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The Power of Words: Understanding Indian Culture through its Key Concepts

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Let me begin with two powerful verses of the Ṛgveda concerning the Word (*vāc*):

1. O Lord of the Holy Word! That was the first
beginning of the Word when the Seers fell to naming each object;
That which was best and purest, deeply hidden within their hearts,
they revealed by the power of their love.
2. The Seers fashioned the Word by means of their mind,
winnowing it as with sieves the corn is sifted.
Thus friends may recognize each other's friendship.
An auspicious seal upon their word is set.

RV X. 71. 1-2

They show the process of name-giving by the seers, arising from the hidden recesses of their heart, and purified by sifting. This original revelation of the Word (*Vāc*) may be the source for all later name-giving, and the ideal model for the enterprise the IGNCA had undertaken with great vision and courage 25 years ago, in the form of the project of a *Kalātattvakośa* or a Lexicon of Fundamental Concepts of the Indian Arts.

Allow me to say a few words about my personal connection with this ambitious and inspiring project. Ever since my Indological studies and Ph.D. research, I was convinced that I could approach the Indian tradition through the study of some of its core concepts. I chose *līlā* for my thesis. Much later I got

involved with Prof. Raimon Panikkar in the preparation of "a Lexicon of Fundamental Concepts of the Indian Tradition", a project which, for lack of institutional support, never proceeded beyond the planning stage. When I met Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan in 1985 and she asked me to join her in the beginning stages of IGNCA, I was immediately enthusiastic about her proposed project, and I got deeply involved in it for almost 10 years. But how does it feel now, 25 years after that beginning?

I am still equally convinced of the importance and insight of such a project, regardless of whatever unavoidable shortcomings in its execution there might have been, and I shall present its approach and method again. But what has changed in these 25 years is the cultural and intellectual landscape in India. It is first of all these changes that we must become aware of, and respond to them by discovering the enduring relevance of a project concerning the key concepts of Indian culture.

In the present scenario two kinds of *pūrva pakṣa* or opposing views may be brought forward to criticize such a project.

- 1) One may be based on the multilingual situation in India, and a certain opposition to making Sanskrit the sole cornerstone of Indian culture. What about non-sanskritic languages? What about tribal languages? etc.
- 2) The second argument would just be the opposite: are we not in a global world, connected by an Internet where English is universally accepted? We have to be international and connected to the rest of the world. I would call this position a linguistic neo-colonialism, bulldozing the beauty of cultural and linguistic pluralism.

Both these prevalent views seem to be alienated and unaware of the deep-rooted unity of Indian culture.

The first objection loses sight of the interconnectedness of all Indian languages with Sanskrit. Without going into linguistic subtleties to prove the fundamental place of Sanskrit, let me just mention a few examples. The one state which opposes Sanskrit vis-à-vis Tamil is Tamil Nadu. But what about the names of their leaders – Karunanidhi, Jayalalita ... are they not Sanskrit?

A different example comes from Orissa, where I have done research on a religious reform movement of the 19th century which opposed Brahmins, priests, temple and ritual, which has no Sanskrit sources but only Oriya.

The name of the movement is Mahima Dharma, and they address the supreme Reality by the name of *Śūnya Brahman* and *Śūnya Puruṣa*. Their most outstanding poet was a Kandha tribal without any Sanskrit learning, Bhima Bhoi. But all their central concepts are Sanskrit!

A recent event has again brought out the power of a word. It is the reaction to the rape case in Delhi, when the anonymity of the victim had to be preserved, and a journalist had the bright idea to name her '*Nirbhaya*'. This word has become the focus of sympathy, protest, and the attempt to create a fund for saving the dignity of women.

These are scattered examples, but it is obvious that the main reason for basing such a project on Sanskrit terminology is the ancient and rich Sanskrit literature, right from the Veda to the present. It is strange that one has to be apologetic for Sanskrit in India!

Especially as the second opponent view shows an impoverishment and loss of cultural identity.

It is precisely in the light of this, the loss of the awareness of the real contributions of Indian culture to the global community, that these two core projects of the IGNCA have made important contributions - last but not least for

a new generation in search of its roots, as well. If the new generation were to lose its cultural identity, it would be a loss for humanity.

There is a third aspect of the present-day situation, which is positive and strengthens the importance of such a project: the increasing interest in intercultural dialogue. The number of studies and institutions that have come up internationally in the last 25 years devoted to intercultural research shows the need for such a dialogue. But since not every scholar can be at home in different languages and cultures, resource material is a necessary tool. It is precisely in such a situation that a reference work such as *Kalātattvakośa* can fulfill a need.

Keeping the present situation in mind, let me present the *Kalātattvakośa*, its original vision and intention, its methodology, and give some examples of the concepts treated in these volumes.

The project was conceived by Dr. Kapila Vatsayan, and she herself describes it as "futuristic", and as "a multi-volume thesaurus of Indian thought systems and categories of knowledge", however with the aim of exploring fundamental concepts underlying Indian Arts and Culture. I may quote my own introduction to the first volume:

The Indian arts, both in theory (*śāstra*) and practice (*prayoga*), are branches of a single living tree of Indian culture. They cannot be understood in isolation from other dimensions of thought and science, myth and ritual, spiritual and secular traditions. The underlying world-view has crystallized in certain concepts, reflecting the understanding of cosmos and man, of space and time, of form and structure, of the part and the whole, of body senses and mind. So far, most indological and art-historical research has been done in single disciplines or in limited historical periods, but a serious investigation into the interrelatedness of all these fields is still a desideratum. An interdisciplinary approach is the

first prerequisite to understanding the relationship between the ancient sciences (e.g. Āyurveda, Jyotiṣa), philosophy, and the various branches of the arts.

(KTK Vol.1, p. xi)

Thus from its very inception, the vision was holistic and interdisciplinary. On the other hand, there are specialized glossaries or dictionaries of particular branches or disciplines, such as poetics or temple architecture or the terminology of Tantric texts. These are necessary and they also complement what is missing in Sanskrit Dictionaries, which do not contain technical meanings of particular art-forms (e.g. *śilpa*). In the publications by the IGNCA such glossaries are appended to the technical treatises of the Arts (*Kalāmūlāśāstra*).

The process of compiling the selection of terms, their categorization, and the list of texts to be scrutinized for the culling of quotations and definitions throws light on the methodology behind this programme. As in the Ṛgveda verses quoted in the beginning, this was a collective work of scholars from different disciplines. The selection of (originally 250) terms was done on the basis of their multidisciplinary nature, of their pervasiveness, and their relevance in one or more art forms. This work itself revealed the interconnectedness of the fundamental concepts between sciences such as Āyurveda and Jyotiṣa, the Vedas and Āgamas, the Purāṇas, Darśanas and the Arts. The selection of a term was based on its occurrence in at least some of these areas and texts. What - in the case of the Vedic *ṛṣis* giving names to objects, is called 'sifting' - was exactly the process performed by this group of scholars. A similar method was followed in selecting texts which need to be studied for defining the term in question.

It was clear from the outset that this Lexicon would not follow an alphabetical order, but would compile concepts into groups of meaning. Though there are no water-tight compartments, and overlappings are unavoidable, such

groupings give access to a world-view underlying the more technical terms, to mention for example: concepts of space and time, and the cosmic elements (*mahābhūta*).

The entire approach was clearly based on internal criteria of the Indian tradition, and not on its Western perceptions. The holistic insight had to be brought out wherever possible, and it emerged by itself once the concept was presented in the light of the relevant texts.

After the selection of core concepts and texts, the methodology for writing articles was discussed with a number of scholars, and was broadly agreed upon. Here again it is important to note that the traditional Indian viewpoint was maintained, without neglecting a systematic approach which would also be acceptable to indological research. Thus the etymological section could contain both, a traditional Sanskrit hermeneutics and a modern linguistic and comparative analysis. Also, though some traditionalists would deny that a concept undergoes a historical development and semantic changes, it was found necessary to follow such a development.

The sections on the development of each concept are the largest ones, because they trace the concepts from their earliest, mostly Vedic antecedents, through the different texts, religious and philosophical traditions, the scientific texts and Sanskrit literature, with a representative selection of original quotations.

It is only after presenting the concept in its various disciplines and schools that its manifestation in the Arts could be shown, because the same term inherits whatever meanings it has found in other contexts. "The relation between the conceptual background and the manifestation in the arts is the main focus of the articles. The arts occupy an intermediate position and hence mediate between metaphysics and physics, between spirituality and science".(KTK v.1, p.xiii).

Take even such an apparently abstract term as ‘*Brahman*’. Without having explored its Vedic, Upaniṣadic and philosophical meanings, to speak of it in an aesthetic, musical context could not be possible. Thus the aesthetic experience is described by Abhinavagupta as:

This enjoyment ... is characterized by a resting (*viśrānti*) in one's own consciousness (*saṃvit*), which due to the emergent state of sattva, is pervaded by beatitude (*ānanda*) and light (*prakāśa*), and is similar to the tasting (*āsvāda*) of the supreme Brahman. (Abhinava Bhārati on Nāṭya Śāstra VI.31, tr. R. Gnoli) (KTK .Vol.I, p.22)

In the field of music it is *nāda-brahman* that embodies the absolute power of sound:

We worship *nāda-brahman*, that incomparable bliss which is immanent in all the creatures as intelligence and is manifest in the phenomenon of this universe. (Sangīta Ratnākara I.3.7, KTK Vol. I, p. 24)

Two more sections are contained in every article: Classification and Process. The first places the relevant concept in a network of related concepts (e.g. the *indriyas* or sense-organs in their classification as sensory and motor organs, and in relation to the *tanmātras* or subtle sensations).

The section on Process depends on the nature of the concept. For example the article on *bhūta/mahābhūta* (element) describes the ritual process of *bhūtaśuddhi*, or purification of the body of the worshipper, transforming it from an elemental body into a divine one (Vol. III. p.97)..

The other important methodology followed is the use of full quotations in Sanskrit (sometimes in Pali and Prakrit as well), followed by a translation. In this way the Lexicon is useful for both those who know Sanskrit and for those not familiar with the language. The quotations collected represent in a way an anthology of the term in question, and can be the basis for further research.

Let me give some more examples.

Coming back to the title of this lecture: The power of words (and of the Word), the earliest meaning of *Brahman* in the Veda is the sacred Word, and its power. The Atharvaveda proclaims in a hymn titled *brahmavidyā*:

That Sacred Word which was first born in the East
the Seer has revealed from the shining horizon,
He disclosed its varied aspects, high and low,
the womb of both the Existent and the Nonexistent.

Atharvaveda IV.1.1 (KTK vol. I. p.7)

As in the Ṛgveda verses quoted earlier, it is the seers who mediate the revelation of the word in its varied aspects. *Brahman* being called ‘the womb (*yoni*) of both *sat* and *asat*’ is a powerful reference to the cosmic origin. The term *yoni* would again appear in an article, leading from the cosmic to the tantric ritual and to the symbolic form of the *yoni* as represented in relation to *liṅga*. *Brahman* does not remain an abstract Absolute, as both in the Upaniṣads as well as Purāṇas it has two aspects: one with form (*mūrta*) and one formless (*amūrta*). Art has always had to mediate between the two, or to give form to the formless.

Take another example from the article on *prāṇa*. Apart from its physiological meaning as ‘breath’, or its yogic meaning as the life-force which manifests in five forms, *prāṇa* is also fundamental in music. All artistic activities depend on *prāṇa*, as noted in the Svachchanda Tantra:

All the activities of talking, laughing, singing, dancing, war-movements, activities related to various arts (*kalā*) and crafts (*śilpa*) are the functions of (specific) *prāṇa*.

Svachchanda Tantra VII.306cd-307ab (KTK. I p. 149)

Not only music and dance, even sculpture expresses *prāṇa* or life-breath, as described by the art-historian Stella Kramrisch:

"It is as though in Indian art the image is embossed from within by the movement of breath or circulation through the vital centres of the living being, unimpeded by the gross matter of the actual physical body. A plastic quality results that is as though carried by the living breath with which the image is filled; conducted by the smooth channels of body and limbs. These smooth channels have pristine glow and a continuity of outline as though what they hold were an equivalent of the breath of God." (Exploring India's Sacred Art, p.4)

(KTK V.I. p.151)

I may give just one more example from the article on *sandhi*, which also shows the many-layered meaning and application of a single term. *Sandhi* means 'juncture, connection' etc. and it is used in Āyurveda for the joints of the body; in grammar for the combination of letters; in time for the junctures of a day which are special times for ritual, *sandhyā*; in *yoga* for the joining of breaths, as well as many other uses in various contexts. When it comes to its manifestation in the arts, the plot of a drama is structured by five *sandhis* or dramatic junctures, each of which have their own technical names (Nāṭyaśāstra XIX.37) with *Abhibhā*). In architecture, particularly temple architecture, the juncture between two major architectural parts is called the *sandhisthāna* or *sandhikṣetra*. In some Śilpaśāstras they are compared to the meeting between the bride and her bridegroom. The implication for example in medicine and in architecture is also that such places of junction need special protection because they are vulnerable. The myth of Narasiṃha illustrates this theme of the threshold very powerfully, which is also depicted in painting.

Sandhi does not only mean 'joining', but also 'healing' (for instance a fracture), performing a ritual in order to bridge the gap between day and night etc., in order to assume a continuity by joining and uniting the otherwise disparate divisions of time.

What emerges from the study of these key concepts is the interconnectedness of such different disciplines as Āyurveda, Jyotiṣa, ritual, architecture, theatre, and many other areas of philosophy and culture, all strung together on the Sūtra of a powerful word. This is the reason why the following motto had been chosen for the series: *sarvaṃ sarvātmakam*, "everything is connected to the whole", or, "every part contains the whole."

If in our fast-moving world the question of the relevance of such a long-term programme is raised, the answer has already been implied in the beginning. It is precisely at a time of crisis of identity that we need to delve into the authentic resources of Indian culture, which have been made tangible with powerful words. Without such knowledge, Indian culture and the key words expressing it are prone to much misuse and alienation. Words such as *guru*, *tantra*, *avatara* etc. are twisted and distorted, both in India and in other countries.

The question that India is facing is a serious one: What are the paradigms with which we approach the burning problems of today? Are we completely dependent on Western categories, as well as technology, or can we find the roots of an original Indian approach, which, if authentically applied, can also have a positive effect on other cultures which are equally without answers to the problems they have themselves created? This applies to many fields of human life and culture, but I shall draw our attention to only one burning question: ecology.

I am convinced that it is only by going deep into the roots of Indian culture that a solution can be found. No superficial or technical solution will suffice, or have any lasting effect.

The relationship of Man with the environment has to be based on a holistic understanding of nature, of the elements, and of the human body in relation to nature. It is the Western dualistic separation of man and nature, or spirit and

matter that has created havoc the world over by exploiting the Earth and the other elements. Only an advaitic understanding and relationship can save us from our predicament. When I was editing the Volume on the Elements, I was painfully aware of the urgency of this situation:

"This volume can serve as basic source material for an Indian ecology, which may have far-reaching consequences. For a present-day view on ecology has to be based on the insights and experiences of an ancient culture which lived in harmonious interaction with the forces of nature. The arts serve as a bridge between concepts, myths, ritual and life forms and hence they particularly express and mediate an ecological consciousness." (KTK Vol.I, xvii)

One of the pervasive ideas within the Indian tradition, whether Vedic or Tantric (the two main streams), is a system of correspondences between macro and microcosm, between body and universe.

The system of correlations of Indian cosmology which we find in the Vedic and Tāntric world views, as also in Buddhist and Jaina thought, is first of all based on the primordial elements. The macro- and microcosmic levels permeate the whole view of reality in the various schools and disciplines. It is here where cosmogony/cosmology, ritual as enactment and re-enactment of the cosmos and the Divine, and art as "transformation of nature" (A.K. Coomarswamy) and as manifestation of the same principles in aesthetic form, are interrelated.

(KTK Vol.I. p.xvi)

This is not just another, pre-scientific view of the universe, it is deeply connected with the sacredness of the cosmos. To give only one example from Śaiva initiation, where the initiand is related to all the elements:

If the earth, which is firm, is contemplated as of the nature of Śiva, (the disciple), is firmly established, and by such a contemplation, he is purified. Water (contemplated as Śiva) nourishes him, and (the contemplation of) fire makes him resplendent. By contact with air (as Śiva) he attains bliss, and (the contemplation of) space carries him to vast expansion.

Tantrāloka VII. 103-4 (KTK. V.I, p.xvi)

In a wider context of Nature, the article on *prakṛti* introduces the connection with the creative process of art in the following way:

Prakṛti is the producer of the material elements whose transformations constitute art and also art-experience, One mode of participation in the transformations of matter is through the artistic creative process. Since the material effects pre-exist in the material cause (*satkārya*), humans create nothing new but only bring to manifestation that which exists already in the unmanifest state in the material in the material cause. The creative process corresponds to the cosmogonical process and signifies the making manifest of the pre-existent and never the creation of something totally new. Humans thus participate in causing the unmanifest to become manifest.

While the creative process moves from the less differentiated to the more differentiated, from unity to multiplicity, the goal of aesthetic experience is to move in the opposite direction, from multiplicity to unity, from the more differentiated to the less differentiated, from the *tāmasic* dominated state of matter towards the *sāttvic* dominated state of matter. Art thus provides the means to get close to the undifferentiated source of materiality. This process of aesthetic enjoyment is therefore analogous to the yogic process of withdrawal of the senses from the manifoldness of

experience towards singles of concentration. (K. Jacobsen in the art. *prakrti*, KTK Vol. III. p.38).

Apart from its Indian readership, the volumes published have received an enthusiastic response from foreign scholars and students, who find there a tool to understanding Indian art and thought. Scholars from different fields, intercultural studies, art history, religious studies etc. find here a sourcebook which opens pathways for intercultural comparisons.

If an objection is raised concerning the sheer bulk of the volumes and the length of the articles, I have a suggestion to make to the IGNCA. It would be very much in the interest of popularizing the programme if an abridged version of the articles were published. I would suggest the following: Include the section "overview", "manifestation in the arts" and "conclusion", omitting the Sanskrit quotations. The articles could be arranged either alphabetically or in the order of the volumes with the groupings of terms. This would mean not more than 3-4 pages per term. Such an abridged version would serve for quick reference, and if the reader wants more details and Sanskrit quotations, he or she can go selectively to the complete article. The two publications would thus be complementary and enhance the usefulness of the programme.

The two research programmes of Kalākośa are intimately connected, therefore I am going to speak on the second one tomorrow: *Kalāmūlaśāstra*, a series of fundamental texts on the Arts.