

Mantras in Hinduism

Mantras are a complex feature of the Hindu tradition that people sometimes do not understand all that well. Different mantras are used for different things. “For India, Mantras are real, palpable, mental artifacts to be revered and mastered, to be used or misused (Alper 2)”. Mantras are very important in religion but they are not completely significantly religiously they have other significance also. Mantras are important for religious and non religious purposes. The history of mantras can be extensively related to Indian people’s religious life (Alper 2). One way of defining mantras is that they are sacred utterances, that are uttered sometimes daily, and sometimes for special occasions. There are formal and also informal definitions of mantras. Mantras are used in a variety of contexts. Hinduism sees certain mantras as only being useful for certain things. Each mantra has a specific function with a specific time and place for use. The Hindu tradition sees mantras as effective because they are believed to be useful and powerful (Alper 6). There are Vedic, Puranic, and Tantric mantras (Alper 5-6). Certain types are used to achieve some sort of escape from hardships from outside nature. There are certain mantras that are used to cope with the daily up and downs of everyday life. Besides these, there are also mantras that address the problems of the whole of human nature (Alper 7-8). Scholars debate whether mantras are language (Alper 9). The Rg Veda has several mentions of mantras. It is hard to understand mantras when you are not immersed in Indian life but it is possible if we try, it is just more difficult (Alper 9).

Mantras are considered to be sacred utterances. Mantras may be recited or chanted when religious rites are performed. They may also be uttered when one is not doing a ritual act (Burde 28). Mantra means “instrument to think” (Burde 28). Mantras are usually regarded as

utterances that will aid you if you need some form of protection. Two functions are said to be performed by mantras. The first is the power to not get injured and a possible wish fulfilment (Burde 28). Mantras first appear in the Vedas but they also appear in the tantric texts and the Puranas. The guru is usually charged with teaching mantras. There are several types of mantras. There are Vedic mantras and also meditative mantras. The Guru gives his student several mantras and helps them learn them, so that one day the student can put the mantras he has learned to good use (Burde 28).

There are six Vedic Mantras. One of the Vedic mantras is *agnin...* which is a command. The second Vedic mantra is *mitro na ehi...*, which is a sacrificial formula. This mantra accompanies an act. The third Vedic mantra is *yo'sman dvesti...*, which is purely used for ritual purposes. It is recited when the soil of a ritual enclosure is prepared with a wooden knife, a *sphya*. The fourth Vedic mantra is *devasya tva savituh...*, which you recite frequently and it indicates that material is being measured for an offering. The fifth Vedic mantra is *indra jusasva* which are considered to be mantras in their normal meaning. The sixth Vedic mantra is *ha bu ha bu ha bu...* which is chanted by the Udgata priest (Staal 201-207). These mantras represent what most of the Vedic mantras look like (Alper 59). It is not possible to compare different mantras such as Vedic, tantric or other mantras to each other (Alper 63). This is because these different mantras have things that make them characteristically unique and they are interpreted differently and so because of this, it would be almost impossible to compare these mantras with each other (Alper 63).

There four basic types of utterances, each of them is responsible for certain parts of the religious acts. They are all focused on some aspect of the presentation. The first mantra deals with presenting the characteristics. These are utterances that define parts of the situation such as

the qualities and identities. The second one deals with presenting the attitudes. These are expressions of personal feeling, such as personal wishes. The third mantra deals with presenting the intentions. These are statements expressed in the first person that expresses the commitment that person has to that action; why is this particular person doing this. The fourth one deals with presenting the requests. These are commands that are directed to a second party because they wish to establish a relationship with that person (Alper 99). In order to perform a ritual, the person who wishes to perform the ritual must be purified (Alper 99-103). The multiple repetitions of bija mantras are felt to accomplish the transformation. Bija mantras are felt to be symbols of the elements in their essential form (Alper 103).

Mantras are felt to put a person in contact with divine power, and that is why they are essentially controlled through very strict rules (Alper 165). There are certain prerequisites a person must have in order to recite a mantra. The person must have a proper moral basis, purgation, excellent practical skills, sufficient intellectual grounding, and the status of a person in an esoteric tradition (Alper 165-166). The person who wants to perform a mantra must have purified themselves before the ritual to get rid of all the bad stuff. They must be of a moral standing, so they can not have done anything bad. They must have the proper skills to perform the mantra. They must be from the right class in society. And they must have sufficient knowledge about mantras. A mantra must be performed by a disciple who pays close attention to the proper ways of saying the mantra (Alper 166). There is one mantra that is identified as comprising all other mantras. It is the AUM mantra. Pranava and also Vedic mantras are said to be the means of knowledge and also a way to help you achieve *moksa* (Alper 167). If a person does not understand a certain mantra it is due to their ignorance or absence of their mind in finding the meaning; which is there if you look (Alper 167). Another place mantra is used in Yogic

Meditation. Using mantra in meditation is attested in the classical yoga meditation. The aim of Yoga is to receive a vision of your outer body Purusa. Because a mantra is not necessary it is not useful in this situation (Alper 204). There is a relationship between mantra and god but it is not given in much detail (Alper 205). There is claimed to be a relationship between the mantra and god, because when you meditate you are claimed to be realizing god in the meditation. It is not the same as the relationship between the object in human language and the word, which has to follow certain rules. In Yoga the individual is attempting to attain a bond with the divine. Mantras are similar because you are trying to enlighten yourself by saying your sacred utterance (Alper 205).

The field of mantras is very large. “The fundamental, role of mantras, their great variety, and the powers ascribed to them, and the fact that belief in their efficacy has survived in India from the Vedas down to our own day does indeed confront us with a problem: How is one to explain the mantric phenomenon?” (Alper 296). There is a tendency that has become widespread that believes that the existence of mantras can be explained rationally. It is believed by some that mantras can only be properly understood and explained within Indian tradition itself (Alper 296).

Since there are varying definitions of mantras it is possible to say the word is untranslatable (Gonda 247). Mantras are considered to be formulas of worship and believed to contain a presence of a deity. It is believed that if correctly pronounced the deity will appear from it (Gonda 248). The reason the mantra is produced by your mind is to gain deific assistance when you need help of some kind (Gonda 251). There are several mentions in the Rg Veda of mantras which are called the songs to the Gods (Gonda 252).

Mantras are mentioned in several different ways. Mantras can be used as an arm for those who make the rules and help decide religious orthodoxy (Alper 17-18.). “Not only does the power of mantra have clearly designed policing powers against Vedic enemies, it also is so highly charged that, unless properly and carefully handled, it can fall back upon and burn its handler” (Alper 18). To be considered a perfect mantra it must be done with the greatest of care, and said exactly how it should be, and that it be done in a poetic way (Alper 19). One of the most common mantras is the mantra that is given to a boy at his sacred thread ceremony, Upanayanam. This ceremony is to celebrate his coming of age. The mantra which he should repeat three times a day is called the Guyatri mantra (Rodrigues 132-135).

Can mantras be considered speech acts? In order to designate something a speech act it involves viewing language a certain way and having everybody believe that is the way to view it. The best way to approach theories of language is to see it in action. Because mantras are recited by a person with specific intentions they are considered speech acts. Some discussions have said that mantras are obscure, because it is hard to pin point what the true meaning is behind them (Alper 144-145). Because, of the fact that mantras are intended to be indicative and refer to things (Alper 149). But overall it would appear that since mantras are actually trying to convey meaning they should not be considered speech acts (Alper 149).

References and Further Recommended Reading

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http://www.khandro.net/practice_mantra.htm

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