

Akshara – The Forgotten Periodic Table

Sai Venkatesh Balasubramanian and Gomathi Balasubramanian

Sai Vidya Mandir, Bengaluru-560062, Karnataka, India. s.venky30@gmail.com

Abstract:

The immense power of Sanskrit Sounds and Mantras and their mention in Spirituality and contemporary science cannot be over-emphasized. Upon a cursory glance, it is seen that the Sanskrit alphabets (Aksharas) could be mapped to certain concepts such as Creation, Balance, Success and Variety; stringing together such Aksharas could form Mantras and words. Based on this, a hypothesis is formulated which leads to a listing of concepts from Akshara descriptions given in Tantric Texts such as the Matruka Nighantu, Mantra Vidhanam and Siddha Sapara Tantra. Finally, sample interpretations of various words and Seed (Bija) Mantras using the Aksharas are presented.

Keywords:

Aksharas; Sanskrit Alphabet; Sanskrit Sounds; Mantras; Bija Mantras.

Introduction:

The significance of sound in Indian Philosophy is described concisely by a single term – ‘Nada Brahma’ (Berendt 1987). The concept of sound, which is worshipped as the supreme Divinity, is alluded to in many works of Indian Literature (Radha 2005). For instance, the Lalitha Sahasranamam extols the Divine Mother as the Form of Mantra (Ravi 2010). A lot of references exist in Itihasas such as Ramayana and Mahabharata regarding the power of sacred sounds – Mantras (Chawdhry 2005, Keshavadas, 1988, Debroy 2012). The Mahabharata details how specific Mantras were used for various purposes such as progeny (Kunti and the Sun God) and weaponry (The Brahmastra and other Astras) (Debroy 2012). The Maheshwara Sutras describe how the Aksharas were born out of the rhythmic sound of the Divine – thus concisely capturing the transcendental powers of the Aksharas (Danielou 1987).

Even in recent times, the significance and the potential of the sacred Sanskrit sounds have been investigated and published of which, two such examples are noteworthy:

1. Travis et al. have compared the physiological patterns such as heart rate and skin conductance produced by recitation of Sanskrit Texts to those produced by Transcendental Meditation Techniques, and the results indeed highlight the alpha powers and coherence exhibited by Sanskrit sounds (Travis et al 2001).
2. Experiments performed in Cymatics, the science of visualization of sound, reveal that the sounds of certain languages such as Sanskrit produce eye-catching ornamental patterns reminiscent of ancient Yantras and related Sacred Geometry (Dale 2009, Angelo 2005).

Given the significance of the Sanskrit speech sounds and the wide variety of tasks accomplished by utilizing their powers, one wonders if the Sanskrit alphabet forms some sort of a spiritual 'periodic table' – each alphabet corresponding to a concept, and for any given purpose, the corresponding concepts could be strung together to form words and Mantras. That is precisely the motivation behind the present article. Specifically, certain texts such as the Matraka Nighantu, Siddha Sapara Tantra and Mantra Vidhanam are considered as the base platform to develop a hypothesis and using the descriptions contained therein of the worship of the Akshara Goddesses (Akshara Pita), each Akshara is mapped to a concept (Sharma 2007). As examples, select words and seed Mantas (Bijaksharas) in Sanskrit are then interpreted using this conceptual basis. It is seen that the collection of 51 Aksharas could form a set of concepts forming a 'periodic table' and by stringing Aksharas in suitable order and composition, one could use sound as a very powerful tool.

Tantras – The Hidden Sources

The discussion in the above section points towards the immense power of Sanskrit sounds and Mantras. A logical question then follows: How were the Mantras formed out of Aksharas? Within the vast and comprehensive Sanskrit literature, is there any text that outlines albeit veiled, the power of each Akshara?

It is interesting to note that the 'power' of each Akshara is immense, and as witnessed in the Mahabharata, could be used for extremely destructive and harmful purposes. One could then intuitively conclude that a lot of effort went into preserving and concealing this information regarding the power of Aksharas. Thus the best place to search for such information would be among texts of esoteric philosophy.

One such group of the texts is the Tantra (Avalon 2009). The Tantras often contain a lot of content steeped in esoteric philosophy meant to be kept well out of the reach of the common man. A typical example is the Sri Vidya Tantra, where even the Tantric texts themselves insist on preserving their secrecy (Brooks 1992).

With regards to the power of Aksharas, apart from the Vedic treatises of Shiksha and philosophical Sankhya, texts such as Matraka Nighantu, Siddha Sapara Tantra and Mantra Vidhanam outline the importance and the power of Mantras (Sharma 2007). Of particular interest is the tradition of the 51 Akshara Pitas, which are the sites where the Divine Mother Sati's body parts is believed to have fallen after the ill-ominous event of the Daksha Yagna. In each of the sites, the Goddess is worshipped as a personification of one of the Aksharas and hence the name Akshara Pitas (Sharma 2007). In the present article, the three Tantric treatises of Matraka Nighantu, Siddha Sapara Tantra and Mantra Vidhanam are used as the reference to build a hypothesis aimed at unraveling the potential powers of Aksharas (Sharma 2007).

The Hypothesis

With the single aim of unraveling the power of the Aksharas and the formulation of a concept oriented 'Periodic Table', the bedrock of the present article is a hypothesis, conjectured The 'Akshara Hypothesis', whose key points are enumerated as follows:

1. Out of a dire need to preserve the secrecy, the scholars and seers decided to conceal the information regarding the immense powers of Aksharas. This could have been motivated by the ghastly and dreadful sight of the destruction caused by usage of Mantra based weaponry in the Mahabharata War (Debroi 2012).
2. The main texts consisting of this concealed information are three – Matraka Nighantu, Siddha Sapara Tantra and the Mantra Vidhanam (Sharma 2007).
3. The only living embodiment of the concept of Akshara power is the tradition of worship of the 51 Akshara Pitas, where each Pita Goddess is regarded as the personification of an Akshara (Sharma 2007).
4. Any word, term or Mantra in Sanskrit can be interpreted using the concepts of its corresponding Aksharas, and the derived concept would yield the meaning of the word.

The 51 Concepts

In this section, the concepts behind each of the 51 Aksharas are presented, building on the Akshara Hypothesis. In particular, it is noted that each of the 51 Akshara Pita Goddesses is referred to by two names in the Siddha Sapara Tantra, and these names are listed in Sharma (2007). The meanings of these two names are used to lexically 'decipher' the common link between them, and this common link forms the concept represented by the corresponding Akshara. The Akshara concept formulations are grouped by the various classes of the Sanskrit alphabet. Though the inclusion of the Aksharas Rr(ठ) and Ll(ड) are often disputed, the following list includes them.

Short Vowels:

1. A (अ) – Amrita and Ajaamukhi: Amrita is immortality, whereas Ajaamukhi suggests a dual meaning of Goat-Faced and the Unborn (Jaa – Born). The common link is eternal existence, leading to the concept of Existence and hence, Creation.
2. I (इ) – Indraani and Ilaa: Indrani, as one of the Sapta Matrakas represent overcoming the passion leading to jealousy. Ilaa represents the beauty of nature envisioned in the smooth flow of a river. The connecting link, and hence the concept is Love and Desire.
3. U (उ) – Uma and Ugra: Uma, as the Mother of the Universe, symbolizes unconditional motherly love, affection and care. Ugra represents the wrath, similar to that seen in a lioness when its cub is troubled. The underlying concept here is Care and Caution.
4. R (ठ) – Rttidhaayi and Rutudhaama: Rttidhaayi represents the caretaker and establisher of the world Order (Rit). Rutudhaama is the Originator of Seasons (Rutu). The underlying concept is the passage of time and hence Order and Priority.

5. L (लृ) – Lukara and Lutumbara: While Lukara is the reference to the melodious sound made by the letter 'L', Lutumbara is the One showily adorned. The underlying concept is Charm.

Long Vowels:

6. Aa (आ) – Aakarshini and Atharvini: Aakarshini is the enchantress – the controller. Atharvini represents the Healer – the remover of misery and sorrow. The concept is Bliss.
7. Ee (ई) – Eeshini and Eeshwari: Eeshini is the symbol of Divine Perfection and Eeshwari is the perfect Goddess. The concept represented is Perfection and Balance.
8. Oo (ऊ) – Oordhvakeshi and Oorjasvala: Oordhvakeshi represents the One whose hairs stand on end, possibly due to awe. Oorjasvala is the tall and high one. The common link and hence the concept is Excellence and Greatness.
9. Rr (ऋ) – Rookara and Renuka: Rookara represents the intense sound of 'Rr' and Renuka represents the powerful Goddess. The underlying concept is Intensity.
10. Li (ली) – Lookara and Loonchika: Lookara represents the resonating sound of 'L' and Loonchika represents the reciprocating respect. The underlying concept is Respect and Awe.
11. E (ए) – Ekapaada and Revathi: Ekapaada represents the single-footed One or alternatively the One-footed penance and austerity undergone by the Devi. Revathi represents the bountiful. The underlying concept is Solidarity and Solitude.
12. Ai (ऐ) – Aishwaryaatmika and Sushka Revathi: Aishwaryaatmika represents the abundance of Fortune and Sushka Revathi represents dry richness. The concept is Abundance.
13. O (औ) – Omkaara and Ashvini: Omkaara represents the eternal sound of Om whereas Ashvini represents the healing and pleasant force of the twin Gods. The concept is Pleasure.
14. Au (औ) – Aushadha and Aghora: Aushadha represents the curative power of medicine whereas Aghora represents the Wrathful One. The concept is Healing and Recovery.

Support Vowels:

15. Am (अं) – Ambika and Anjana: Ambika represents the Universal Mother and Anjana represents the Unblemished One. The underlying concept is Completion and Fulfillment.
16. Ah (अः) – Akshara and Ajaa: Akshara represents the eternal constant (Kshara – Changing) and Ajaa is the Unborn. The underlying concept is the Oneness of the Advaita Philosophy.

Gutturals:

17. Ka (क) – Kalaratri and Bhootavinyasini: Kalaratri represents the dark emptiness of night and hence, time, and Bhootavinyasini represents the conjunction of the forces of nature (Bhootas). The underlying concept is thus Control, Coordination and Management.
18. Kha (ख) – Khandita and Kathyodhini: Khandita represents the force of Severance, whereas Kathyodhini represents the Sword wielding Goddess. The concept is Separation.

19. Ga (ग) – Gayatri and Dhoomra: Gayatri represents the power of Knowledge and Wisdom; Dhoomra is the Smoke filled delusion. The concept is thus Clarity.
20. Gha (घ) – Ghantakarshini: Ghantakarshini represents the Goddess who controls using the powerful, heavy sound of the Bell. The concept is Resonance and Stability.
21. Nga (ङ) – Tarna and Arundhati: Tarna represents the young, growing deer and Arundhati is the eternal star. The concept is Growth and Development.

Palatals:

22. Ca (च) – Chamunda and Sushuma: Chamunda is the Destroyer of ego whereas Sushuma is the beacon pointing at the Right path of life. The concept is Freshness and Direction.
23. Cha (छ) – Chayatha and Nirjhara: Chayatha is the representation of Shadow, Nirjhara is the untarnished. The concept is the rise of purity from the depths of shadow and thus Enthusiasm.
24. Ja (ज) – Jaya and Bhogada: Jaya represents victory and Bhogada is the giver of fortune. The underlying concept is the result of victory and fortune – Prosperity.
25. Jha (झ) – Jhankarini and Nirjharanadi: Jhankarini represents the powerful 'Jha' sound; Nirjharanadi is the power of waterfall. The underlying concept is Influence and Change.
26. Nja (ञ) – Jnanaroota and Prabodhini: Jnanaroota is the form of Knowledge whereas Prabodhini provides Wisdom. The underlying concept is Wisdom and Learning.

Cerebrals:

27. Ta (ट) – Tankahasta and Dharini: Tankahasta wields the sickle and Dharini represents the giver of bounty. The concept embodied is Fruition.
28. Tha (ठ) – Thankarini and Kriyasaraswathi: Thankarini represents the forceful 'Tha' sound and Kriyasaraswathi is the Goddess of time and action – Kriya Shakti. The concept is Time.
29. Da (ड) – Daamari and Dakarini: Dakarini represents the drumming 'Da' sound whereas Daamari represents the vagaries of the Goddess. The concept represented here is Variety.
30. Dha (ढ) – Dhankarini and Shridhara: Dhankarini represents the heavy 'Dha' sound and Shridhara represents the One adorned by wealth. The concept is Accumulation.
31. Na (ण) – Narna and AnantaShakti: Narna represents the connecting bridge and Anantashakti is the power of the Infinite. The concept is Transformation and Innovation.

Dentals:

32. Ta (त) – Tamasya and Saraswati: Tamasya represents the solidarity of darkness and Saraswati is the mighty flowing river. The concept is thus Unity and Oneness.
33. Tha (थ) – Sthanvi and Nilakantha: Sthanvi represents the established one, whereas Nilakantha is the ever-spreading evil destroyer. The concept is Spreading and Expansion.

34. Da (दा) – Dakshayini and Bhogadayini: Dakshayini is the dexterous skillful one, whereas Bhogadayini is the giver of Fortune. The concept is Skill and Self-Restraint (Daama).
35. Dha (धा) – Dhatya and Amala: Dhatya is the One bedecked heavily and the Amala is the ever pure One. The concept embodied here is Purity.
36. Na (ना) – Narya and Ananta: Narya is the ultimate Feminine Power whereas Ananta is the one representing the Infinite. The concept here is Focus and Infinity.

Labials:

37. Pa (पा) – Parvathi and Icchashakti: Parvathi represents the Daughter of the Mountain, whereas Icchashakti represents Willpower. The concept is Determination and Independence.
38. Pha (फा) – Phatkarini and Aatapakomala: Phatkaini is the power of splitting, while Aatapakomala is the soft warmth of coziness. The concept embodied here is Endurance and Self-Confidence.
39. Ba (बा) – Bandhini and Chitshyamala: Bandhini is the binding power of bondage and Chitshyamala is the power of revelation. The concept is Revelation and Knowledge.
40. Bha (भा) – Bhadrakali and Shyamala: Bhadrakali is the powerful Goddess of Time and Shyamala is the Dark Complexioned One. The concept here is Force and Life.
41. Ma (मा) – Mahamaya and VidyaShyamala: Mahamaya is the Great power of Illusion (Maya) and VidyaShyamala is the power of wisdom. The concept is Enlightenment and Self-Realization.

Semi-Vowels:

42. Ya (या) – Yashaswini and Deepini: Yashaswini represents the perfection and honoured one whereas Deepini is the ever-lit flame of Life. The concept is Activity and Honour.
43. Ra (रा) – Rakta and Rechika: Rakta represents the redness of blood whereas Rechika is the supreme Devourer. The concept is Removal and Negation.
44. La (ला) – Lamboshti and Mohini: Lamboshti is the one with the long lip, Mohini is the supreme enchantress. The concept embodied here is Beauty.
45. Va (वा) – Varada and Narayani: Varada is the endless giver of boons, whereas Narayani represents the destination of the human soul. The concept is Donation and Charity.

Sibilants:

46. Sha (शा) – Sridevi and Mangalagauri: Sridevi represents the Goddess of Wealth and Mangalagauri is the Auspicious White One. The concept is Transcendence.
47. Sha (षा) – Shanda and Anukriya: Shanda represents the six featured one, whereas Anukriya is the embodiment of help and service. The concept is Help and Support.
48. Sa (सा) – Saraswathi and Siddhikriya: Saraswathi is the Goddess of Knowledge and Siddhikriya represents the act of accomplishment. The underlying concept is Success.

Consonants:

49. Ha (ह) – Hamsavathi and Adyayini: Hamsavathi is the Divine Swan (Paramahansa) and Adyayini represents the endless primal One. The concept is Eternity.
50. La (ळ) – Bandhamochini: Bandhamochini is the destroyer of bondage and giver of liberation. Thus the underlying concept is Liberation and Isolation.
51. Ksha (क्ष) – Kshamavathi and Mayamalini: Kshamavathi is the forgiver and Mayamalini represents the power of the Mahamaya. The concept embodied is Strength and Power.

Sample Interpretations:

Based on the hypothesis and listing given in the above sections, example Sanskrit words and Mantras are interpreted using the Akshara concepts, with the derived concepts yielding the meaning of the word, as follows:

Words:

1. Ambaa (अम्बा) – Mother: 'A' represents creation (act of giving birth by a mother). 'M' represents the enlightenment and 'B' represents Revelation, both concepts referring to the fact the mother is the first teacher. 'Aa' represents that the mother is the most supreme source of Bliss for a child.
2. Vriksha (वृक्ष) – Vriksha: The three components of 'V', 'R' and 'Ksha' represent the three aspects of a tree – producers in the food chain, seasonal nature and strength of endurance.
3. House (आलय) – Aalaya: 'Aa' represents bliss, 'La' is beauty and 'Ya' represents the place of Living.

Bija Mantras:

Bija Mantras are (usually single syllabled) Mantras, which are believed to have great potent powers, but lack a lexical meaning (Frawley 2010). It is seen that Akshara concept based interpretation reveals the meanings of the Bija Mantras:

1. Gam (गं) – Containing the Akshara 'Ga' representing clarity, this is the Bija of Lord Ganapathi, the remover of obstacles.
2. Ham (हं) – 'Ha' represents Eternity and Ham is the Bija Mantra of Lord Shiva – The Endless One.
3. Hreem (ह्रीं) – Containing the Aksharas for Eternity, Removal and Balance, this is the Bija of the Mahamaya.

Conclusion:

Upon a brief review of the immense power of Sanskrit sounds and Mantras, it was inferred that the Sanskrit alphabets or Aksharas might be associated with certain concepts, which might form the basis for utilizing them to form Mantras. Based on this premise, a hypothesis is formed and from the information available from Tantric texts, the concepts underlying each of the 51 Aksharas were listed. Based on the listing, sample analysis for words and Bija Mantras are provided. It is noted that the concept oriented interpretation of Aksharas lend meaning to the otherwise non-lexical Bija Mantras. The Akshara-concept mapping outlined in this article may lend to a better understanding of some of the words, terms and Mantras utilized in Sanskrit literature.

Like all hypotheses, this 'Akshara Hypothesis' and the Akshara-Concept mapping has to withstand the test of time to establish its veracity and validity. But, should the hypothesis be true, it must be understood that it is this very Akshara-Concept mapping and the transfer of such information to irresponsible hands that led to the monstrous scale of destruction and calamity in the Mahabharata. Thus, every attempt must be made to preserve this information and thus ensure righteous and ethical conduct. The World can neither afford a Mahabharata II nor a World War III.

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