

Veda as Word

Veda as Word ed by Prof. (Mrs) Shashiprabha Kumar, 2006, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd, N. Delhi. This is a most valuable collection of papers originally presented in the First National Seminar held at the Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies, JNU, New Delhi. It is a publication that every serious student (and we are all students) of Sanskrit and Language generally should consult.

Such studies have long been overdue. Linguistics today has, I think, lost its original, and by this I mean 'ancientmost', direction. Whether synchronic, diachronic or comparative, it deals with language at a very gross, often quite limited and sometimes pointless level. It has Chairs and Departments at Universities and claims to be a 'science' and use the 'scientific method(s)'; but these very terms beg the question and honest historians of science tell us that the sciences, physical or biological etc., are riddled, with wrong assumptions and theories (e.g Cohen 2001, Pert 2002). Let me hasten to explain here that others before me have made similar complaints about modern Linguistics (e.g Klostermaier 1977). And as one writer in this volume states, "To regard *Nirukta* (or the 'Paninian Grammar') as a system which stands or falls by the judgements pronounced from this Testing Laboratory of Modern Linguistics should be unacceptable. Its questions are far more comprehensive than the question-bank of a 'science' like Linguistics can accommodate" (Dr W Shukla: p 176). This 'science' has in no way made communication happier among people. We really need to explore the subtler levels of language if we are to come out of the modern Tower of Babel.

A very long time ago some sages with insight saw the relation of Language or Word and the human constitution itself. Thus in the RV 1.164.45:

Catvāri vāk pārimitā padāni tāni vidur brāhmaṇā ye manīṣiṇaḥ/
guhā trīṇi nihitā nengayanti turīyaṃ vāco manuṣyā vadanti//

These four levels of Speech/Language are known only by wise brāhmins: one level is that spoken by men; the other three are hidden and unmanifest. Linguistics deals primarily with the lowest level, the *vaikhari*, as Bharṭṛhari named it in his *Vākyapadīya*, and when it deals with semantic and syntactical aspects of Language it touches on the second level, the *madhyamā*, but only superficially. Of the other two levels, *paśyantī* and *parā* it knows absolutely nothing. Yet these are the aspects of Language that are connected with and inhere in the essence of men.

Veda as Word, or, to be exact, the majority of papers in it, deals with aspects of the three areas that are hidden or internal. We already mentioned Dr. W.Shukla, who, though a mathematician by profession, yet deals here with Yāska's *Nirukta* focusing both on serious and some amusing points like the figure of speech *śleṣa* 'pun'. One only wishes the paper was much longer than six pages. In his paper on the RV hymn 10.125, *vāg-ambhrṇī*, Prof. S.P.Singh examines in some detail the extraordinary powers inherent in *Vāc* as declared by the seeress *Ambhrṇī* who, in an amazing flash of illumination, speaks in the first person identifying herself with *Vāc*. Creation proceeds outward and downward through the supreme power which is *Vāc*; indeed, she has, through divine forces (=natural laws that express her), been placed variously in different phenomena so that they all function through her presence, yet she is beyond and comprehends them all (10.125.3-4): she is

immanent and transcendental. In his own paper, *nighaṅṭu-nirukta meṃ vānnāma*, Dr A.D.Sharma discusses the 57 synonyms of *vāk* which are given in Yāska's lexicon and thus brings out their subtler significance as expressions of the different spiritual attributes that inhere in *Vāk*.

Prof. (Mrs) S.S.Dange's paper 'From Mortal to Divine through *Vāk*' examines the use of Speech in the *Brāhmaṇas*. Taking as basis the theme *vāg vai yajñah* 'Speech is verily Sacrifice', Mrs Dange points out that all man's experiences and actions are expressed and made pure by (Indra who is) Speech, as said in *Śatapatha Br XI.1.6.18* and *Kauṣitakī Br 2.7*. In the ritual, utterance is divine; it is regulated and different from ordinary parlance which is unregulated. Thus *vāg yama* 'speech-/regulation/ restraint', as Mind and Speech are yoked together, convey the sacrifice to the deities and at the same time purify the inner being. But regulated speech even in ordinary daily life becomes, through study and practice, a sacrifice to the Absolute (*Śatapatha Br XI.5.6.3-9*). Then, there is also the inner yogic aspect where the four *padāni* of *Vāk* in *RV 1.164.45*, cited above and given by Bhartr̥hari as *parā*, *paśyantī*, *madhyamā* and *vaikharī*, are identified with specific locations or centres in the human organism; *parā* is in the *mūlacakra* 'bottom-end of spinal cord'; *paśyantī* is the *nābhi* 'navel'; *madhyamā* in the heart *hṛd* and *vaikharī* in the throat *kaṅṭha*. (There is a different yogic tradition that places the respective forms in the area from navel to heart, then heart and chest then throat and finally mouth.)

Prof.(Mrs) Usha Chaudhary's essay "Vāg vai Sarasvatī" focuses on the cosmic and creative/poetic aspect of *Vāk* as found in the *Sarasvatī* hymns of the *RV*. Of course, there is no actual identification of the mighty river-goddess with speech in the *RV*: she is only indirectly presented as a goddess of knowledge and speech and becomes this only in later tradition: thus e.g. *Śaunaka* says in his *Rgvīdhāna 2.295* that whoever recites after the morning purifications *RV 6.61*(hymn to *Sarasvatī*) becomes expert in speech and wisdom. In this same paper is cited the other famous stanza 35 of *RV 1.164*, where the last pada identifies *brahma* "the holy-power" as the highest heaven or resort of *Vāc*: *brahmāyaṃ vācaḥ paramaṃ vyoma*. Mrs Chaudhary very pertinently explains that the epithet *nadītamā* (*RV 2.21.16-18*) can, apart from 'best river', mean also 'most revealing through sound' or 'best speech' (*nad=śabde*). Another engaging point she makes is that *Sarasvatī*'s seven sisters (*RV 6.61.10*) are the seven metres; they are not given here but we know them to be *gāyatrī*, *anuṣṭubh*, *triṣṭubh*, *br̥hatī*, *uṣṇih*, *jaḡatī* and *pañkti*.

Prof. D. Prahladachar in his 'Vedāpauruṣeyatva' presents the different views in the Indian philosophical tradition regarding the *apauruṣeyatva* of the *Veda* including the arguments of the *pauruṣeyatva-vādins*; in this connexion he examines also the *nityānityatva* of *śabda* itself, which has the aspects *varṇa* 'phoneme' and *dhvani* 'utterance', the first being *nitya* 'permanent, eternal' the second *anitya* 'mutable, impermanent'. He concludes, in the received line of tradition, that the *Vedāpauruṣeyatva* is found in the immutable sequence of the *varṇas* - which retain their sequence (and signification) in successive creations, breathed forth, outward then back, inward. I would add that the real *apauruṣeyatva* pertains to knowledge itself (i.e. *Veda*) - the knowledge, (*cit* in later tradition) whereby the entire creation comes about: this knowledge belongs to the Absolute alone.

Following Shri Aurobindo, Kireet Joshi examines the concept of 'Veda as Word' in the context of the *R̥gveda* and the *Upanishads* and rightly relates it all to the *praṇavaśabda* AUM. K. T. Pandurangi and S. R. Bhatt, each in a separate paper, examine briefly this concept in the framework of *Pūrvamīmāṃsā* which holds that

śabda 'the word' is *Veda* 'knowledge' (in that the names of *devatās* are *śabdātmakas* 'of the nature of sound' and, moreover, this knowledge has the qualities of *āptatva* 'reliability' and *nityatva* 'eternality/universality'). There are several papers on Vedic versification, accent and recitation by Profs D. Bhargava, B. Caubey and R.C.D. Sharma. Two other papers by Prof (Mrs) D.S.Tripathi and Dr U.C.Dash respectively delve into the *Prātiśakhyas* and *Yajurveda* to examine phonetics and metres. Prof R.K. Sharma in his article "Vācam-artho'nudhāvati" concludes that despite Pāṇini's strong semantic leanings the Pāṇinīya tradition places greater importance to correct verbal form *svarūpavedana* and lesser to comprehension of meaning *arthāvabodha*. Profs K. Kapoor and P.C. Muraleemadhavan deal respectively with continued and cumulative Vedic exegesis and Kerala's contribution to Vedic exegesis and chanting. Dr S. Chaudhari describes the four types of speech as found in the *Rgveda* (and other texts) and the use of *śleṣa* in Vedic poetry. In her "Vidhivākyaḥ-their significance in human life", Prof P.Shashirekha discusses the nature of *dharma* within the *Mīmāṃsā* frame and the six *pramāṇas* which characterize all procedures: *śruti* 'authoritative statement', *artha* 'purpose' etc.

Dr. R.Shastri discusses the *Brāhmaṇa* comments on Vedic language and legendry and in this light examines the *Viṣṇu-Vamana* and *Indra-Ahalyā* legends. I do not expound these informative papers in greater detail only because I should need several pages more and, however good a publication may be, its review must have reasonable limits. Also, six of them are in Hindi, which I don't know well enough; the brief description of these I have taken from Prof Kumar's own introduction.

Last but certainly not least is a paper by Dr R.N. Jha – "Śaṅkara on *śruti* as Verbal Testimony". This is a truly remarkable study that must be read by every student of Sanskrit and *Vedānta* since it collects, connects and expounds Śaṅkara's views on many aspects of *Vāk* in his commentaries on the *Prasthānatraya* (= *Upanishads*, *Bhāgavad Gītā* and *Brahmasūtra*). Beginning with a multiple definition of *Vāk*, but mainly as the *instrument* of expression, it tells us that *varṇas* are eternal and so is *śabda* 'the Word' since it consists of these. Then it presents the two modes of verbal testimony, *śruti* and *smṛti*. The first is direct revelation, self-valid, eternal and universal. Since, however, all people are not competent to understand *śruti*, the ultimate means of knowledge, they must rely on such *smṛtis* as are in agreement with the *śrutis* and then move to *śruti* such as "I am the brahma" *ahaṃ brahmāsmi*. When the purification of the mind has advanced and one has the realization of one's true identity as *ātma/brahma*, then even *śruti* is abandoned along with all other kinds of knowledge, valid or invalid.

The book-format is very convenient, the paper and printing of very good quality with few misprints, chiefly in the diacritics of the transliterations. I can't judge the price of Rs495 but the US \$ 24.75 is very reasonable. Personally I feel very grateful to Prof Kumar who organized the seminar on "Veda as Word" and then the publication of these excellent papers in a single volume, which I repeat, should be consulted by all scholars of Sanskrit. May she be inspired and inspire others to produce additional volumes with such illuminating material. Indeed, the wealth of *Vāk* or *Veda* is inexhaustible; for *Vāk* herself, within each and every one of us, says in *RV* 10.125.8 – *paro divā para enā pṛthivyaitāvatī mahinā saṃ babhūva* 'Beyond this earth and sky – so great in glory am I'.

Bibliography

- Cohen J.B 2001 *Revolution in Science* (1985) Cambridge Mass, Harvard Univ.Press.
Klostermaier K. 1977 “Man carries the Power of All Things in his Mouth” in H.
Coward & K.Sivaraman eds *Revelation in Indian Thought*, Emeryville, Calif, Emery.
Pert C.B 2002 *Molecules of Emotion* (1997) NY/London, Scribner.