

The Evolution of Mantra from the Vedas to Tantrism

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Introduction

Mantra has served as an ontological tool and a means of traversing the metaphysical universe on the Indian continent since at least c. 1500 BCE. The evolution of mantra appears to be a complex amalgamation of practices and soteriological methods, set within an ever-evolving metaphysical framework. From the early Vedas, the power of the word, channelled by the Kavi or Vedic poet/priest, held clans together by rousing a devoted heart through the invocation of inspired speech. As spiritual praxis diverged from the central Vedic fire, we can see the development of ‘tools of awakening’ through the ritual use of mantra. This paper examines the function of mantra within its soteriological habitus from the early Vedic period (c. 1500–1000 BCE) through the later Vedic period (c. 1000–500 BCE) to the Tantric era (up to 1400 CE), and how its maturation parallels the evolving metaphysical framework of the Sāṅkhya Tattwa system. To draw a clearer comparison between the changing function of mantra, we take a closer look at the theories surrounding the mechanisms of speech, sound, thought, ritual, and awakening at specific points along the continual and complex timeline of mantric practice.

The Inspired Kavi

A notion we often see in the Vedic religious structure is the Brahmin priest’s power. Findly's discussion of the Kavi provides insight into the emergence of priestly authority within Vedic ritual culture. There is a strong notion that earlier power structures within the Vedic ritual community centred not on the priest but on the formulation of words themselves. Let us look at the definition of the word mantra to begin to frame its function. According to Staal (1993, 191), the term mantra is commonly derived from the Sanskrit root *man* ('to think') and the suffix *-tra*, denoting an instrument or tool. We can take this to mean the agency of thought. Inspired cognition and sacred speech were central to early Vedic ritual practice; therefore, the power of the spoken word relied on the truth within the words. It was the one who ‘sees’ who had access to the true word. The recitation of truth was a re-enactment of creation itself (Findly

1989, 24). In the Rig Veda 6.9.5, we see the prayer of a young poet who aspires to Agni, the original Kavi, so that he can align his mind, his heart, and his ears to the one original thought.

(2) I do not know how to stretch the thread nor weave the cloth¹, nor what they weave as they enter the contest. Whose son could speak here such words that he would be above his father below?

(3) He is the one who knows how to stretch the thread and weave the cloth; he will speak the right words. He who understands this is the guardian of immortality; though he moves below another he sees above him.

(4) He is the light firmly fixed for all to see; the thought swiftest among all who fly. All the gods with one mind and one will rightly come to the one source of thought.

(5) This is the first priest of the oblation; look at him. This is the immortal light among mortals. This is the one who was born and firmly fixed; the immortal growing great in his body.

(6) My ears fly open, my eyes open, as does this light that is fixed in my heart. My mind flies up straining into the distance. What shall I say? What shall I think?
Rig Veda 6.9.5 (O’Flaherty 1981, 116)

The true words of the Kavi had the power to lift a heavy mind through inspiration, and it was a ‘dull mind’ that people feared. Dull-mindedness, or *amati*, was a fall from grace, and grace was central to Vedic ideology (Findly 1989, 31). The way of the gods was a path of protection and abundance. It was the inspired Kavi who could channel this truth and give power and purpose to the people.

(11) When questioned I speak reverently of the Order, if I may, trusting in you who know all creatures. You rule over all this, over all the riches in heaven and earth.

(12) What is ours of this? What riches? What treasures? Tell us for you who understand, you who know all creatures. Hidden is the furthest end of our road, where we have gone as those who fail to follow a false path.

(13) What are the limits? What are the rules? What is the goal? We wish to go there as racehorses speed towards the victory prize. When will the dawns, the goddesses, the wives of immortality, spread over us their light with the colour of the sun?

(14) Those whose speech is empty and contrary, insipid and petty, leave one unsatisfied, what can they say here, Agni? Unarmed, let them fall defeated.
(The Rig Veda 4.5.14, O’Flaherty 1981, 115)

Findly (1989) states that the two-fold nature of mantra lies in its formulaic coherence. Equally poignant is the content of a mantra’s significance. Wilke (2011) supports this view by describing the early RigVeda hymns as the real food for the gods and as primary to the

¹ The cloth was considered all of manifest existence which was woven together by the gods (O’Flaherty, 1981)

sacrificial offering. At this point, there is no clear distinction between sacred and profane speech. In the early R̥igVeda, we begin to see the qualities of speech which allow them to become powerful. Eloquence, with direct and carefully chosen words, most importantly, coming from the heart, is the medium of power (Findly, 1989). The most potent principle of the mantra is truth or insight. According to Findly, truth does not exist in language, and it is the job of the skilled seer to weave the unseen forces into clear language in order to share the divine sphere with the human sphere. In the early Vedas, the formulas that define speech as mantra take a different form. They are not bound by social rules and strict codes of recitation (Staal, 1998). Social hierarchical systems and the complex ritual procedure develop over time. The R̥ig Veda 10.71.1 -11 renders Findly's observations true with the added dimension that the ritual sacrifice was a communal gathering. It was a friendship that brought people together, and in this love the truth could be understood. Gonda (1963, p. 278) also describes how it is in the heart that feelings and experiences are fashioned into thoughts.

The R̥ig Veda 10.71.1 -11

- (1) Brhaspati, when they set in motion the first beginning of speech, giving names, their most pure and perfectly guarded secret was revealed through love.
- (2) When the wise ones fashioned speech with their thought, sifting it as grain is sifted through a sieve, then friends recognized their friendships. A good sign was placed on their speech.
- (3) Through the sacrifice, they traced the path of speech and found it inside the sages. They held it and portioned it out to many; together the seven singers praised it.
- (4) One who looked did not see speech, and another who listens does not hear it. It reveals itself to someone as a loving wife, beautifully dressed, reveals her body to her husband.
- (5) One person, they said, has grown awkward and heavy in this friendship; they no longer urge him forward in the contests. He lives with falsehood like a milkless cow, for the speech that he has heard has no fruit no flower.
- (6) A man that abandons a friend who has learned with him no longer has a share in speech. What he does hear he hears in vain, for he does not know the path of good action.
- (7) Friends have eyes and ears, but their flashes of insight are not equal. Some are like ponds that reach only to the mouth or shoulder; others are like ponds that one could bathe in.
- (8) When the intuitions of the mind are shaped in the heart, when Brahmins perform sacrifices together as friends, some are left behind for lack of knowledge, while others surpass [...]
(O'Flaherty 1981, 61)

The importance of purity or truth as the central principle during the early Vedic period is frequently emphasised in the hymns of the R̥g Veda. Truth is *ṛta*, the cosmic order in the universe witnessed by the inspired poet. From the above hymn, we can see a proto-social hierarchy emerging from the priest's power, creating an organic social stratum organised by love and respect for the truth. Should a priest become dull-minded, their position would be null and void (R̥g Veda 10.71.5, see above). This idea is also reinforced in Book 7 of the Vedas, where we see a collapse of this structure and where Vasiṣṭha must restore the true, pure relationship between the priests and the gods. Vasiṣṭha is a revered sage from the early Vedas whose ideas were so influential that he became one of the first sages of Vedānta philosophy. He is the chief author of Mandala or Book 7 of the R̥g Veda. In the R̥g Veda 10.130, we gain insight into how the fabric of our metaphysical reality or *prakṛti* is woven into existence by “Man”, and the means to ontological salvation is through the chants or listening to the chants. R̥g Veda 10.130.4 describes which metre is ‘yoked’ or joined to each deity as a means to *puruṣa* or salvation.

(2) The Man stretches the warp and draws the weft; the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs, that are fastened in place; they made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.

(3) [. . .]

(4) The Gāyatri metre was the yoke-mate of Agni; Savitṛ joined with the Uṣṇi metre, and with the Anuṣṭubh metre was Soma that reverberates with the chants. The Bṛhatī metre resonated in the voice of Bṛhaspati.

(5) The Virāj metre was the privilege of Mitra and Varuṇa; the Triṣṭubh metre was part of the day of Indra. The Jagatī entered into all the gods. That was [. . .]

R̥g Veda 10.130.4 (O’Flaherty, 1981, 33)

Gonda (1963, 54) adds to this idea by noting that the metaphysical framework of the Vedic hymns was grounded in the Kavi's visions. Gonda describes a precise process, from the Kavi's flash of inspiration to the inferred divine truth.

Ritual Mantra as Formula

As we move forward in Vedic history, there is a shift from hymns to mantra chants, which places greater emphasis on formulaic structure and thus evolves their function in the ritual setting. As ritual becomes more established, so do the structures of the hymns and their pronunciation and repetition. It is through precise pronunciation that power is released. We can see a reflection of this development from hymn to mantra in the R̥g Veda 10.90.9.

(7) They anointed the Man, the sacrifice born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass. With him, the gods, Sādhyas, and sages sacrificed.

(8) From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the melted fat was collected, and he made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages.

(9) From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it, the formulas were born.

Rig Veda 10.90.9. (O’Flaherty 1981, 30)

In the later Vedas, we see more hymns dedicated to Vac, the goddess of speech, than to Brahman. This suggests that speech itself begins to take on objective sacred importance. Wilke (2011, 134) describes the early hymns as “evocative calls to the gods and magic poetry” that later evolved into esoteric word formulas. Staal (1996) theorised that, during the late Vedic period, the meaning of a mantra was secondary to its function. He argues that Vedic mantras were chanted aloud or muttered; they were neither the ritual acts themselves nor did they carry significant meaning for the ritual act; those that did were exceptionally rare. The mantra was recited alongside the acts, as if following a technical operation. An example of this is the consecration of space-filler bricks for the central ritual altar. Each brick was so powerfully charged with a mantra that it had to be pacified with milk to be brought under sway (Staal 1993, 217).

According to Staal (1996, 208), the power of a mantra was manifest in the formulaic ordering of *stobha*, or syllables and sounds common in the Samaveda. The outcome was that the mantra appeared to make no sense; however, the power it generated brought the ritual action to life. The *stobha* were added to create rhythmic, musical sound structures. These sound structures created a subtle architecture that served as the agency to the divine realm. Similar to the early Vedic hymns, the precision of speech, the powerful projection of the word, and the confidence in recitation created power in the mantra. However, we now have the notion that the mantra exists as its own instrument and that the inspired poet is no longer needed, only the most competent priest. The complexity of these syllabic mantras became so intricate that the priest needed markers on a stick to guide the recitation (Staal 1993, 231–232).

Staal (1993, 221) argues that the musical element was far more significant than the mantra's meaning. He suggests that the meaning and poetic value of the mantra were “uninteresting

and mediocre”, but it was the sounds that made them remarkable. Wilke (2011, 137) supports this idea, arguing that the “nonsensical” *stobha* did have meaning, not in a linguistic sense, but by transporting the listener out of the logical brain and into a field where the divine could be sensed. This connection could be grounded in soma inducing a liminal state, enhanced by the repetitive rhythms and soundscapes described by Staal. It is not clear what soma refers to directly; however, there is speculation that it was a concoction of plants that was drunk and brought the ritual participant into an altered state. In the Rig Veda 10.130.4, a connection is made between the *Anuṣṭubh* metre (a particular form of a rhythmic metre) and *soma*. The liminal state allowed the direct experience of the deity. According to Mīmāṃsā philosophers, it was the name of the deity which personified an aspect of existence.

(4) The Gāyatri metre was the yoke-mate of Agni; Savitr joined with the Uṣṇi metre, and with the Anuṣṭubh metre was Soma that reverberates with the chants. The Bṛhatī metre resonated in the voice of Bṛhaspati.

Rig Veda 10.130.4 (O’Flaherty 1981, 33).

To ritualise this deific structure was to bring it into reality. This was achieved through mantric recitation, in which the ritual was the primary concern. Any performance of speech that uses linguistic means to convey an intention is a speech act (Taber 1981, 145). Timalsina (2010) describes the Mīmāṃsā view that *Śabda*, or word, has two properties, one visible and one not. The meaning of the word is what is seen. The meaning conjures an image in the perceiver's mind and therefore triggers a form. What is not seen is the power that lies within the form. As we have demonstrated earlier, Staal believed that the mantra had a function in the ritual. That function was to establish cosmic order or *rta*. Staal was clear that mantra is not a speech act performed by a priest, but rather an autonomous entity that derives its power from sound rather than linguistic meaning (Staal 1993, 4). This theory stands in contrast to Timalsina’s idea of power manifest in the thought form. According to Staal (1993, 158), the esoteric power lies in the formula itself. As a result, anyone could learn the formula and achieve the ritual's desired outcome, provided they were of the right caste. This idea, in itself, is a distinctly Western empirical one; however, Wilke (2011, 136) extends this concept by suggesting that a mantra originates from a primordial sound. These are potentially proto-Tantric notions of mantra that will be discussed later.

According to Staal (1996), the mantra created a bond between the ritual and the cosmic entity. This bond, or *bandhu*, was the means by which the deity could communicate with the people.

It was the mantra that clarified the ritual and thereby allowed others to see the power of Agni. Wilke offers another idea, namely that the symbolic meaning of the word lay in its tie to ritual objects and acts, contrary to Staal's idea that the words were meaningless. Wilke (2011, 137) argued that if the word was not pronounced correctly, the *bandhu* would not be made between the word and the symbolic action or sound, and the word would be empty of power.

The Tantric Ritual Transformation Through *Mantra*

The transformation from the Brahmanic Vedic mantra to the Hindu Tantric mantra is evident in the soteriological practices that developed. In the Vedic world, mantra had an external, communal function. Although Findly (1988) argues that the mantra was recited internally during the ritual as a form of meditation, this was not the central idea. This was, however, the case for the *tantrika*. Although there are many distinct paths and outcomes for the *tantrika*, the fundamental practices and principles that constitute reality are common. According to the *tantrika*, our universe is composed of subtle elements, or *tattwas*, which arise from one another, beginning with the most subtle principle, pure awareness itself, and culminating in the grossest, the five elements. Within this ontological hierarchy are the mechanisms that distinguish awareness from things (*buddhi*), the 'I'-making (*ahamkhara*), sense processing or mind (*manas*), the senses (*jnanendriyas*), physical movements (*karmendriyas*), sense objects (*tanmatras*), and the five elements (*bhutamatras*). Thought, speech, sound, and feeling result from interactions among the *tattwas*. These interactions create forms that exist on a subtle plane. Each plane of existence is a vibration. Our universe is a projection of vibrations onto vibrations, which gives us the illusion of a solid reality. From this theory, we can understand the sonic relevance of mantra (Flood, 2006).

Bhartṛhari's philosophy seeks to identify the true nature of "word" or *śphoṭa* on an esoteric level. A word exists on four levels, namely Para, the transcendental sound of pure awareness; *paśyantī*, which manifests as a thought form; *madhyama*, which takes form in the sense organs; and *vaikhari*, the physical sound pronounced. These four levels are more characteristic of Śaiva and Tantric traditions than of Bhartṛhari's explicit fourfold model; the manifestation of sound follows the same soterio-ontological framework as the *tattwas* (Timalsina 2010, 409). Gavin Flood (2006, 65) describes in detail the practice of the path of mantra as a transcendental sound arising from within the self and producing speech. Equally, the faculties of hearing and feeling allow the transcendental sound to awaken the individual. It is through the very same human faculties that the mantra was produced that it can be felt by another (Timalsina 2010, 405). We

can see a reference to this practice in the *Khēcārīvidyā* 1.28c–40b (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 657).

7.12 *Khēcārīvidyā* 1.28c–40b. The *Khēcārī* mantra:

(28d) Now hear [the mantra and practice of] *Khēcārī*. (29) And one should go, O goddess, to where there is a guru who has perfected the divine yoga and, after receiving the mantra (*vidyā*) called *Khēcārī* spoken by him, (30) one should begin by scrupulously and tirelessly carrying out the practice described by him.

I shall proclaim the *Khēcārī* mantra, which grants success in yoga, O goddess. (31) Without it a yogi cannot enjoy the *Khēcārī* power. Practising the yoga of *Khēcārī* by means of the *Khēcārī* mantra preceded by the *Khēcārī* seed-syllable, (32) [the yogi] becomes lord of the *Khēcāras* and dwells among them forever.

The abode of the *Khēcāras* [and] fire, adorned with the mother and the circle, (33) is called the *Khēcārī* seed-syllable. By means of it yoga is successful [...]

Khēcārīvidyā 1.28c–40b (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 657)

The Tantrics mapped the principal *tattwas* onto mandalas or sacred geometric schemata, in which each *tattwa* was represented as a deity, with the ultimate *tattwa* as the central deity from which all other deities become manifest. The Tantric mantra regards the Sanskrit letters (*matrka*) as of utmost importance. They are seen as the blueprint of creation, as they are a physical manifestation of the principle components of the original sound equivalent to the *tattwas*. The vibrational quality of each letter is a *bija*, and the particular ordering of the *bija* defines the nature of the deity invoked. We can see an example of this in the *Mṛgendratāntra* *Yogapāda* 8ab (a Tantric text pre-10th Century).

(8ab) O sage, mantra-repetition (*japa*) is [the deity's] verbalisation. It causes the [deity] visualised to approach.

Mṛgendratāntra *Yogapāda* 8ab. (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 641)

To each letter, a specific number of rays (*rasmi*) is assigned, and each ray is associated with a different *mahabhūta* or element, thus creating different emanations of the deity (Timalsina 2010, 409). From this perspective, the mantra is seen as a form of consciousness in its own right. The resonance of each sound merges and highlights different layers of the self, from the gross to the most subtle. By meditatively sounding the *bija* mantra in the appropriate order, we access subtle forces that lie dormant in a conditioned mind (Timalsina 2010, 409). The function of reciting the *bija* is to recreate the deity's energy signature and to experience that *bhavana* or feeling within the self, rather than in an external metaphysical realm of the early Vedas and of the Kavi. Staal (1996) argues that the *stobha* was, in fact, an earlier formation of the *bija*

mantra, which is somewhat paralleled by Robert Yelle's (2003) idea that the *bija* was added to various parts of the *mantra* to create palindromes. Staals' theory of *stobha* is far more formulaic compared to Yelle's idea of the *bija*. According to Yelle, reciting the palindrome mimicked the contraction and expansion of the universe. In the instance of the *mantra so ham*, a meditation *mantra* which accompanies mindfulness of breath, we see an onomatopoeic resemblance to the in-breath and out-breath of every living being. Through the repetition of this *mantra*, a meditative state is induced through fixation on the breath. Mallinson and Singleton (2017) refer to these practices in Svachchandantra 7.29, Parakhyatantra 14.82, and Yogabija 1.3.2.

Yelle's (2003, 21) theory of ordered *bija* opposes Staals' *stobha* theory as each *bija*'s meaning is a reflection of the action, "so" the in-breath and "ham" the out-breath. Yelle added to the idea that the *mantra* was a form of pure consciousness, which, like all sentient life, reflects universal behaviours such as birth and death, the need for nurturing, and a wholesome environment. When a palindrome was created, it was enveloped or brought to life by reciting it backwards and forwards. Before the mantra's life force was enhanced, it needed an initial charge. When the word is uttered from a transcendental state, then the *mantra* is enlivened. It was through this medium that the *mantra* was initiated and passed on (Timalsina 2010, 405). In addition to being alive, the mantra needed the *bija* to support its existence. For example, by adding a *pravana* or *om* to the beginning and the end of a *mantra*, we create a dam or *setu* at each end of the *mantra* and by doing so prevent its power from leaking away (Yelle 2003, 21). Here we can see that the *mantra* existed as a separate entity, with the power to awaken an individual depending on its potency and the initiation.

I have only scratched the surface of Mantra in the Indian tradition, but from the few examples I have given, we can see that Vedic mantras were a means of establishing cosmic order and connecting to the divine. Over time, the ritual action and the mantric verse began to take on a more mechanical function, in contrast to their heartfelt early Vedic counterparts. The ritual itself became an amalgamation of actions and mantra, with the division between the two less distinct. Although the Vedic and Tantric functions of mantra serve as instruments for transcendental experience, they differ markedly. The function of the Tantric mantra becomes a tool for realising the principal *tattwas* that make up the self and the universe. Later Tantric practices create a more intimate connection with the divine beyond age, class or gender. We can see, however, that the early Vedic mantric practices laid a pure foundation for devotion,

concentration, and realisation of the cosmic order of things, and initiated a path towards myriad technologies for understanding the self.

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