

Perspectives on The Origin of Indian Civilization

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chapter 6

Oral Tradition
in Indian Civilization

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Abstract

Vedas are at the foundation of Indian Civilization. It is known that for thousands of years till the present, Vedas are contributing to not only the culture of India but also to the global culture. The continuous transmission of the Vedas from ancient times to the present is enabled through oral tradition. In this oral tradition, the knowledge is carried on through Vedic chanting with precision in which the *guru* teaches the disciples at a very young age. This oral tradition is passed on from generation to generation. In 2003, the UNESCO proclaimed the Vedic chanting as an intangible cultural heritage of the world. In addition to Vedic chanting, the oral tradition has been instrumental and effective in India for teaching classical music, scriptures, poetic literature, folk music and folk tales. Thus oral tradition plays a very significant role in the Indian Civilization. This chapter presents various aspects of oral tradition that are contributing to Indian Civilization.

1. Introduction

The roots of Indian Civilization are traced back to the Vedas. The word Veda comes from the root *vid* which means "to know". The Vedas are a large collection of *mantras* traditionally

attributed to ṛṣis. A *mantra* is an utterance with intonations, which carries spiritual power. It is described as *mananāt trāṇanāt caiva*, which means "by repetition and contemplation the chanter is protected". A ṛṣi is one who has realized the Supreme Being through spiritual austerities and meditation and through blessings of the Supreme Being has obtained the deep insight into life and the cosmos.¹ Vedas are also called as Śruti, which means they were originally "heard" by ṛṣis. There have been a large number of ṛṣis in the history of Indian Civilization.² A ṛṣi is also known as *mantra-draṣṭā* meaning "the seer of *mantras*".

The enormous amount of Veda *mantras* has been classified as the four Vedas, namely — *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda*. The Vedas describe *dharma*, which refers to principles of nature that hold and protect all things. *Dharma* has many levels depending on the subject and contexts. It is for this reason Veda or Śruti is taken as the validating authoritative reference for any clarification regarding *dharma* to be followed as given by^{3, 4}

dharmam jijñāsānām pramāṇam paramam śrutiḥ

The scriptures also refer to the Vedas as the breath of the Supreme Being. They are also called as *śabda* (the divine and transcendental sound) manifesting into *mantras*. They are like manuals, which are used in creation of this universe. Also the Vedas are beneficial to us like mother. In the words of Max Müller:

In the history of the world, the Veda fills a gap which no literary work in any other language could fill. It carries us back to times of which we have no records anywhere and gives us the very words of generation of men of whom otherwise we could form but the vaguest *estimate by means of conjectures and inferences*.⁵

It is important to note that the *mantras* of the Vedas are associated with a triad. The triad consists of ṛṣi (seer), *chandās* (metre) and *devatā* (deity). The ṛṣi refers to the seer for whom

the *mantra* was heard (or seen) by the blessings of Supreme Being. The *devatā* refers to the deity to whom the *mantra* is intended. It is to be noted that although many deities are referred, they are all manifestations of just one Supreme Being. The *chandas* refer to the metre in which the *mantra* was cognized. The *mantras* are generally prayers in poetic form. There are several types of metres and the commonly used seven types of metres are:⁶

Chandas	No. of Lines (pada)	Alphabets in Each pada	Total
Gāyatrī	3	8, 8, 8	24
Uṣṇik	3	8, 8, 12	28
Anuṣṭup	4	8, 8, 8, 8	32
Br̥hatī	4	8, 8, 8, 12	36
Pañkti	5	8, 8, 8, 8, 8	40
Triṣṭup	4	11, 11, 11, 11	44
Jagatī	4	12, 12, 12, 12	48

These metres are found not only in the Veda *mantras* but are also used in the enormous Sanskrit literature. The metre helps to memorize the *mantras* and the poems.

The enormous development of literature in Indian Civilization is based on the Vedas. However, in addition to *chandas* of the Vedas, there is a large number of works in Sanskrit language.^{7, 8} The various scriptures in Sanskrit are composed in the form of *sūtras*, which are short cryptic statements. Then there are historical epic works, namely the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* composed as *śloka*, which generally refers to two lines in poetic form. It is to be noted that in spite of development of writing in Indian Civilization,

the oral tradition has been effectively used from ancient times to present times. The oral tradition was not only used to transmit Veda *mantras* but also the scriptures, classical music, poetic works, folk music and folk tales.

2. Oral Traditions

2.1 VEDIC CHANTING

It is well known that Samskr̥tam, commonly known as Sanskrit language, has played a major role in Indian Civilization over thousands of years to present times. There has been interesting research into whether the origin of Sanskrit lies in India and also the refutation of the so-called Aryan Invasion Theory.^{9, 10} The Vedic Sanskrit, also known as *chandas* (Samhitā), is slightly different from classical Sanskrit. Vedic Sanskrit is almost entirely religious. The Vedic Sanskrit has accents known as *svaras*. There are minor differences between the Vedic and classical Sanskrit in grammar, vocabulary and number of metres used in literature.⁷ One can understand the meaning of Veda *mantras* using the knowledge of classical Sanskrit. Enormous literature in all fields of study in Vedic Hinduism exists in Sanskrit in addition to a large number of literary works.^{7, 8, 11} Also, Sanskrit due to its well-structured grammar such as sage Pāṇini's grammar, has the suitability as a natural language.¹²

The beginning of oral tradition of the Vedas is referred¹³ in *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* as given by Mahārṣi Vyāsa:

In the beginning when the creator, four-headed Lord Brahmā, was focusing his mind on the Supreme Being Lord Nārāyaṇa, from whose navel he had risen, the *nāda* (a subtle transcendental sound) emanated from his *hṛdaya* (inner space of heart). This *nāda* that came out of his *hṛdaya* (inner space) consisted of three syllables (A, U, M), which merged and became the holy *praṇava* (om̐). From this *praṇava* arose the alphabets of Sanskrit language and subsequently the

four Vedas emerged from the four heads of Brahmā. Then Brahmā orally taught these Vedas to his sons, who were great sages. These sages orally passed them to their sons, who in turn continued this through the lineage.

Thus the tradition of transmitting the Vedas orally from the *guru* (master) to a *śiṣya* (disciple) has not only sustained over thousands of years but is continuing even in the present times at homes, temples, *āśramas* and special schools for Vedic teaching known as *gurukulas*.^{14, 15, 16} It is to be noted that this *guru-śiṣya sampradāya* (or master-disciple tradition) is an integral part of teaching-learning discipline, which has sustained the oral tradition through generations for thousands of years. In 2003, UNESCO proclaimed the oral tradition of the Vedic chanting as an intangible cultural heritage of the world. The proclamation is as below:

... the verses of the Vedas were traditionally chanted during sacred rituals and recited daily in Vedic communities. The value of this tradition lies not only in the rich content of its oral literature but also in the ingenious techniques employed by brāhmaṇa priests in preserving the texts intact over thousands of years. To ensure that the sound of each word remains unaltered, practitioners are taught from childhood complex recitation techniques that are based on tonal accents, a unique manner of pronouncing each letter and specific speech combinations.

— UNESCO Proclamation 2003
Intangible Cultural Heritage-ICH

According to the *varṇa* system of India,¹⁷ it is the essential duty of brāhmaṇas that they must learn as well as teach the Vedas through chanting. Also, the prerequisite to learn Vedic chanting is that the brāhmaṇa boys, at their age of eight years, have to go through *upanayana* (wearing a sacred thread) ritual. In this sacrament, they are initiated through the well-known *Gāyatrī Mantra*, and take a vow to learn the chanting of Veda

mantras and study the Vedas. Then these young brāhmaṇa boys start learning Vedic chanting from a *guru*. It is noted that many times the father is himself the *guru*. At this young age of eight years, these boys are highly capable of learning and retaining the Veda *mantras*. The teaching procedure is that the *guru* chants one *mantra* with intonations first, and then the disciples need to chant it precisely the same way, twice. The *guru* corrects any mistakes till the chanting precisely follows the same as the *guru's* chanting. Neither the *guru* nor the disciple uses any written text. The teaching and learning is on aural (oral) basis. Then, after the teaching session the disciples must practise repeatedly to properly memorize the chants. The master goes to the next line or segment only after the previously learnt portion is fully memorized. It is important to note that the memory is indispensable in oral tradition. Also, the disciples lead a disciplined life, which enhances the memorization and learning. Thus, the tender age with proper teaching and learning method along with a disciplined life plays a very important role in the success of oral tradition through Vedic chanting. The harmonious relationship between the master and the disciple is very important in oral transmission through Vedic chanting. A Vedic *mantra* noted below as invocation provides the common vision for both the master and the disciple.

*om saha nāvavatu, saha naubhunaktu, saha vīryam karavāvahai
tejasvināvadhitamastu mā vidviṣāvahai, om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ॥*

May both of us be protected together, May both of us eat together, May both of us engage in noble and productive work together. May our study and understanding be brilliant. May we not hate each other. May there be Peace, Peace, Peace.

The success of oral tradition for transmission through Vedic chants from master to disciple over the generations is due to

several important guidelines, namely: (1) phonetic guidelines, (2) simple to complex patterns of chanting and (3) chanting disciplines. It is important to note that knowledge and practice of precise chanting will also supplement the study of the Vedas.

2.1.1 PHONETIC GUIDELINES

The phonetic guidelines are critically important, as they are the rules of pronunciation for Vedic chanting. The science of phonetics clearly emphasizes the importance of error-free chanting. In *Nārādīya Śikṣā*, a treatise on phonetics, says:¹⁸

If the Vedic text (chanting) employed in the sacrifice is defective in the accent (pitch) or sounds or used for the performance of the wrong rites, it does not yield the desired results.

The six parameters that control the precision in pronunciation are given according to a *mantra* in *Taittirīyopaniṣad* are: *varṇa* (alphabet), *svara* (accent or pitch), *mātrā* (duration), *balam* (emphasis), *sāma* (uniformity) and *santānaha* (juxtaposition).^{12, 19, 20}

Varṇa deals with the pronunciation of all Sanskrit sounds with the use of full mouth. The Sanskrit sounds based on the places of pronunciation with respect to mouth are classified as guttural (from the throat — *kaṇṭhya*), palatal (the tongue against the back of the palate — *tālavya*), retroflex (the tongue further forward on the palate — *mūrdhanya*), dental (the tongue against the back of the front teeth — *dantya*), Labial (the lips either closed or pursed — *auṣṭhya*) and nasal (through the nasal passages — *nāsikya*). Also the aspirated and unaspirated sounds play important role in pronunciation.

Svara refers to the three main tonal accents, namely *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita*. These three accents are acute, grave, and circumflex. In addition, two extended notes called *nigadha* and *prachaya* are used. The accents play a key role in Vedic chanting because change in accents results in not only the change in the

meaning of *mantras* but also yield different results. There is an example given in *Taittirīya Saṁhitā*³ as:

Tvaṣṭā, who was not well disposed towards Indra, for some reason wanted a son capable of killing Indra so that he could settle old scores with Indra. So Tvaṣṭā performed *homa* (fire-sacrifice) chanting a *mantra*: *Indra śśatruṣ vardaḥsva*. When chanting it, the correct way was to utter "Indra" in even tone (i.e. without raising or lowering accent). In *śatru*, the *tru* should have been high, and similarly, *vardaḥsva* should have been high. If recited properly as above, it would mean "let Tvaṣṭā's son grow up to kill Indra". By the efficacy of the sound of the properly chanted *mantra* alone, Tvaṣṭā's son should have grown up and killed Indra. But Tvaṣṭā erred in pronunciation. That is, he raised the tone high in *dra* in *Indra*, the *śatru* was recited evenly and in *vardaḥsva* the *rdha* was lowered in tone instead of being raised. As a result, instead of "let Tvaṣṭā's son grow up to kill Indra" the meaning got topsy-turvy (reversed). Although the words and letters were not changed, due to the fault in intonation, the result was just contrary to what Tvaṣṭā wanted. In other words, Indra killed Tvaṣṭā's son. Thus the father Tvaṣṭā became responsible for the death of his son, Vṛtra, at the hands of Indra.

Mātrā refers to the length or duration of each vowel or consonant. The commonly used duration units are *hrasva*, *dīrgha*, *pluta* and *ardha mātrā*. The *hrasva* is taken as one unit of *mātrā* as equivalent to blinking eye five times or saying five syllables. The *dīrgha* is two *mātrā*. The *pluta* is three or four *mātrā*. *Ardha mātrā* is half a *mātrā*. The duration of chants are based on *mātrās*, which need to be precisely adhered to while chanting.

Balanī refers to the articulatory force of a syllable. The force (quantity of air) depends on the type of syllables, namely *alpa prāṇa* and *mahāprāṇa*. In *alpa prāṇa* syllables, no aspiration is required whereas in *mahāprāṇa* syllables, aspirations are required. The aspiration energy for *mahāprāṇa* syllables comes

from the abdomen area. The sitting posture on a mat on the ground with straight back is required so that the posture enables proper breathing and thus proper energy required for articulation.

Sāma refers to continuity, proper speed and pleasantness in chanting. It is important to note that chanting has to be continuously smooth as the change of *svaras* occurs in the *mantras*. In collective chanting, it becomes important that each chanter maintains continuity in harmony so that the chanting from the group is continuous and all voices are in unison.

Santāna refers to the combination and juxtaposition. When compound letters are encountered, the proper pronunciation with correct *mantra* is required. *Santāna* also refers to proper punctuation. The stops taken for inhaling while chanting are critical for both the melody and meaning of the chants.

Thus all the above six parameters are equally important in chanting which can only be taught orally to a disciple by the master. The *Nāradya Śikṣā*, like the other phonetic manuals, emphasizes severe penalties incurred by the chanter who fails to perform his task accurately, whether by mispronouncing the text, accenting it incorrectly, erring in either the length or the tonal quality of a syllable, failing to render the text with sufficient clarity or simply suffering any mental lapse.¹⁹

2.1.2 PATTERNS OF CHANTING

In order to maintain the oral tradition of Vedic chanting to be error-free and precise, eight types of variations of the three original patterns of the *mantras* have been developed by *ṛṣis*. In total there are eleven types of chanting patterns in which the first three, namely *Samhitā*, *pada* and *krama* are simple patterns, whereas the additional eight patterns, namely *jaṭā*, *mālā*, *śikhā*, *rekhā*, *dhvaja*, *daṇḍa*, *ratha* and *ghana* (bell) are complex in the ascending order.^{3, 14} These names indicate the design of patterns, namely: braid, garland, topknot, row, flag, staff,

chariot and bell respectively.¹⁴ For example, in *jaṭā* (braid), as two strands of hair are made into one by entwining to form a tress. Similarly, by entwining two words of a *mantra*, the pattern of *jaṭā* comes into being. An entwining process that involves a reversal of the stems forms a garland of flowers (*mālā*). Similarly, a unit of two words is treated in precisely the same way as in the type of *mālā* known as *puṣpa mālā*. In the pattern of *śikhā* (topknot), a coiffure adopted especially by ascetics, the hair is bound and encircled around the top of the head, with the end of the strand left over after each encirclement. In this *śikhā* pattern, the basic *jaṭā* scheme is adopted, but one word is added to the end of each unit. Likewise, the other patterns are designed.¹⁴ However it is important to note that all the six phonetic parameters discussed earlier have to be followed in the pattern that is chanted.

All these patterns are used in present times. However, more commonly found patterns especially in south India are, namely *Samhitā* (source), *pada* (words) *krama* (order), *jaṭā* (braid) and *ghana* (bell). These patterns are shown as below:

Name of Pattern	Pattern
Samhitā	<i>namaḥ śivāya ca</i>

In the *Samhitā mantra* pattern above, let the numbers 1, 2 and 3 represent the three units namely, *namaḥ* (1) *śivāya* (2) and *ca* (3). The patterns look like:

It is very important to remember that all of the six phonetic parameters, namely *varṇa*, *svara*, *mātrā*, *balam*, *sāma* and *santānaḥ* depend on the pattern. It is seen that only through oral recitation can the master teach all these patterns to the disciples. The studies on sound and memory in oral traditions have shown that strong evidence exists for the important role of sound patterns in recalling and in a stable transmission of oral traditions.²¹

2.1.3 CHANTING DISCIPLINE

In addition to strictly following the phonetic guidelines, required repetition and memorization of various chanting patterns, the disciple should avoid certain undesirable chanting characteristics. These undesirable characteristics of Vedic

Name of Pattern	Pattern
<i>samhitā</i>	1, 2, 3
<i>pada</i>	1; 2; 3
<i>krama</i>	12; 23
<i>jaṭā</i>	12 21 12; 23 32 23;
<i>ghana</i>	12 21 123 321 123; 23 32 23;

chanting are given as,^{3, 4}

*gīti śīghrī śiraḥkampī tatha likhitapāṭakaḥ |
ānarthājāñolpakanṭhasca śadete pāṭhakādhamāḥ ||*

Which means that the one who has these six undesirable characteristics is not good in Vedic chanting. The six undesirable characteristics are: singing (instead of chanting), high speed in chanting, oscillating the head, reading from written script (instead of chanting from memory), not understanding the meaning of chants and a weak and shrill voice quality.

Likewise, the six desirable characteristics of Vedic chanting are given as,^{3, 4}

*mādhuryamakṣaravyaktiḥ padaṇchedastu susvaraḥ |
dhairyaṁ laya samartham ca śadete pāṭhakāguṇāḥ ||*

Which means that one who has these six desirable characteristics is good in Vedic chanting. The six desirable

characteristics are: pleasant chanting, full clarity in pronunciation, proper breaking of words, correctness in intonation, strength and steadiness in chanting and proper speed and continuity in chanting.

Thus the Vedic chants of all of the four Vedās, namely *R̥gveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* have been transmitted orally, preserving the original way from the generations after generations through precise memorization and efficient method through memory techniques. It is important to note that the oral transmission to the disciple begins at a very young age at which the capability of memory is very high. The aim of Vedic chanting is to instill an automatic and total command of the Vedic text that would rule out even the slightest possibility of error. Also the memorization was reinforced by additional methods such as *mudrās*, which are finger positions and motions (corresponding to the type of chants) that are essential in performance as they are for learning and remembering the *mantra*.^{16, 19}

3. Ślokas and Sūtras

The Vedic literature in Sanskrit is predominately in poetic form as metrical verses and short aphorisms. These compositions also conformed to special requirements of an old literature, namely consciousness, memorability, predictability, rhythm, formulaic construction, suitability for oral delivery and appropriateness for teaching and learning. Because the Vedas themselves are in the form of verse, it seemed an obvious choice for Vedic literature, and from the Vedas the tendency spread into various fields of knowledge.¹⁹

One of the most dominating metres that are found in the Sanskrit literature is *anuṣṭup* metre. A *śloka* or a verse consists of two lines and each line (i.e. top and the bottom line) contains two parts. A *śloka* in *anuṣṭup* contains 16 syllables per line. Each part of the line contains 8 syllables. So a *śloka* in *anuṣṭup*

metre contains 32 (8×4) syllables. The two epics *Rāmāyaṇa*, which has 24,000 verses, and the *Mahābhārata*, which has 100,000 verses, use mainly the *anuṣṭup* metre. It is said that Mahārṣi Vālmīki, who composed the *Rāmāyaṇa* orally taught it to two young boys (brothers) who were sons of King Śrī Rāma. They in turn recited the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* in an assembly in the court of King Śrī Rāma. It is common to see that even at present times there exists oral tradition of teaching and learning chapters from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (700 verses) of *Mahābhārata*. In addition there are *subhāṣitas*, which are verses of wisdom abundantly found in Sanskrit literature. It is also common to see very young boys and girls being orally taught these *subhāṣitas*, which they memorize and understand their meaning as they grow older in life.

The *sūtras* (formulaic statements) are commonly used in Sanskrit treatises. For example, the grammar treatise written by Mahārṣi Pāṇini has about 4000 *sūtras*. In traditional teaching of the Pāṇini's grammar, the *sūtras* are taught orally for memorization so that they can later be recalled instantaneously from memory in the application of *sūtras* in the formulation of words.

4. Classical Music and Dance

The origin of classical music of India is from the Vedas. The chants of the *Sāmaveda* are more musical in particular, due to the extended *mātrās* i.e. durations of the three *svaras* of the Vedas. These three *svaras* (accents) of the Vedas, namely *udātta* (acute) to *anudātta* (grave) and *svarita* (circumflex) are related to the seven notes which are also called as *svaras* of music. The seven *svaras* in the classical music are *sā*, *re*, *gā*, *mā*, *pā*, *dhā*, *nī* and *sā*. It is interesting to note the correspondence between *svaras* of the Vedas and *svaras* of the classical music. In *Nāradya Śikṣā*¹⁸ the correspondence is given as the *svaras* *nī* and *gā* originate in *udātta*, while *re* and *dhā*, originate in *anudātta*. Then *sā*, *mā* and *pā* have their origin in the *svarita*. In addition to the

relationship with the Vedas, the seven *svaras* (notes) of music are related to the sounds from animals. In *Nārādīya Śikṣā*,¹⁸ it is given as the note *sā* is from a peacock, *re* is from a bull, *gā* is from a goat, *mā* is from a curlew, *pā* is from a cuckoo, *dhā* is from a horse and *nī* is from an elephant. Thus it is seen that music is related to Vedic chants and also to the sounds of nature. The origin of music in India is traced to divinity. The visual pictures of Lord Kṛṣṇa holding the musical instrument bamboo flute and Goddess Sarasvatī holding a musical instrument *vīṇā* indicates that music is not only for entertainment but also for the spiritual development. In the words of Yogī Śrīraṅga Sadguru:

Music should become the bridge that takes the listeners from sensual level to the spiritual level of *ātman*.¹

Given that the music tradition in India is also from the Vedic origin, the oral tradition is essentially used to transfer this art from generation to generation through face-to-face instruction from *guru* to *śiṣya* by demonstration and imitation. This oral tradition of music is referred as *paramparā* in Sanskrit language, which means that knowledge orally transferred well from one generation (master) to another generation (disciple). This is known as *guru-śiṣya paramparā*. In the book *Euphony*²² well-known violinist L Subramanian says:

Even today students are discouraged from singing and playing their instruments looking at the book with the musical notation. Rather they are expected to listen to the *guru*, repeat the lesson, memorize it and play (or sing) from memory. All the great performers have been products of the *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, still considered the most effective way to learn Indian music.

In north Indian music, the traditions are kept through what are known as *gharānās*. Every *gharānā* would specialize in one or the other specific feature of classical music.²³ The master to

disciple oral tradition essentially keeps the *gharānā* tradition intact.

In classical music also like the oral tradition of Vedic chanting, the disciples will be of very young-age girls and boys. The seven notes or *svaras* are taught in simple to complex patterns at various speeds in increasing order. For example, the three orders are shown below.²⁴

Simple type

sā ri gā mā pā dhā nī sā
sā nī dhā pā mā gā re sā

Jumping Type

Sa Ri Sa Ga Ri Ma Ga Ri
Sa Ri Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa
Sa Ni Sa Dha Ni Pa Dha Ni
Sa Ni Dha Pa Ma Ga Ri Sa

Linked type

Sa Sa Ri Ri Ga Ga Ma Ma
Pa Pa Dha Dha Ni Ni Sa Sa
Sa Sa Ni Ni Dha Dha Pa Pa
Ma Ma Ga Ga Ri Ri Sa Sa

Thus, it is seen that the various features of Indian classical music such as delicate nuances, ornamentations, and microtones influence the rendering of *rāgas*. It is due to these reasons the oral tradition is the most efficient method for the *guru* to teach the disciple. In the words of George Ruckert:²⁵

The *guru* taught the music directly through oral repetition: hear, repeat, practise, repeat, hear again and practise. A literature of *rāga* and *tāla* was accumulated slowly along with the technical abilities to be executed with greater refinement and discernment of ear, and the student was continually required to prove that he or she was ready for the next step.

It is interesting to note that the Sanskrit word *saṅgīta* is used to refer music. However the Sanskrit word *saṅgīta* actually refers to vocal music, instrumental music and dance. The ancient classical dance of India is called Bharata Nāṭyam. The origin of Bharata Nāṭyam is also from the Vedas. The Bharata Ṛṣi says²⁶ that he was inspired by the Lord to formulate the *Nāṭyaveda* or Veda of dance as a composite of the well-known four Vedas. The composition by Bharata Ṛṣi was based on text of recitals from the *Ṛgveda*, the music element from the *Sāmaveda*, the histrionic and gestural representation from *Yajurveda* and the sentiments from the *Atharvaveda*. In dance the disciple has to learn to sing music also, so that coordination between music, movements and storytelling sequence can be coordinated. The art of classical dance such as Bharata Nāṭyam is also transferred from the *guru* to *śiṣya* in a combined oral and visual tradition. The disciples start at a very young age to learn this classical performing art of dance.

5. Folk Music and Folk Tales

Folk music of India is traced back to the ancient Indian civilization and culture. In the words of poet Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore:

Folk songs enable us to understand the mind and heart of the common people. A unity in the people's thought can be seen through rural folk songs from different villages of India.²⁷

The folk songs in ancient Indian villages were composed and sung which were then orally transmitted to the next group of people. The themes of the folk songs were day-to-day things of village life and celebrations. As an example a farmer says in a Kannada folk song:²⁷

mādeva ninahortu nanyāra nambilla
nā māduvenemba alavilla mallayya
nee nadeso nanna saruvella||

O Lord Śiva, I have not believed in any one other than you.
I do not feel that I am the doer. O the capable one, you make
it happen.

Thus the folk songs deal with all facets of life. The oral tradition of folk music performance is still practised²⁸ such as the tales of well-known King Bhartrhari of Ujjain and King Gopichand of Bengal through oral traditional performances in Ghatiyali, Rajasthan.

Similar to oral tradition of folk songs and music is the oral tradition of folk tales in India. In the words of noted author A.K. Ramanujan:

Anyone studying the culture of India needs to study not only its written classic but its oral traditions of which folklore is an important part. Folklore prevails childhoods, families and communities as symbolic language of the non-literature parts of the people and the culture.²⁹

However, the folk tales through oral tradition would have changes in the choice of words and language but the essence of the story would continue from generation to generation. The oral tradition plays important role not only in folk tales but also in religious moral stories.³⁰ In Indian context the oral tradition of tales goes back to stories from Upaniṣads and other ancient literature not only in Sanskrit but also in all regional languages and dialects. In the words of A.K. Ramanujan:

Indeed, one way of defining verbal folklore for India is to say it is the literature of the dialects, those mother tongues of village, street, kitchen, tribal hut and wayside tea shop. This is the wide base of the Indian Pyramid on which all other Indian literature rest.²⁹ ;

6. Conclusion

Thus it is seen that oral tradition has a significant role in the Indian Civilization. The oral tradition through *guru-śiṣya*

paramparā is responsible for sustaining Vedic chanting, scriptures, classical music and dance and folk music and tales from ancient times to the present times. In reference to chants and music in ancient India, it is noted by Guy Beck:

the Hindu experience of scripture has been oral (aural) from the beginning with a strong emphasis on maintaining of purity of transmission by means of disciplined memorization.³¹

The key elements that are responsible for the sustenance of oral tradition is that it begins at a very young age of disciples, who have a high capacity to memorize. Also, the fact that the Vedas are revered, because they deal with knowledge of life and the cosmos in addition to the Veda *mantras* being the manifestation of the spiritual and transcendental sound.^{32, 33} The Vedas, as an authoritative validating reference sustained through oral tradition, form the basis of the Vedic civilization and culture.³⁴ The Vedic civilization and culture formed the foundation for the development of the cultural history of India.³⁵

Even in present times it can be seen that the Hindu rituals and religious occasions in temples³⁶ provide opportunities on a continuous basis for the oral recitation of the Vedic chants and music. It is always preferred that even in present times the Vedic chanting and classical music are learnt directly from *guru* so that the various phonetic guidelines can be demonstrated properly by the *guru*. This is due to the principle that a book cannot replace the *guru* who is a life force, in transmitting properly the Vedic chanting and music with all details to the disciple. Thus, the intangible heritage of oral tradition of Vedic chanting, in addition to its own significance, is the foundation of all other oral traditions of music, dance and folklore. It is interesting to note that the modern research in neuroscience and cognitive sciences indicates that there is compelling evidence suggesting that brain's response to music

is innate and has strong biological roots.³⁷ The efficiency of oral learning and remembering the chants, which are of musical nature at a very young age, is very high. Thus the ancient Vedic civilization seems to have successfully used this approach for sustaining the oral tradition of Vedic chanting, music, scriptures and story-telling. This intangible cultural heritage of oral tradition continues to play an important role in maintaining the continuity of Indian civilization from the ancient times to present times.

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