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RGVEDIC TRADITION OF KERALA

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The methods by which the Brahmanas in India preserved the Vedic tradition from centuries ago, are worth mentioning. Also the devices they used to transmit this wonderful sacred texts from generation to generation are many, which deserve special study. First of all, the strong belief that the Vedas were Apauruseya (not authored by ordinary human beings) and Nitya (eternal), was deep rooted among them. Any one with common sense and reasonable thinking will not be able to accept the divine origin and eternity of this sacred literature. Still such strong beliefs were prevalent among the Brahmanas, the custodians of Vedas, from very ancient times which helped to preserve the text intact without any change in the Samhita or Pada or Aksara or even in its accents while chanting. This is not the peculiarity of the Vedas only, but many of the auxiliary texts of the Vedas like Siksas and Pratisakhya also had these peculiar features.

There are, or there were, two methods of using Vedas in oral chanting which were in use from ancient days. They are Swadhyaya and Prayoga, the day to day chanting of Vedas and the Vedic exegesis or Vedavikrits. In these two methods also, the above mentioned strong belief of divinity and eternity of Vedas worked well, by which the text or Samhita and the Mantras, Padas and Padas in it were used without any change of any kind from very ancient times. In the employment of Vedas (Prayoga) in rituals, especially in Vedic rituals like Yagas, utmost care was taken to utter the Swaras correctly and it was believed that the Mantras will bring in great calamity or the opposite result if the Swaras were uttered in an incorrect way. The famous statement in the Nirukta of Yaska:

mantra hinah svarato varnato va mithyaprayukto
na tamarthamaha /
sa vaguajrah yajamanam hinasti yathendrasatruh
svaratoparadhat //

is an example for this. We have the history of the transmission of canonical texts of different religions all over the world from very ancient times. In none of them, except in the Vedic texts of India, the oral tradition of the transmission of religious texts from generation to generation, is found. We have the canonical texts of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism transmitted. But the process of transmission had taken place in all of them through Books or in book form, not orally. The Tripitakas, the basic canonical texts of Buddhism, were transmitted in book form. We have the reference to these texts of Buddhism in ancient literature as 'books' (Pitakapustakesu). The Old Testament and the New Testament of Christians were also transmitted in Book form, not orally. 'Khuran', the Veda of Muslims, is called 'Kitab'



(meaning 'book') and was studied or taught in Book form. All these are the religions of 'Books'. Writing was also common in the transmission of the canonical texts of many of these religions. It is stated in Khuran(96,4) that the prophet Mohammed had the divine inspiration from God to use pen (which is referred to by the world 'Kalam' there). Thus Book and Pen were used for transmitting the canonical texts of these religions.

This is not the peculiarity of the religions referred to here as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism only. Hellenic or Greek religion also gave importance to book and writing. Same is the case with Alexandria and ancient Egypt also. Actually, it is in Alexandria where the concept of Library, a place where books are collected and stored for the use of everyone, is seen found for the first time. According to Christianity, the transmission of religious texts included 'translation' also. They accepted the ideas or 'meanings' of the passages of Bible also as 'divine' and 'pure', not their 'language' only as such. As a result, many translations appeared for Bible in different languages all over the world and all of them were considered as authoritative religious texts. This trait is seen in Buddhism and Jainism also in India. Their original canons were written in Pali and different dialects of Prakrit. But later, teachers of both the religions began to accept hybrid Sanskrit or pure Sanskrit for their religious texts and in a later stage, regional languages also, for propagating their religions principles.

But the only religion in the world, it can be said, which was not a 'Book religion' till very recent times, was Vedic religion in India. The oral tradition was its soul, by which the text of Veda and its different modes of chanting were transmitted without any change from time immemorial.

Analysing geographically, one can see that the Vedic tradition in India was strongly preserved more in South India, than in north India. Prof. J., F. Stall in his book 'Namboodiri Vedic recitation' (Mountain & Co. Netherlands, 1961, pp18-20) has stressed this point studying the Vedic tradition of India historically. In North India, Vedic tradition is even now prevailing in Maharashtra, U.P (Kasi) and Gujarath. In places like Bengal and Assam Vedic tradition has become almost extinct. In South India, Rajamahendravara (Rajamundri) in Andhra is a place where Vedic tradition is even now prevailing strongly. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala also, the tradition is alive even now. (In Kerala, Sama tradition is going to be extinct. Jaiminiya Sama tradition is followed here. There were 21 families of Nambudiris in Kerala who preserved this tradition. Now only five aged scholars in three families at Panjal in Trissur Dt. in Kerala, all aged above seventy, seventy five, are there who are skilled in chanting all modes of Sama followed in Kerala like Rk or Aricika, Sama or Gramageya, Chandrsyama or Aranyaka and Uha and Usani. After these scholars, there are none to follow their tradition in Kerala. The whole tradition of Kerala Jaiminiya Sama chanting will be extinct after the generation of these five scholars, which is not far away, as all of them are, as already said, very old. It is in this context that the school of Vedic studies of SSUS has undertaken and successfully completed the project of the

audio-cum- Video documentation of the Samaveda tradition of Kerala in 100 hours. The whole matter has been converted into CDs and is available in the Library of Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady for study and references. Also copy of the same will be made available for academic/research institutions for study/research purposes in exchange basis. There are more scholars in Rgveda and Yajurveda in Kerala at present. But there is the possibility of vanishing those traditions also in near future, if utmost care is not seriously taken and encouragement is not given for preserving them also). In Karnataka also, in South India, the Vedic tradition is alive now to a great extend.

Vedic tradition became popular in South India with the advent of the Aryans to this place. This had begun, according to the historians, in the first centuries of the Christians ear itself. By the 6th and 7th centuries A.D, many institutions were established in South to impart Vedic education. Centres of learning called Salas were started connected with Temples. The Salas were institutions where the Brahmin youths were taught a variety of subjects including the Vedas. In addition, the affluent and erudite Brahmin families established conventions whereby Vedic education was imparted by resident scholars in their own homes. The young men are initiated for Vedic learning under these teachers after their Upanayanam. The training of the course was entirely in the oral tradition. The initiation and training, both was known as 'Upadesam' or oral advise. The Vedic lessons were imparted as Mantra, again implying the meaning; 'whispered communication.' The imparting of the learning of Rgveda, like that of Yajus and Sama, was in this way in Kerala also at that time when the present state of Kerala was not separately identified and was one of the portion of the wide area know as South block or Daksinapatha (otherwise South India) at that time.

The learner had to take the initiation by approaching and making obeisance to the teacher. The training was imparted to the disciple sitting with the legs crossed in front of the preceptor. The latter would in tone and repeat the texts, again and again till the former was able to repeat it without mistake. These first lessons were called Mutal Mura (first exercise). Before going to higher lessons of Vedic chanting, the first lessons covered Samhita (Cangata in Namboodiri dialect) which the learner had to learn by heart to the satisfaction of the Guru.

Of the greatest importance is that Veda should be recited with the proper intonations like Udatta, Anudatta and Svarita. A strong discipline was followed in Kerala in the teaching of Rgveda, which is current even now, that the disciple has to move his head in a specific up and down and sideways manner. The Guru catches hold of the tuft of the hair of the disciple's head and pulls, pushes and twists the head to make thorough the movements of the head according to the Svaras and to instill the correlation between the intonation of the sound and the motion. Then, a secondary reinforcement is brought in by making the disciple learn the Mudras to be executed with the right hand, for each syllable that is uttered in chanting. For example, a gesture with the palm upwards and all the fingers except the thumb folded down accompanies all utterances of short vowels ending in an Udatta. There are eighteen such Mudras in use in Kerala in the chanting of Rgveda, which are distinctive to the region.



Also there are some peculiarities in the articulation of certain sounds. For example, the trill 'r' was differentiated into 'black' and 'white' (as they are called in Kerala) as in Durga or Varsyam and Agra or Grabbhyam respectively. Another example is the uttering of 'l' or 't' that comes in the end of a word : Asil, Asit, Talsavituh, Tatsavituh, Yalpatye, Yatpatye....Here 't' itself will be written there, but the articulation is as 'l'. In the same way sometimes the letter 'Va' is pronounced as 'ba' as in in Tatsaviturva (ba) renyam. There are many other subtle peculiarities also in the chanting of Rgveda in Kerala, which are special features of Kerala Rgvedic tradition.

Among the Rgvedins of Kerala, the Asvalayana and the Kausitaka branches are differentiated. The Namboodiris of Kerala adopt another division of the text of Rgveda, apart from the conventional classification into Mandala, Anuvaka, Sukta and Mantra, Viz. Astaka, Adhyaya, Varga and Mantra or Rk. They use the colloquial pronunciation for Astakam as Attam, and for Vargam as Varkam.

Among the eight 'Vikrtis' of the chanting of Rgveda famous all over India, Jata, Mala, Sikha, Rekha, Dhvaja, Danda, Ratha and Ghana, Jata and Ratha are more popular in Kerala. Here the Ratha is not the same one included in the eight Vikrtis mentioned above. In Kerala tradition of the chanting of Rgveda, the Virkti Danda is practiced as Ratha. Thus the ceremonial chanting of Rgveda with the Svaras in Kerala includes Pada and Krama of the text or Samhita and Jata and Ratha of the eight Virktis. In Karnataka and Tamilnadu in the south, Pada, Karma, Jata and Ghana are more in vogue.

In course of time, the teaching of the Rgveda got localised in the Brahmasam Mathas at Trissur and Tirunavaya, where the young men used to join for Vedic learning after completing 'Motalora' and 'Changatha' locally. They used to be provided with free accommodation and food. Later on, due to the changes that took place in the society as the result of many historic reasons, big Namboothiri families, collapsed and facilities for imparting primary lesson of Rgveda like 'Motalora' and 'Cangatha' became insufficient in their families. So the entire course was shifted to the Trissur or Tirunavaya Mathams. Though these Mathams also had to face to the problems that the Namboothiri families faced, still the continuity of Vedic teaching has been maintained in them till very recent times. Now the schedule in these institutions has been adjusted so that the Namboothiri youths can combine school/college

education along with the Veda classes. Some years ago, the Tirunavaya Brahmaswam Matham had to be closed down for want of students. Though much effort was made for restarting Rgvedic education there, it did not become successful and the Tirunavaya Matham remains closed even now. In Trissur Brahmanaswam Matham, the continuity of Rgvedic education has not been interrupted till the present day. At present there are sufficient students studying Rgveda in Brahmaswam Matham, among whom there are two students from Maharashtra also.

There has been friendly rivalry between Trissur and Tirunavaya Brahmaswam Mathams. At Kadavallur Sri Ramaswamy Temple, Kadavallur, Trissur Dt. every year, a competition on the chanting of Rgveda between the scholars of the two Mathams, takes place. The candidates from these two Mathams recite Rgveda in different Vikrtis and there are judges to evaluate the performances. Titles or honours like 'Mumbilirikkal' (sit in front of the examiners for the competition), 'Katannirikkal' (sitting in the inner parts of the temple for further, higher tests) and 'Valiyakatannirikkal' (more severe tests entering the inner parts of the temple for Vedic examination) were given to the successful candidates. These are the highest titles that a Rgvedic scholar gets if he proves to be excellent

in different modes of chanting. These little or honours can be compared to the degrees like M.A, M.Phil and Ph.D of the present day. No such examination is current in Kerala for Yajurveda or Samaveda. No other examination or evaluation method for Rgveda, or for any other Vedas, is prevalent in other parts of India also. Due to the socio-cultural changes that took place in the modern society, this Anyoyam ceremony was also stopped for some years. But now it has been restarted with more pomp and vigour. For the last few years, national level seminars and discussions on different topics connected with Vedas also used to take place on the stage outside the temple on the days of Anymyam, when the ceremonial Vedic examination goes on inside the temple.

After the usual course of training upto Jata or Ratha, the Namboodiris use to participate in Trisandha, Murajapam and Varnam frequently conducted in Mathams, temples or such other places. All these are intended or envisaged for practicing or exercising the chanting of Rgveda in different way inter mingled with the element of worship. A recent innovation or practice is the Rgveda laksharchana (also with Yajurveda and Samaveda), the aim and purpose of which also is almost the same.