SIKSA AND PRATISAKHYA SOUND AND GESTURE-MANTRA AND MUDRA

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Abstract

The understanding which science has today, that vibration is at the heart of the whole of creation, was a certainty to people living thousands of years ago. It was the basis of scientific thought in the Rig Veda. Many are already familiar with the reference to speech and therefore hearing which can be found at I.164.45 in the Rig Veda and there are further examples of the reverence for speech at that time in Hymns X. 125 and X.7 1. A profound teaching evolved about the nature of sound and its relationship to life.

Early scientists repeatedly experimented and observed sound in different realms of experience with a persistence that cannot be ignored. Some of their findings are recorded in the Siksas and Pratisakhyas which belong to the different Vedic sakhas (recessions). These manuals lay down rules for the proper pronunciation, intonation and preservation of certain phonetic peculiarities pertaining to recitation.

The paper outlines briefly the general role of phonetic treatises before focusing in particular on some of the information contained within the Yajnavalkya Siksa and the Vajasaneyi Pratisakhya of the Sukla Yajur Veda tradition. The importance of the role of sound and gesture (mudra), to which this siksa and pratisakhya relate, is critically discussed.

The paper deals first with the question of sound and refers to that branch of science, which deals with human an anatomy, the physiology of the ear, and the neurological hierarchy, which relates different levels of hearing. It also examines the way in which science may explain the connection between gesture, movement and anatomy, as described in the Yajnavalkya Siksa.

The investigation of sound was perhaps the single most important impetus for study among the ancient seers and sages of India. These early scientists repeatedly experimented and observed sound in different realms of experience with a persistence that cannot be ignored.[1] The understanding which science has today, that vibration is at the heart of the whole of creation, was a certainty to people living thousands of years ago. It was the basis of scientific thought in the Ṛg Veda.[2] A profound teaching evolved about the nature of sound has its relationship to life. The śikṣā śāstra deals in a scientific way with how the different vibrations of letter and syllables, which arise in different part of the body, are revealed as sound.

The phonetic manuals known as śikṣās and prātiśākhyas - what are they?

First of all it is necessary to say that they represent on oral tradition. Before writing there was only a spoken language and this, it is said, was based on sounds meant for the well-being of mankind. A pratisakhya deals with the laws of sound, not the laws of writing of grammar. Writing represents the level of our consciousness and writing came because of forgetting the Veda. This was a sign a Kali Yuga.

Each Vedic tradition has its own associated śikṣā and prātiśākhya although some of the information may be found repeated in more than one of treatises (śāstras). In this paper I am referring to the śikṣā and prātiśākhya of the Śukla Yajur Veda tradition, Mādhyandina branch unless stated otherwise, that is, the Yājñavalkya Śikṣa and the Vājasaneyī Prātiśākhya.

In a general sense the word 'śikṣā signifies the entire field of articulatory phonetics. These manuals belong to a collection of six ancillary disciplines known collectively as the "Limbs of the Vedas" (Vedāṅgas) consisting of phonetics, ritual, grammar, etymology, metrics and astronomy. We should remember that Sanskrit, and I am referring to the language of Vedic mantras, is essentially a musical' language including accent and intonation, and there are specific rules for this. Consequently, the Yājñavalkya Śikṣa given in sloka form, and the Vājasaneyī Prātiśākhya which is in sutra form, refers to the arrangement of accents of recitation, udātta, anudātta and svarita, and how they are represented by the system of mudras which accompany recitation.

The prātiśākhyas, which are more detailed and lengthier documents than the śikṣās, examine the special problems of word order, word separation, accent articulation, and similar matters pertaining to a particular school, recession or śākhā of the Veda with which it is associated and this includes the rules which apply to recitation in padapāṭhaḥ and saṁhitā-pāṭhaḥ. While there may at one time have been as many prātiśākhyas as there were individual schools of the Vedas only six have survived. In contrast, about 65 śikṣās still exist.[3] The relative status of the two types of phonetic manual is clear. It is said that if the śikṣā and the prātiśākhya are found at variance, the śikṣā is said to be the less authoritative.

Having given a very brief description of the roles of śikṣās and prātiśākhyas some aspects of their relevance to contemporary science is discussed.

Currently, it has been said recently, by more than one authority on the subject, that as many as 95-98% of vedins learn to recite the mantras without understanding the meaning of the hymns. Of the remaining 3-5% there are those who have concentrated on the meaning alone and there are those who have combined an understanding of both sound and meaning.

But why is the word of sound and gesture, of which the śikṣā and prātiśākhya relate, so important?

We deal first with the question of sound and to answer this question we have to turn to that branch of science which deals with human anatomy. I am referring here to the physiology of the physical organ of hearing, the ear.

Why, then is the ear and its capacity for hearing so important? Why was it a special study for those living thousands of years ago?

It is the opinion of at least one 20th century physician and physiologist that the ear's primary function is to charge the neocortex of the brain and thereby the entire nervous system. Sound is nutrient; sound waves 'digested' by the ear provide electrical impulses that charge the brain. This scientist spent most of the life redefining the ear's extraordinary significance in relation to the voice.[4]

Contemporary science is well-aware that human hearing only responds to a fraction of the available range of vibrations in the physical realm. Ancient wisdom was well-aware that there are different levels of hearing, much finer levels of audition. This has been described in the Rg Veda. In other words, there is a hierarchy of hearing which in turn relates to a neurological hierarchy within the human species.

Physiologists inform us that the ear is the first organ of the human body to be formed in the womb (before birth); when the foetus is about eight weeks old it has all its major organs including the organ of hearing. By the ninth week the developing foetus is

already hearing, already listening. Those involved with the dying tell us that the faculty of hearing is the last of the senses to be relinquished. If it is the first and the last of our existence in the physical world, is it not of some special significance?[5]

Elsewhere we are told that the ear is the oldest organ in the evolution of the human species, that is related to a sense which is older than hearing, that of spatial different roles of the right and left ear.

Experimentation shows that the hearing process of the right ear comprises five main stages: right ear, auditory centre of the left brain, central laryngeal motor area of the left brain, speech muscles, and the passage from mouth to right ear. The left ear, however, comprises six stages as sound travels to the auditory centre of the right brain. The theory is that to reach the central laryngeal motor area, the speech centre, (which is situated in the left brain) a transfer of neurological impulse is necessary; this transfer constitutes an element of delay, which can be measured, and this delay varies, according to the individual, between 0 and 0.4 of a second.[6] Thus contemporary physiological research confirms different roles for the right and left ear-but this knowledge was well-known by the compilers of the Yājñavalkya Śikṣa.

In this śikṣa, a descriptive quality is given for the right ear. It is described as having the quality of 'going with speed', further explained as having the ability to 'catch the quality of the sound quickly', whereas the left ear is described as having the quality of 'storing the energy of sound'. It is for this reason mantras are often given by the initiator the right ear of the initiate. The Nāradīya Śikṣa, a phonetic manual relating to Sama Veda recitation, also specifies that the seven svaras (tones) should be sung into the right ear of the student as it is in this way that the treatises (śāstras) are to be passed on from the teachers (ācāryas) to the students (śiṣyas).[7]

Brain sciences have made huge advance, due to advances in technology, which allows brain mapping. There are two main ways: PET (Positive Emission Topography) and FMRI (Functional Magneto Resonance Imaging). In order to understand the complexity of musical structure and 'language' it is necessary to analyse many different brain activities. This kind of scientific work has increased greatly during the past ten years.

It has been known for a long time that the combination of words and music brings about the uniting of the two hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere speech centre often dominates while the right hemisphere is orientated towards emotion, intuition, spatial perception, inflection, rhythm. It follows, therefore, that speech, which is a left brain activity, is enhanced by gesture or mudra which has a right brain appeal. Brain activity is also enhanced by connecting rhythm to speech. Recent research has shown that linguistic processing is closely related to musical recognition. In that sense it can be said, from a scientific point of view, that music really is a language and that language can be music.

Now I will deal with the question of gesture or mudrās.

The instructions for the mudrās given in the Yājñavalkya Śikṣa are likely to have been based on a fundamental relationship between head, heart and hand.

In 1994 I had the opportunity to attend a lecture given by Dr. Brain Freeman, an embryologist from Sydney, Australia, at the 4th International Alexander Congress. He was primarily interested in the first nine weeks after the moment of

conception.....He explained how the embryo goes through a phase of being extremely curled, in a C-shape. The heart is growing right under the head. The face is resting on the heart. Through the pressure generated between the growing head and the growing heart, the face is sculpted. The brain is tethered into her heart in the most direct way, through the face. As the hands come into form, they too rest in contact with this head/heart centre.[8]

It seems that the concept underlying the relationship between recitation and gesture, between ear, mouth and hand, is to do with a fundamental unity.

Turning now to a contemporary scientific reference which stresses an aspect of the hand-eye connection, we find the an ear, nose and throat specialist, surgeon, psychologist and inventor in France, Dr Alfred Tomatis, who spent at least 50 years redefining the ear's special significance in relation to the voice made a discovery which is curiously pertinent to the instructions given in this ancient source of information, the Yājñavalkya Śikṣa:

We advise the child when he leaves us to continue reading at home every day, in a loud, clear voice..... It is not only those who suffer, or have suffered, from dyslexia who should do this, but the entire population, adults as well as children, those able to juggle with words as much as those who are intimidated by words. Reading aloud half an hour daily seems to me the minimum to be prescribed. Besides its deep though not always visible benefits this method offer an advantage that may be immediately appreciated: *it ensures a most effective storage of information* [my italics]. I often repeat to my clients that what has been learned in this way is never forgotten.....

A child who learn his lessons by repeating them aloud assimilates them-more slowly, yes, but also much more securely and lastingly. The benefit will be still greater if he takes care-and this is what we ask our young clients to do-to speak towards the right hand and particularly the area of the skin between strengthened and this is always favourable to self-affirmation and self-realization.[9]

I have seen this process at work with young boys learning to recite the Vedas in SYN using the mudrās of the Mādhyandina style here in Varanasi. However, it is likely that some of this intelligence is becoming lost from understanding among those who teach the Vedic tradition. The neurological intelligence which underlines this very old set of instructions should not be underestimated.

When asked why the instructions in the manual are so specific, it was explained that the mudrās are the formulas for movement and sound together and these movements activate the energies of the inner or subtle body.[10] They activate the nāḍīs and the area elsewhere referred to as the ājñā cakra or 'third eye' situated deep within the core of the brain. If the grammar changes, the accent will change and consequently the mudrā or gesture will change. It is an interaction of three components which affects the nervous system and the subtle body. It is important to realize that this is a system of sound and movement which preceded yoga, dance and other disciplines. In the Yājñavalkya Śikṣa therefore, there exists a very ancient and scientific system for the co-ordination of sound and movement.

Besides the subject of mudrās there are other important topics for detailed examination such as the pronunciation of letters and words and the use of accents or intonations. The subjects of pronunciation and very particular qualities of sound which are

essential to proper recitation of the Vedas, which do not occur in classical Sanskrit and which are dealt with in such detail in the prātiśākhyas, have not been touched upon in this paper.

In summary, the three accounts of recitation, representing a 'Law of Three', especially when combined with the use of gestures (mudrās), can be seen as the basis of an important esoteric psychology for they not only represents a simple musical system but are a way of modulating energy and perception[11] The śikṣā and prātiśākhya mentioned specifically in this paper, as representative of the śikṣā and prātiśākhya tradition, describe how different components of recitation - words, accents and mudrās combine at different levels of refinement of bring about an energy-creating process of some considerable potential!

References:

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