

Role of Sound in Sanatana Dharma (Vedic Hinduism)

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Introduction

Sound that we hear is basically vibrations produced by a source, which gets transmitted as waves through air and enters into our ears and then reaches our brain to be perceived as sound. The vibrations can be produced by various innumerable sources such as human voice, nature in various aspects such as animals, five elements, musical instruments, mechanical system, etc. There are innumerable types of sounds that are perceived by humans in the general audio frequency range of 20 cycles per sec to 20000 cycles per sec. Also there are vibrations produced below and above this audio frequency range called infrasound and ultrasound respectively. The science of acoustics deals with all types of sound production. In reference to human perception from both psychological and physiological perspectives, sound can be broadly classified as desirable and undesirable. The undesirable and unwanted sound is called as noise. There has been extensive modern scientific research to clearly show that the noise is detrimental to both physiological and psychological well being of humans.

Sound has also received importance in Sanatana Dharma (Vedic Hinduism). Vedas are the foundational reference literature of Vedic Hinduism. Vedas refers to a very large body of knowledge that deals with physical, psychological and spiritual aspects of life and cosmos. The word Veda etymologically relate to the verbal root "Vid" meaning "to know". However it is interesting to note that Vedas are also termed as "Shruti" meaning "Heard". This means that the knowledge was heard in the form of mantras by the rishis. A rishi is the one who has realized the Supreme Being through intense spiritual austerities and meditation, and, through the blessings of the Supreme Being, has also obtained deep insight into life and Cosmos. A rishi who has heard the mantras in deep states of meditation is also referred as "mantra drishtaara" meaning "the seer of mantras". A mantra is an utterance with intonation, which carries spiritual knowledge and power and is described as "mananaat traananaat chaiva", which means "by repetition and contemplation the chanter is protected". The rishis chant the mantras as heard by them so that the mantras are orally transmitted with sound precision from them to their disciples in an unbroken process of teaching and learning. The characteristics of sound play a major role in the precise chanting and oral transmission of Veda mantras. The Vedas and Vedic literature place major emphasis on the role of sound in life. It is because sound plays

critical role in several important aspects such as spiritual development, Vedic chants, music, bhajans, speech and literature.

Spiritual Development

The Sanskrit words namely Naada and Shabda cannot be fully translated as sound because sound only refers partially to elaborate description of Naada and Shabda in the Vedas and Vedic scriptures. Also two types of Naada are described namely Anaahata and Aahata. The Anaahata Naada, (experienced in deepest states of yoga) refers to the self-existing unproduced vibrations having no cause, whereas the Aahata Naada refers to the one, which is produced from a source of vibration. Vedas say that Naada has four stages namely Para, Pashyanti, Madhyamaa and Vaikhari. The first three stages are only perceptible to yogis. In reference to human beings, Vaikhari refers to the fully manifest form of sound (speech), which is heard by the listeners. The Madhyamaa stage is within and getting crystallized. The Pashyanti is deeper in the visionary state. The Para is the causal state. Thus it is seen that any sound producing process has these four stages. Generally the Naada refers to the musical world and Shabda refers to the Vedas and also a word.

The scriptures also use the terms Naada Bramhan and Shabda Bramhan. The Amrita Bindu Upanishat proclaims that, *“There are two Bramhans to be realized, Shabda and Param Bramhans; the one who has realized and is well versed in Shabda Bramhan will realize Param Bramhan”*. Also Sri Lakshmana Deshikendra in his Sharada Tilaka Tantra says, *“In my view, consciousness of all beings is Shabda Bramhan”*. Sri Saranga Deva says in his musical treatise Sangeeta Ratnakara, *“we worship Naada Bramhan, that incomparable Bliss, which is intrinsic in all the creatures as consciousness and is manifest in the phenomenon of this Universe”*. In the Upanishads, the indwelling and all-pervading Pranava (OM) is also referred as Shabda Bramhan. Thus we see that a focus on sound, which corresponds to the stage of Vaikhari, leads us in the inner spiritual development. Sri Adi Shankaracharya in his Yoga Taaraavali says, *“There are innumerable approaches to attain spiritual development and Bliss. However its our view that the approach through focus on Naada is the most effective”*. He also says, *“The one who desires to achieve excellence in yoga should concentrate attentively on Naada by overcoming distractions”*. Thus anyone seriously interested in inner spiritual development can use the approach of listening to sound. It is important that the sound listened to should lead the person to the spiritual objective. Many of the deities have musical instruments in their hands, which represent the synthesis of yoga and naada. The divine music flowing from Lord Krishna’s flute has a yogic effect on the listeners. Goddess Saraswati has instrument Veena in her hands

through which the divine music is played and also She has Akshamala (like rosary) that represents the sounds of the Akshara (Sanskrit alphabets) making the words and speech. She is also known as Goddess of Speech (Vagdevi). Lord Nataraja has the drum, the sounds of which represent the sounds of Sanskrit alphabets in seed forms, which are referred by the great Sanskrit grammarian Maharishi Panini.

Vedic Chanting

Sound plays a critical role in Vedic chanting because it is orally transmitted from the teacher to the student. There are strict phonetic guidelines. Naradeeya Sheekshaa, a treatise on phonetics says, *“If the Vedic text (chanting) employed in the sacrifice is defective in the accent (pitch) or sounds, or used for the performance of wrong rites, it does not yield the correct meaning and the desired results”*. The six parameters that control the precision in pronunciation, according to a mantra in Taaittiriyanopanishat are: *“Varna (articulation of alphabets including production of hard aspiration or mahaa praana and soft aspiration or alpa praana), Svaras (tonal accents such as udaata, anudaatta, svarita, prachaya and Nighaata), Maatra (proper duration of pronunciation of each vowel and consonant), Balam (articulatory force of a syllable), Saama (continuity, proper speed and pleasantness), and Santaanaha (combination and juxtaposition of sounds)”*.

In addition to strictly following the phonetic guidelines, the chanter should avoid the specific undesirable characteristics and acquire the specific strong desirable characteristics. The undesirable characteristics are: *“singing (instead of chanting), high speed, oscillating the head, reading from the written script (instead from memory), not understanding the meaning of chants and weak or shrill voice quality”*. The six desirable characteristics are: *“pleasant and melodious chanting, full clarity in pronunciation, proper breaking of words, correctness of intonation, strength and steadiness in chanting and proper speed with continuity in chanting.”* Thus we see that knowledge about the proper production of sound is essential for Vedic chanting as it is transmitted from a teacher to a student. A teacher of Vedic chanting should ensure that the above sound qualities are not only given high importance but also fully met by the qualified students.

Music, Shlokas and Bhajans

It is well known that the origin of classical music is traced back to the Vedas. In addition to classical music, the recitation of shlokas, devotional songs, bhajans need sound quality in their practice in addition to sincerity and devotion. In particular the chants of Sama Veda are quite musical. The three svaras namely udaatta, anudaatta and

svarita are related to the seven notes of music, which are also termed as sapta-svaras, which are Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni and Sa. In Naaradeeya Sheekshaa, the correspondence between three svaras of Vedic chanting and seven svaras of music are given as: *“the sounds of the svaras Ni and Ga originate in udaatta, the sounds of svaras Ri and Dha originate in anudaatta and sounds of svaras Sa, Ma and Pa originate in svarita”*.

In addition, the seven svaras of music are related to the sounds from animals. The Naaradeeya Sheekshaa says, *“svara Sa is from a peacock, svara Ri is from a bull, svara Ga is from a goat, svara Ma is from a curlew, svara Pa is from a cuckoo, svara Dha is from a horse and svara Ni is from an elephant.”* In relation to the production of seven svaras from a singer, the Naaradeeya Sheekshaa says, *“Svara Sa originates in the throat, svara Ri originates in the head, svara Ga originates in the nose, svara Ma originates in the chest, svara Pa arises from chest, head and throat, svara Dha arises from forehead and svara Ni arises out of all joints”*. Thus the sounds of nature and the sounds produced through human body is related through music. Great saints like Tyaagaraja, Purandara Daasa, and Meerabai used music as a means for their spiritual fulfillment. In the words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru of Karnataka, India, *“Music should become the bridge that takes the listeners from the sensual level to the level of Atman”*.

It is important to note that a proper recitation of shlokas and bhajan singing depend on the quality of sound. In addition to the devotion, the clarity in pronunciation of various words with proper soft and hard aspiration is important. In particular when a group collectively recites shlokas and sings bhajans it is extremely important to maintain proper sound synchronization in terms of pronunciation and speed in addition to the devotion of the members of the group. When a group recites Vishnu Sahasranama or Lalita Sahasranama or any other similar shlokas, it is important the group is cognizant of the sound quality in terms of the pronunciation and speed.

Speech

The speech is one of most common activity of human beings. Saranga Deva in his Sangeeta Ratnakara says that, *“the alphabets have manifested from the Naada. The words are made up from alphabets and from the words speech come out. Worldly transactions are carried out through the speech, and thus, the world is dependent on Naada”*. In a similar way, in the words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru, *“just as from seed comes naturally sprout, branch, leaf, flower, unripe fruit and full fruit like wise starting from spiritual light as seed, the Naada, the Svara and Aksharas have developed into various aspects of knowledge”*. The four

stages of speech, which were referred earlier emphasizes that the normal speech that we hear is the fully manifested form namely Vaikhari. Thus sweet words, which are truthful, carry spirituality.

Saranga Deva in his treatise Sangeeta Ratnakara describes nicely the process of normal speech (or sound) production by human beings. He says that, *“A person impels the mind and the mind activates the internal power source in the body, which in turn stimulates the vital force. The vital force stationed around the root of the navel, rising upwards gradually through the heart, and the cerebrum and the cavity of the mouth as it (the vital force) passes through them to manifest as dhvani (sound)”*. Thus it is seen that a person uses his or her whole body in producing any form of sound namely speech, music, etc. The speech produced by a person also reflects his or her emotional state. Especially speech combined with anger does not produced good effect on both speaker as well as listener. Thus an understanding and proper articulation of speech and its relation to emotional state are emphasized for spiritual development.

Literature

The literature that is formed by prose, poems, plays, etc in any language becomes alive when it is properly vocalized with human speech. Every language has its own sound effect. A literary work is essentially a composition of words to express the inner feelings of the author. An author after experiencing the theme expresses it through the proper assembly of words. The choice of words especially poetic composition indicates the important role of shabda. A kavi (or poet) is referred to one who has realized the Supreme Being. The great poets such as Maharishi Valmiki, Maharishi Vyaasa, and Atmakavi Kalidasa have demonstrated the effect of shabda in their works. It is well known that the Sanskrit language has several unique effects of sound or shabda. In particular the poems in Sanskrit are easy to memorize due to the explicit sandhi (union of alphabets) effect, which produces new sounds. The large number of vowels and consonants including their combinations as basic sounds enable Sanskrit language to deal with many varied expressions. The metrical details in Sanskrit also bring the sound effect. Thus the infinitely large literature in various languages have been carried through generations by oral traditions not only because of their intrinsic values for life but also for the joy of sound they provide the listeners.

Concluding Remarks

This article has briefly presented the spiritual role of sound in various aspects such as Vedic chanting, music, bhajans, recitation of shlokas, plays, poems, speech etc. The poet Dandi, a well-known author in Sanskrit says that, *“if sound is removed from the world, then the world becomes dark”*. Sound carries information. It is for these reason sages of

Sanatana Dharma gave utmost importance to sound not only in spiritual development but also in day to day to life.

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