Modes of Communication
in Ancient Indian Literature

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Preface:

It is very common that human beings speak to each other with the help of different languages. But in prehistoric times, mostly, he was communicated with symbols. There must have been many more limitations due to those symbols. Just as, the discovery of fire is a milestone in the history of a human civilization, the same purpose might have been served by the language. In a way, Language is a life-long partner of a human being. It is well pointed out in the book "Modern Rhetoric", as, 'man may be called the animal with language - the symbol making animal' (1). Language is a symbol, but it has wider sphere than the prehistoric symbols. Because in those times man lived mainly with the support of gross weapons. Gradually the attitude changed & thought became powerful. Now man was called a rational animal. Really speaking, the weapons are still there, but they are more powerful in the subtle form. It can be explained in this way the weapons like the atom bomb etc. have a minute form, but they are most powerful & ferocious, so is the case with language, it is also a weapon, with changed form & so, most powerful. This powerful nature of language, goes without saying. Now one cannot think of a state without a language. If there is no language, there won't be any thought - process, & if so, there won't be any communication for a common man, in a way, then life will be in danger. So the language has got a key role to play in human life. It became as if a second nature of a human being. So a man is known by the language he speaks. It has engrossed whole of human life. Previously man used language, but after some times it got the status of science and language became the science of communication. Now a days also, the language can be split in two ways; one, the language for common usage, & two, the
language for communication with specific purpose. Such language was in usage, many centuries before Christ. The science of communication is very recently come up, in comparison with the language. But then what was the status of language at that time? was it used to communicate something or people were unaware of communication? The Literature, which is representative of that times has world-wide appeal & it is imperishable one. So the question arises, what makes it imperishable? Is it the language which was so powerful? Then the question comes, “what is a language?” Is it mere words or is it a particular construction? Here comes the science of communication. In a most simple way, construction with specific purpose is a science of communication. The present paper aims at understanding the ancient literature on the basis of this modern technique. That will be convenient to modern man, because he is conversant with the modern tools, such as science of communication etc.

**Ancient Indian Literature :**

Available ancient Indian literature starts with the Vedas. This is the oldest literature in the world. When one speaks of the Vedic Literature, he is concerned with all the branches i.e. the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Āranyakas & Upaniṣads. Except some portion of Yajurveda, all other Vedas i.e. Rgveda, Sāmaveda, Atharvaveda, including some portion of Yajurveda, are in the poetic form. Brāhmaṇas are in the prose form. Āranyakas & Upaniṣads are in mixed form. Out of this Vedic Literature, the Upaniṣads are studied widely for the simple reason, that these are philosophical texts, which means they are produced with specific intention. They communicate something. There is no doubt that they are there before the science of communication came into existence. Surprisingly, one finds these techniques in the older literature like Upaniṣads. So it is very interesting to note this resemblance between the philosophical texts & science. But before that it is essential to understand the general outline of these philosophical texts.
The Upanisads:

The Upaniṣads are also known as Vedānta which means, the last portion of the Vedas. Here ends the Vedic Literature. The word Upaniṣad signifies multiple meanings. It has different connotations as Ādi Śankarācārya has rightly pointed out in the commentary on ‘Kathopaniṣad.’ He has given three different meanings on the basis of the root sad. They are namely Viśāraṇa i.e. killing the nescience (avidyā), gati i.e. leading towards the highest Reality (Brahman) & avasādana i.e. loosening the chain of stay in the womb; birth, oldage etc. (Garbhavasājanma-jarādi). Fourth meaning he has given, says the word Upaniṣad is used in the secondary sense i.e. the text of Upaniṣad is (2) also called as Upaniṣad, without using the word ‘text’. Etymologically, the word Upaniṣad means to sit near. Of course, it is sitting near the teacher (Guru) for sacred knowledge. As all know, there are 10 principle Upaniṣads, having different names, but same goal.

Basically three principles are discussed in there Upaniṣads viz. - the individual (jīva), the world (jagat) & the highest reality (Jaganniyantā). According to the Upaniṣads the highest reality is of two types i.e. having some qualities (saguna) (4) & devoid of such qualities (nirguna) (5). The individual is a part & parcel of that highest reality (6), and the world comes forth from that highest reality as, the hair come from the living being (7). It seems that to explain these principles, Upaniṣads have adopted some methods which are very similar to present science of communication.

Modes of Communication:

Language is an instrument for discriminating & expressing shades of feelings. When it is used in a deeper sense, it gets the form of a discourse. The discourse is of four kinds viz. exposition, argument, description & narration (8). In an exposition, the intension is to explain something. An argument tries to make somebody change his mind. A description makes reader as vividly aware as possible. It gives him the feel of things described, and a narration presents an event to the reader as what & how it happened (9). Nobody remains away from
using the language, but when it is scientifically explained, it goes to the
status of a science.

**The Upaniṣads & modes of Communication:**

It's really amazing that the Upaniṣadic seers have used the modern
techniques without naming them, & so, many a times this science of
communication is treated as something new. It seems that its new in
its presentation. Now it will be explored on the basis of Upaniṣadic
discourses.

Exposition is one of the types of communication. It informs some-
ting to the reader. Upaniṣads, while explaining the nature of Brahman,
have used this method, e.g. Isopaniṣad says that, that self-luminous,
invisible soul is within & outside of everything. He is unborn, devoid of
vital breath & mind, white, & beyond that highest imperishable entity.

(10) The highest reality or Brahman is the only entity that is to be
experienced.

According to the Upaniṣadic seers when somebody approaches
that highest reality, he doesn’t return. So naturally, this highest reality
must be thoroughly known. But it is beyond description. It should be
experienced & not verbally understood. So the language changes,
seers have tried to explain it. But at times they have used comparison
& contrast, which comes under the sphere of exposition. Kenopaniṣat
explains it as one who thinks that he has not understood it, he has
understood it & one who thinks that he has understood it, he has not

(11). This is rather a clumsy construction. One may apparently think
it as useless, but the hidden meaning is very much important. It
conveys the idea that one who realises the highest reality, experiences
one’s own limitations, & so, says that I have not understood it. On the
other hand, one who has really not understood it, has no idea
regarding that experience & so unknowingly says that I have
understood it. All this explanation is intended in such a small line. So
this is a mode of exposition, which is aptly found here. One can gather
approximately 13 references, which speak of exposition (12).
Argument is another type of mode of communication. It is intended to change the mind of others. Because of father’s suggestion Naciketa went to Yama the destroyer of all beings. Yama was not at home. Naciketa stayed there for three nights. Yama came back, saw a guest, waiting for him for three nights, became compassionate & gave three boons to Naciketa. Naciketa asked for father’s mental peace, from first boon. Agnivyā by the second & spiritual knowledge from the third one. Yama, without any hesitation, satisfied him with two boons, however, regarding the third, there is a good deal of argumentation. When Naciketa asked for this boon, Yama held so many temptations before him. Yama said, “I’ll allow you sons, grand-sons having hundred years of life, elephants, horses, gold, land as much you want and live as many years you wish” (13). Next two - three ślokas step-by-step go for high temptation. Yama said, “you ask for desires which are next to impossible for this world. I’ll provide you the cellesant ladies with musical instruments & chariots (14). He tried his level best to change Naciketa’s mind. But Naciketa was very firm. He proclaimed, “Oh ! destroyer, these unsteady enjoyments kill the lustre of the sense organs. So all your vehicals, your songs & dancing should be good for you only” (15). He explained the perishable nature of a human life, exactly in the reverse order in which Yama described & ultimately came to the conclusion that Naciketa is not at all interested in any other boon, except this one, which is entered in secret. (16).

This is a proper & an unique example of argument. Both, Yama & Naciketa were very firm on their own viewpoint. Both of them tried their level best to convince each other. But ultimately Naciketa’s ardent desire for spiritual knowledge conquered Yama & he gave all his knowledge to Naciketa, without any reservation.

Description is the third kind of discourse. Here the intetion is to give the reader the feel of things described. In the Taittiriya Upaniṣat, there is a separate chapter on the (नीमासा) of ānanda. This ānanda is measured by hundred, i.e. when this whole earth is full of wealth that is one ānanda of a human being. Hundred such ānandas of a human being are one ānanda of a Deogandharva. Hundred such ānandas of
Deogandharva, are one ānanda of manes (pitras). One hundred ānandas of manes are, one ānanda of ājānaja deo. One hundred ānandas of ājānaja deo are, one ānanda of karmadeo. Hundred ānandas of Karmadeo are, one ānanda of deo. One hundred ānandas of deo are, one one ānanda of Indra. One hundred ānandas of Indra are, one ānanda of Brahmaṇspati. One hundred ānandas of Brahmaṇspati is, one ānanda of Prajāpati & one hundred ānandas of Prajāpati are one ānanda of Brahman (17). When one reads the whole passage, one doesn’t simply read it, but feels it. Because there is a rhythm & a sort of hierarchy maintained there, which appeals to the reader.

The whole of Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat is a very good example of description. It is the shortest Upaniṣat in size, but has a wider appeal. Just within 12 mantras it has covered all the three principles i.e. the individual, the world & the highest reality.

Narration, the fourth kind of discourse is popularly used by Upaniṣadic seers. Narration is a kind of discourse concerned with action, with events in time and with life in motion. Narration also tells a story, which is a sequence of events. Generally people like to read and hear stories, so it must have been used on large scale. Kathopaniṣat has a background of narration. The Upaniṣat opens with the story of king Uddālaka, who was donating barren cows in the Viśvajit sacrifice. His son, Naciketā was sitting near by. He saw these donations, thought that beloved things should be donated & asked his father to whom Naciketā was to be donated. In the beginning the father didn’t pay any attention, but when he repeated the question twice, thrice he told Naciketā that he had been given to Yama, the lord of death. And then the story goes on that Naciketā immediately went to Yama & so on & so forth.

In Kenopaniṣat there is a story of the battle between gods & demons. An unusual thing happened & gods got victory over demons. It was the highest reality, the Brahman, because of whom, the victory was achieved. The Gods found it as their own credit. So the Brahman stood before them as a secret (yakṣa). Gods called fire, wind & Indra respectively, to
see what that secret is. The Brahman put a stick of hay before fire & wind. But neither fire could burn it, not wind could take it away. Both of them went back with insult. Then Indra went. At that time the secret form of the Brahman vanished & a beautiful lady appeared before Indra & told him what that secret was. The Upaniṣat doesn’t come to an end here, but speaks of meditation on that highest reality (19). There are ten more references of narration in ten Upaniṣads. The peculiarity of all those passages is that they come to an end with some philosophical advice.

Two more devices are used on a large scale in ten principle Upaniṣads. One of them is a metaphor. It is a transfer of meaning. Very famous example of metaphor, one gets in Maṇḍuka Upaniṣat. There it is stated that there are two birds of same age, friends of each-other, they are sitting in a single tree. One of them is enjoying sweet fruit & the other is a passive witness (20). The august audience here know that this pair is of the lord & the individual. The tree is the body. The individual is enjoying the fruit of his Karmāṇ & the lord is witnessing.

Another well-known metaphor is found at the beginning of Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣat. It is based on the horse of Āsvamedha sacrifice. The Dawn is the head of that horse. The sun is an eye. The wind is the vital breath. Open mouth is the fire named Vaiśvānara (21). In this way the full description of that horse is given there. In Maṇḍuka Upaniṣat the ritual is plainly discarded as they are the baseless ships (22). And here the whole metaphor is based on the ritual. Why is it so? is there any controversy between the two Upaniṣads? No, that is not true. All Upaniṣads hold good that one must abandon the ritual for one’s own liberation. But at the same time while preaching, they have adopted the method from known to unknown. In the Upaniṣadic period people were familiar with the ritual & so the seers of the Upaniṣads have used ritualistic terminology, but for higher success.

Illustration is the last device in this sequence. Its commonly used till today. The Upaniṣadic seers have applied direct method for these illustrations & so they became more popular. Ample examples of such illustrations, one can get in Chāndogya Upaniṣat. Famous among
them is clay - illustration. Āruṇi, the father was preaching the nature of highest reality to his son śvetaketu. At that time he gave an illustration that just as by understanding a lamp of clay, one understands all the modifications of clay, in the same way, by realising the soul, one realises the universe, which is the form of the soul (23).

Another well known illustration is the illustration of salt. One evening Āruṇi asked śvetaketu to bring some salt & a glass of water. Then he asked him to put the salt in the water & told him to come next day with a glass of water. Next day śvetaketu came with glass of a water. Āruṇi asked him to separate the salt from the water. It was not there, so he asked śvetaketu to taste the water at the bottom, in the middle & at the top. It was salty everywhere. Then Āruṇi said, ‘ in the same manner everything in the universe is filled with the highest reality’ (24).

Epilogue - UP till now different modes of communications from the Upaniṣads were discussed. If one thinks objectively, one will notice that though these divices were not named & discussed in the time of Upaniṣads, still they were knwn to the seers, who used them. How was it possible? It seems that the narration is like second nature of a human being. Everybody likes story. So when language came into existance surfaced automatically & it will continue to be used till the end of language itself. When somebody wants to inform something to others, it is the exposition which comes to help. To convince somebody argument is essential. Description helps one to have immediate experience of the thing. A human being is always eager to make others feel, what he has already felt. When one realises some secret entity, he cannot express it with common language, so he takes resort to metaphor. To make one understand something, illustration is the best tool, which takes one from the known to the unknown. That is why all the Upaniṣadic seers have used all these tools, because these tools are part & parcel of language. The next generation discovers what was in the hidden form, in the texts of earlier time. So in a way, it is discovering the devices as modes of communication, which where inscribed in Upaniṣadic language.
2. Kathopniṣat - Śāṅkarabhāṣya - 1.1.1.
3. ईश-कैन-कठ-प्रश्न-मुण्ड-माण्डूक्य-तितिरिः।
   ऐतरेयं च छादोयं ब्रह्मदारण्यकं तथा॥
4. अपोरणीयान् महतो महीयान्। कठ - 2.20
5. स एष नेति नेति आत्मा..। - ब्रह्म - 3.9.26
6. अश्रियैः को भूवं प्रविष्टो रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपो ब्रह्म।
   एकत्थस्ता सर्वभूतान्तरत्ना रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपो वहिष्ठ॥ - कठ. 5.9
7. यथा सत्: पुरुषात् केशलोमानि तथासक्रातस्मभूतीह विश्व॥ मुण्डक 1.1.19.
8. Modern rhetoric - P. 44.
9. Ibid - PP 44-45
10. दिव्यो हामूतः पुरुषः वास्ताध्यन्तरे हाजः।
    अप्रागो हामनः: शुद्रोक्ष्राकारातः परः॥ मुण्डक - 2.1.2
11. यस्यामंस तस्य मातं मातं यस्य न वेद सः। - केन 2.3
12. Īṣa - 16, Katha - II.9.12, Muṇḍaka - II.1.2 - 5, Taittiriya - I.11,
    Aita - II.1.4, Chado - VII.1.4 - 7, Brhad - I.2.1, I.5.17, II.3.1 - 5,
13. शतायुष: पुत्रप्राप्ताः वृष्णियो बहुतपूर्णा स्त्रियेऽशिवरूपयमक्षतः।
    भूमेर्दारण्यं वृष्णियं च जीव शरदो वास्तविभिषिः॥ कठ 1.23
14. ये ये कामा पुरुषोक्ते मर्यादीः सर्ववाचार्यं प्रार्थययः।
    इमा रामा: सरसा: सत्तृया न हीद्रस्ता लम्भनीया मनुक्ते॥ तत्रैव 1.25
15. शोभाया मर्याद्यो यद्यन्तात्तत्त्वं विद्यायानां जसस्यानि तेजः।
    अपि सर्वं जीवितमयं तवेत् वाहायतः नृत्यंगिे॥ तत्रैव 1.27
16. योजयं चेत् गृहमनुप्रविष्टे नान्यं तस्मात्लिंकान्तव वृष्णिः॥ तत्रैव 1.29
17. Taittiriya Upanisat - II.8.
18. Kathopniṣat - I.1.1-4

20. द्वारा सुपर्णो सचिवा सखाया समान वृक्ष परिवर्त्याते।
जत्योरेक: पिपल स्वास्थ्य अनन्तरुल्लो अभिवाक्षीति॥ मुण्डक - 3.1.1

21. उषा वा अक्षरस्य धेहस्य शिरः। सूर्यश्शुक्वातः: प्राणो व्यातमन्वीङ्काशानः।।
ब्रह्म- 9.9.9.

22. प्रत्याहारे अद्वृत्ता यज्ञरूपः। मुण्डक - 2.9.7

23. यथा सोमय एकेन मृत्युल्गेन सर्व मृत्युं विज्ञातं स्यात्।। छाद्य 6.9.8