Oral Tradition of the Vedic Literature (Ṛgveda)

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The Vedic literature has been traditionally preserved by the oral recitations. It was transmitted from the teacher to disciple. This type of transmission is observed even in the Ṛgvedic times. In the Maṇḍuka Sūkta of the Ṛgveda (VII.103.4), the poet Vasiṣṭha referred to this tradition - cp यदेवामात्रो अनुस्य वाचा शाक्तन्त्रेऽव च वदति शिखराणः:— i.e. in the rainy season, one frog imitates the speech of another, just as a learning disciple imitates the recitation of his teacher.

For the preservation of the Vedas, the oral tradition of recitation has proved very useful. Many devices in the form of Padapāṭha, kramapāṭha and next viṅgṭipāṭhas were skillfully worked out. The viṅgṭis were named as जटा माला शिखा रेखा ध्वजो दशः: चथो चनः:। Thus there are eight viṅgṭi-pāṭhas, out of which जटा and चन are still in practice.

Pada and krama formed the basis of these viṅgṭis it is obvious that the Vedic texts were first handed down to us in the form of samhitā-pāṭha, where in the padas, i.e. the words were generally joined with Sandhi (with some exceptions) and the accents also followed the samhita recitation (i.e. continuous recitation). To illustrate in-

सुपर्ण ब्रह्म: कवयो वचोभिरेकं सरत् बहुधा कैतपयिनि।
छन्दांसि च दृष्टान्तो अध्वरेरु प्राहान् संमर्थं ममभवेदश॥

Here, the sandhi between कवयो, वचोभि: and एकं has taken place and they are recited as कवयो वचोभिरेकं। Here the sandhis have combined the visarga and consonant; and visarga and vowel. The exception is- there is no elision of अ of अध्वरेरु in the preceding ओ of दथो। (exception to एकं: पदान्तादि p VI.I.109)

The first verse of the Ṛgveda runs as

अग्रमौजै युगोहितं वच्छस्य देवमृत्ववर्जयाम्।
होतां रुष्याकामम॥ (recite entire sūkta)
Here the sandhi of consonant with a vowel अर्धमौचे और देवमृत्तिजम् may be clearly observed.

Naturally in continuous recitation, the succeeding words presuppose the existence of preceding words, therefore the sandhis take place between two consecutive words. Similarly the original accents of the words are also changed due to their position in the continuous recitation.

Thus in the first instance, the word कल्पवन्ति, being a principal verb, is originally सर्वानुदात. But since it appears after a non-verb ब्रह्मा having था as उदात्त, क in कल्पवन्ति changes into स्वरित, in संहिता [cp तिरुडळीत्र: pa घा 8.1.28] — तिरंतै पदम् अपादानी वर्तमानं अतिःतन्त्रं परस्त्रं अनुदाते भवति। उदातादुदातस्त्य स्वरितं: (pa 8.4.66) उदातादुदातस्त्य अनुदातस्त्य स्वरितादेशो भवति।

Thus in अभ्रिम्पये—ईच्छे is principal verb, not appearing in the beginning of a पादा, but appearing after अग्रिम् which is not a verb, is originally सर्वानुदात. But since it appears after उदात् इ (in अग्रि), इ in ईच्छे is changed to स्वरित in continuous recitation of samhītā.

Further शाकाक्षय analyzed the continuous text of रघुदा साम्हिता into Padapāṭha—i.e. word by word text. Each word is completely isolated. But even in the Padapāṭha, the order of the padas remain the same as is found in the samhītā recitation. Secondly, sometimes the words so separated are further broken in their constituent words.

To illustrate—

सूपपण्ण: सिरः: कचिः: बचः: अमोः।
एकम्: सत्तम्: बहुधा: बल्पन्ति।
चन्दरसि: च: दर्थते: अध्यर्थुः।
प्रहान्: सोमम्य: मिम्ते: हादशा।

Each word in samhītā has been separately noted in the Padapāṭha. The word सूपपण्ण has been broken into two of its constituents सु and पण्ण. The sandhis in continuous recitation have been dissolved. The succeeding words
do not anticipate the existence of the earlier preceeding word, though the order of the words commensurates that of samhita text. As a result, the separate words show their original accents.

Thus in पदपाठ, in the word कवच, the syllable यः (अः) is changed to Svarita, since it appeared after उदात but does not precede उदात; (as in samhita-patha) (cp नौदात स्वरितोदयम् - उदातपर: स्वरितपश्च अनुदात: स्वरितो न भवति - Pā 8.4.66)

Similarly कल्पयति has retained its original accents it is सर्वानुदात in पदपाठ- because it does not presuppose the existence of the earlier word सन्तम्। Thus भिमते the verb, has also retained its accents- it is सर्वानुदात in पदपाठ (in samhita these अनुदात are known as प्रचयः।

An avagraha is given before the detachable case-affix भायुम्, भिम्यो और सु। (cp हल्का भ्लतनाभायो भक्तारो विभिनिप्रलये। श्वसन चानतौ-वा प्रा V.13.14)- this explains वर्षेः: भिमः।

(cp विभिन्त मृत्येषु प्रकृतिप्रत्ययोऽविकृततिं सत्तेवाचग्रहः। वेदपादपाठचर्चा सूत्र 31 भाग 17)

Padapātha of the verse अग्रिमोच्चे- would be
अग्रिम्। इङ्ङे। पूर्वमहितम्। युज्यम्। देवम्। ऋतुल्लिज्जम्। होतारम्। रूक्षावठातमम्॥

(recite the entire sūkta

Here also each word has been separated. The sandhis have been dissolved. The words पूर्वहितम् and रूक्षावठातमम have been again broken into their constituents.

इङ्ङे has retained its accents- (सर्वानुदातत्व) i.e. no change appears in accent. Due to the position of that word in the samhita text; इ in इङ्ङे becomes स्वरिते.

The pada-text was certainly known to Yāska, the author of Nirukta- who states- अथापि इदमन्तरेण पदविभागो न विधाते (I.17). Yāska attaches much importance to the Padapātha, on the ground of grasping the exact meaning of the pada-the words. Thus in अवसाय पद्ये रूक्ष मृदु (Rg X.169.1) and in अवसायावाच (RgI.10.1) the word अवसाय has the same order of syllables. But in अवसाय पद्ये रूक्ष मृदु- The
word अवसाय is derived from the root अव to proceed (गत्यर्थस्य) with अस as noun prefix. Hence it is not split into two segments. However in अवसायाशानु, the root in अवसाय is अस् (untic– विमोचने with अव as a prefix उपसर्ग). Hence Padapātha separates the word in two segments (i.e.अवसाय)

Sākalya adds the word इति in his padapātha after Pragṛhya words and after certain vocatives e.g.

इन्द्रवायू इमे सुला -(I.2.4)

इन्द्रवायू इति।

कवी नौ भिन्नवर्णणा (I.2.9)

कवी इति।

शुभ्रस्वती (I.3.1)

शुभः। पती इति। (Here पती is प्रगृह as well as vocative)

(Here इति appearing in the beginning of a पाद and hence the उदात accent. (P 6.1.198).

It may be noted that this इति has been added by शाकल्य to differentiate the similar words which are not प्रगृह or not vocatives. This इति is therefore regarded as अनाय by Pāṇini I.1.16 (cp संबुद्धी शाकल्यस्य इतावनाय )

This additional इति should be distinguished from इति appearing in original samhitā text. In certain cases, Sākalya changes the order of the words in the Padapātha. Rk- Prātiśākhya II.43 gives three instances–
cp- Samhitā text- शुनाश्च चः निदितः सहस्त्राष्ट्र (V.2.7)
Pada text सुनाश्च चः चितः निदितः सहस्त्राष्ट्र
or नां च शोषः पूर्णमस्मादि (X.64.3)
Padapāṭha नां शोषः च बा च पूर्णमस्मादि अग्निसहारम्
or नां च शोषः दैव्यः च चाति (X.86.42)
Padapāṭha नां शोषः दैव्यः च चाति छाति

Such samhitā instances are technically called अनानुपूर्वसिताः.

Thus the irregularities of samhitā are removed here by Padapāṭha and they are brought into the line of current language prevalent at the time of Śākalya. This restoration of the original form is known as समायति in tradition.

To illustrate few other irregularities in the samhitā pāṭḥā made regular in Padapāṭha are as follows:-

Sarhītā- आदस्ये ते कुष्णास्ये दक्षिण सुरवः (I.141.8)
Pada- अथ अस्ये च ते कुष्णास्ये धक्षिण सुरवः
Samhitā- संदृश्ये हियानस्ये दक्षिणः (II.4.4)
Pada- समदृश्ये अस्ये हियानस्ये धक्षिणः
Sarhītā- स यो व्यस्तादिभ मेघः बहुः
Pada- स यो अस्यादिभ दक्षिणः

in all these above instances दक्षिण, धक्षिणः और दक्षिणः are changed to धक्षिण, धक्षिणः, धक्षिणः (i.e. च changed to थ). cp वेदपदपाठवच्चां (Abhyankar) p 27 sūtra 62 सायण- शुप:शेषमिति पदस्य मध्ये पदान्तरस्य संहितायाः व्यत्यवावस्यति: ।

Kramāpāṭha- is defined as-
क्रमो द्व्यावभिभ्रमयो त्र्यवेद्यावः तथा: ।
उत्तरेऽपि दक्षायतै तथाभिभ्रमधमुक्तायेत् (६ प्रा x.1)

i.e; In क्रमापाठ two consecutive padas are recited in their proper order, then the second pada is taken and is joined with the third. The third is again recited and is joined with fourth, and so on

The pairs are recited in separate units.
A compound word is shown as dissolved immediately after that pair, in which it stands first and is not longer repeated.

The last word of the each half Rk is recited as enclosed with ढति and recited again at the end.

Pāṇini has noted the क्रमपाठ cp क्रमासभ्यो बुजं IV.2.61. The word क्रमक is formed to mean, one who recites क्रमपाठ tit Ār. 3.1.3 refers to the Samhitā pāṭha, Padapāṭha and Krama-pāṭha- with the names of निर्मृज, प्रत्युण and उभयमन्तरेण- respectively, it is explained by Rk Prātiṣākhya it must be at least as old as 6th century B.C.

Thus if one refers to the consequitive padas- by a b c d e f - the pairs of क्रम will be- ab/bc/cd/de/ef/and so on.

Sandhi takes place between members in the pair only. Thus ab are joined with sandhi, bc are joined with sandhi. But b-b in two different pairs are not joined with sandhi. The accents are also recited accordingly.

Thus the क्रम of सुपण्ड विप्रा- would be

सुपण्ड विप्रा । सुपण्डगति सुपण्ड ।
विप्रा कवचः ।
कवचो वचारभिः ।
वचारभिः वचारभिः वचार: ।
एके संततमू ।
संतत बहुधा ।
बहुधा कल्पयन्ति। कल्पयन्तीति कल्पयन्ति । end of अर्थवर्च छन्दसिसि च ।
च दधते ।
दधती अध्वरेष्यु ।
अध्वरेष्यु प्रहारोऽ ।
प्रहारोऽसमेस्य ।
समेस्य मिमते ।
मिमते द्वादश । द्वादशोऽति द्वादश ।
From the above instances, it will be clear that the sandhi-combinations of samhitā-pātha, which are absent in Padapātha, are reintroduced here. Each word (excepting the first of the verse) is recited twice. It is linked through sandhi, with the preceeding word and then with the following word.

As Fritz Stall remarks in his ‘Ritual and Mantras’ (1996) (p 372)- that, it becomes more difficult to forget a single word, for if a pair were forgotten, the continuity between the succession of pairs would show a break. This does not apply to the recitation of the samhitā or Padapātha themselves. If a word is forgotten in their recitation, it does not leave a trace. The study of Krama-pātha, says the prātiśākhya of the Atharvaveda (4.108), has for its object the fixation (dārdhya) of samhitā and Pada.’

It may be noted that though there are eight vikṛtis- जटा and चन are in practice, and some of them have more than one methods for recitations. I here refer to only one form of जटा I have dealt with शिखा and चन of शिखा being essential to understand the method of ghana.

The scanning of the padas in Jaṭā-pāṭha will be as follows

ab ba ab
bc cb bc
cd dc cd
dc ed de and so on

जटा
I अग्रिमान् इत्यादिश्रीग्रिमान्
इति पुरोहितम् पुरोहितमात्वः इति पुरोहितम्
पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य यज्ञस्य पुरोहितं पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य ।
पुरोहितार्जुनिथिति पुरा:सिंहतम् ।
र्यज्ञस्य देवं देवं यज्ञस्य यज्ञस्य देवम् ।
देवमुख्यत्वार्जुत्वार्जुं देवं देवमुख्यविभृङ्गम् ।
र्ह्रत्तिकिसिद्धार्जुनितमृ । (अर्थ अंड) ।
होतार्जु रद्वार्जु रद्वार्जु होतार्जु रद्वार्जु ।
रद्वार्जुर्ममार्जु रद्वार्जुर्मम । ।

II सुपुर्ण विख्रा विख्रा: सुपुर्ण सुपुर्ण विख्रा: । सुपुर्णमिति सुपुर्ण ॥
  a b a a b
विख्रा: जवय: कवय: विख्रा विख्रा: कवय: ॥
  b c b b c
कवयो वचोभिः वचोभिः: कवयः कवयो वचोभिः ॥
  c d c d c d
वचोभिरेके वचोभिः वचोभिरेकेम् ॥ वचोभिरिति वचः: अभः: ॥
  d e d e d e
eकं सन्तं सन्तमेकमेकं सन्तम् ॥
  e f e e f
eकं सन्तं सन्तमेकमेकं सन्तम् ॥
f g g f f g
बहृं तथा कल्पयति कल्पयति बहृं तथा कल्पयति ॥ कल्पनातिति कल्पनाति ॥ (अर्थ अंड)
  g h h g g h

Second half

छन्दसिः च च छन्दसिः छन्दसिः च ॥
  a b b a a b
च दर्शतो दर्शत: च च दर्शत: ॥
  b c b b b c
दर्शतो अध्वरे ध्वरे ध्वरे दर्शतो अध्वरे: ॥
  d e d e d e
d अध्वरे घाण: घाण: अध्वरे ध्वरे घाण: ॥
  d e d e d e
From the above instances, one can observe that there are only two words in each group and they are recited thrice; first in successive order, second time in reverse order, and third time again in successive order. In each group the words are combined with sandhi.

शिखाः पदोऽत्र जस्तामेव शिखामाया: प्रचक्षते ।

Jaṭāpātha with addition of one additional next word in a group is regarded as शिखापाठ–

The scanning would be

ab ba ab c
bc cb bc d
cd dc cd e
d e de df and so on

सुपपणि विश्रा विश्रा: सुपपणि सुपपणि विश्रा: कवय: ॥ सुपपणमिति सुपपण ॥

a b b a a b c

विश्रा: कवय: कवयो विश्रा विश्रा: कवयो वच्चाभि: ॥
bc cb bc d

कवयो वच्चाभिवच्चाभि: कवय: कवयो वच्चाभिवरकम् ॥
e d e d c d e

वच्चाभिवरकमेंकं वच्चाभिवरकमेंकं सन्त्॥ वच्चाभिवरितं वर्ष:भि: ॥
de ed de df
eकं सन्तं सन्तमेंकमेंकं सन्तं बहुंथा॥
e f fe ef f g

सन्तं बहुंथा बहुंथा सन्तं सन्तं बहुंथा कल्पयन्ति ॥ कल्पयन्तीति कल्पयन्ति ॥
f gg ff fg h

छन्दसिच्च छ छन्दसिच्छ छन्दसिच च दधात: ॥
a b b a a b c
After recitation of Śikhā-patha, one should continue to recite the last three padas the reverse order and then in regular order

Ghana-pātha:

The scanning of the words in ghanapāṭha would be as follows

ab ba abc cba abc/
bc cb bcd dcb bcd/
cd dc cde edc cde/
de ed def fed def etc.
Thus-

अग्रिमीखः ईदेवग्रिमिखः पुरोहितं पुरोहितमीखः ईदेवग्रिमिखः पुरोहितम्म।
a b b a a b c c b a a b c
ईदेव पुरोहितं पुरोहितमीखः ईदेव पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य यज्ञस्य
b c c b b c d d
पुरोहितमीखः ईदेव पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य॥
c b b c d
पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य पुरोहितं पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवं
c d d c c d e
de यज्ञस्य पुरोहितं पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवम्॥ पुरोहितामर्थिति पुरुःशिंतं॥
e d c c d e
यज्ञस्य देवं देवं यज्ञस्य देवमूलितवृज्ञपञ्चमेवं यज्ञस्य देवमूलितवृज्ञपञ्चमेवं
d e e d d e f e d d e f
deमूलितवृज्ञपञ्चमेवं देवं देवमूलितवृज्ञपञ्चमेवं॥ अर्थमेव अन्ततः
e f f e c f
उत्तरार्थ-
होतां रज्ञातामं रज्ञातामं होतां होतां रज्ञातामम्।
a b b a a b
रज्ञातामिति रज्ञातामम॥

Ghana

सूपण्य बिप्रा बिप्रा: सूपण्य सूपण्य बिप्रा: कवय: कवयो बिप्रा:
a b b a a b c c b
सूपण्य सूपण्य बिप्रा: कवय:॥ सूपण्यिति सूपण्यम्॥
a a b c
बिप्रा: कवय: कवयो बिप्रा बिप्रा: कवयो वचोभिः
b c c b b c d
वचोभिः कवयो बिप्रा बिप्रा: कवयो वचोभिः॥
d c b b c d
कवयो वचोभिः वचोभिः कवय: कवयो वचोभिः वचोभिः मेकं वचोभिः
e d e d e c d d
कवय: कवयो वचोभिः मेकं॥
c c d e
वर्णोंभिग्रहकंकं वर्णोंभिग्रहकं सन्तं सन्तमेकंकं वर्णोंभिग्रहकं

d d e e d  d e f f e d

वर्णोंभिग्रहकं सन्तं || वर्णोंभिग्रहकं वर्णःअभि: ||

d e f

एकं सन्तं सन्तमेकंकं सन्तं बहुधा बहुधा सन्तमेकंकं सन्तं बहुधा ||

e f f e e f g g f e e f g

सन्तं बहुधा बहुधा सन्तं सन्तं बहुधा कल्पयति कल्पयति बहुधा सन्तं सन्तं बहुधा कल्पयति.||

f g g f f g h h g f f g h

बहुधा कल्पयति कल्पयति बहुधा बहुधा कल्पयति ||

g h h g g h

कल्पयति (अर्थं ends)

उत्तरार्थ-

छन्दासिस च च छन्दासिस छन्दासिस च दर्थतो
a b b a a b c

dर्थतश्च छन्दासिस छन्दासिस च दर्थतः: ||

c b a a b c

च दर्थतो दर्थतश्च च दर्थतो अध्वर्ष्ण्वर्षयु दर्थतश्च च दर्थतो अध्वर्ष्ण्वर्षयु ||

b c c b b c d d c b b c d
dर्थतो अध्वर्ष्ण्वर्षयु दर्थतो दर्थतो अध्वर्ष्ण्वर्षयु ग्रहान्

e d d c c d e
g्रहान्धर्ष्ण्वर्षयु दर्थतो दर्थतो अध्वर्ष्ण्वर्षयु ग्रहान् ||

e d c c d e

अध्वर्ष्ण्वर्षयु ग्रहान् ग्रहान्धर्ष्ण्वर्षयु ग्रहान्तसोमस्य:||

d e e d d e f

सोमस्य ग्रहान्धर्ष्ण्वर्षयु ग्रहान्तसोमस्य:||

f e d d e f
g्रहान्तसोमस्य सोमस्य ग्रहान्तसोमस्य मिमते मिमते सोमस्य ग्रहान्तसोमस्य मिमते:||

e f f e e f g g f e e f g

सोमस्य मिमते मिमते सोमस्य सोमस्य मिमते हादशे

f g g f f g h
From the above instances, it may be observed that in ghanapātha, certain words appear for thirteen times. The sandhi combination which did not take place in Saṁhitā-pātha are newly introduced. These techniques of oral tradition minimise the probability of a single word being lost. Consequently there are less chances of variations creeping in stealthily, in the vedic text transmitted by the technique of the oral traditions than in the manuscripts.

Fritz Stall remarks (p.373), ‘the fixation of the oral tradition by the mnemonic techniques pertain only to the form of the mantras. There is no corresponding tradition that fixes and preserves their meaning.’

True, that these techniques do not fix or preserve the meanings of the word. But since these traditions have preserved the accents, it helps, fixing the meaning to certain extent. To illustrate the word रक्षा in राक्षस-राक्षस (Rg I.1.1) is a compound word with उदात्त on the second member of compound the meaning is fixed with the help of तत्तुरुख compound रक्षा धाता -cp ‘समासस्य’ - Pā 6.1.223

But in कविक्रृत्य: and चिन्त्रार्थस्तम्: - the उदात्त accent is shown on the first member of the compound in कवि and चिन्त्र, (Rg I.1.5), the meaning of the compound words are fixed on the basis of their being बहुव्रीहि compound (cp Pā 6.2.1- बहुव्रीहि प्रकृत्या पूर्वपदम् ।) (कवि: क्रृत: यस्य, चिन्त्र: श्रवः यस्य)

Thus system has helped preserving the text of Vedic literature, saving it from being a prey of corrupt readings and to certain extent fixing the meaning of esp. the compound words also.