the power of the Universal Soul. The pleasant waves produced by the united being of the sages and the Universal Soul are what Oso calls *richa* (*vedi* verse). However, a poem is the creation of an individual human being. It feels lifeless in comparison to *vedic* verse, which is always alive with the eternal power.

8. Vedic Verses and Folk Songs

Vedic verses and folk songs can be discussed together to catch their similarities and differences. Most of the major features of folk songs are perceptible in *vedic* verses too. One of them is aural transmission. As we know that folk songs and *vedic* verses came into existence long before the invention of printing press, they had to exist and move through aural transmitting system. In other words, *vedic* verses were produced to be recited and folk songs were created to be sung. The qualities of human voice enable people to express and experience the subtle rhythms of human life. Of course, the oral-aural transmitting system has made *vedic* verses and folk songs lively, energetic, penetrating and experienceable.

Collectivity is another important feature of *vedic* verses that folk song shares too. Both folk songs and *vedic* verses germinated and grew in communities. *Vedic* verses were produced to hold the whole human society to maintain the collective spirit. One of such verses of *Rigveda* is worth notable here:

Sam gachchhadhwamsamvadadhvamsamvomanamsijanatanam

Deva bhagam yathapoorbesamjananaupasate

Oh, men! Just as your forefathers worshipped the same ultimate reality,

You'd better hold the truth together with collective mind and voice. (qtd in Gurung 33)

In addition to this, there are many other verses of *Vedas* that point to collective or plural form of noun and are intended to inspire human beings to hold the sense of collectiveness. Prashrit is well aware of the pervasiveness of such idea in *Vedas*, "*Vedic* culture taught human beings of different generations through collective singing of the lived experiences of life in the form of *mantra*" (23).

Sense of collectivity is equally permeating in folk song. Folk song sprouts and grows in folk life and it represents folk experiences and events. There are so many group songs and group dances in different communities. Some of them appear in ritual contexts and the rest ones go either on festive occasions or in practical situations. In other words, they are the wealth of people produced by themselves and concerned with their lives (Upadhyaya 274).

As in folk songs, collective spirit of human beings is reflected in *Vedas* not only through the ideas and thoughts concerned with whole human beings but also by how they are expressed. In several religious or ritual ceremonies, we find a group of people reciting *vedic* verses simultaneously. The sense of collectivity and the spirit of whole humanity can be expressed and experienced more effectively when a group of people recite the *vedic* verses simultaneously. Of course, collective voice produces a kind of gravitation of sound with which human beings can be more active and organized to move towards the ultimate power and beauty of humanity.

Although *vedic* verses and folk songs sound similar with their common virtues of orality and collectivity, they remain distinct from each other because of their specific qualities. Folk song feels different by its specific virtues of spontaneity, immediacy of emotions and easy flow of liberal tunes. Folk song springs out of the hearts of people. It expresses the warmth of life and human emotions like pain and delight, sorrow and happiness, expectations and frustrations, beliefs and values. The tunes of folk songs have certain track but there is always the possibility of violation of it because folk song tends to overflow with powerful feelings, which naturally affects its tunes. *Vedic* verses, on the other hand, maintain their distinction by Apollonian strength. They are always connected with controlled and reasonable aspects of human mind. Here Dionysiac forces get subsided, giving way to the controlling strength of reason.

9. Conclusion:

In this way, we have seen that *vedic* verses are not the result of an individual emotional sensation that is produced for the superficial entertainment. They are deliberately designed sets of lines. While reciting them, the reciter is to feel himself/herself as the part of recitation itself, following the sound pattern unflinching, which leads to the wider vision and ideas of benevolence, generosity and the sense of gratefulness to the ultimate power on which his/her life constantly and pleasantly rests, floats, gets refined and cultured. However, at present the reciters are not sincerely following the instructions indicated by Yagyavalkya when they are given the opportunity to do so in religious and ritual ceremonies. To maintain the appropriate recitation of *vedic* verse, it is necessary to encourage Sanskrit education in Nepal and increase the sincere recitation practices in the given ceremonies. Of course, we can restructure our country by utilizing the inherent power of *vedic* verses.

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