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THE CONCEPTS OF HRASVA, DĪRGHA AND PLUTA IN VEDIC AND SANSKRIT GRAMMARS

The technical terms Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta representing short, long and prolated vowels (containing three *mātrās* or *moras*) appear for the first time in the Prātiśākhya literature.

The *Ṛgvedaprātiśākhya* of Śaunaka defines the terms as:

mātrā hrasvaḥ (1.27)

dve dīrghaḥ (1.29)

And *tisraḥ pluta ucyate svaraḥ* (1.30)

According to Uvaṭa, the above definitions mean that Hrasva or short vowel contains a single *mātrā* or *mora*, while a Dīrgha or long vowel possesses two *mātrās*, and Pluta vowel three¹.

The *Taittirīyaprātiśākhya* gives a wider definition of the terms in the following manner:

ṛkāraḥkārau hrasvau akāraśca tena ca samānakālasvaraḥ. anusvāraśca dvistāvān dīrghaḥ... plutastriḥ (1.31.36)

It is clear from the definition that the vowel *a* and other vowels of an equal duration, *r*, *l* and *anusvāra* are Hrasva or short vowels. The vowels possessing two and three *mātrās* are known, on the other hand, as Dīrgha (long) and Pluta respectively.

1. *Ṛgvedaprātiśākhya*, p. 36.

The *Vājasaneyiprātiśākhya* describes the basic character of the three groups of sounds in a slightly different languages as:

amātrasvaro hrasvaḥ dvimātro dīrghaḥ trimātraḥ plutaḥ (1.55-58)

The expression *amātrasvara* appearing in the above statement denotes a vowel containing one *mātrā*, because *a*, the first letter of the alphabet possesses one *mātrā*.

The authors of the *Yājñavalkyaśikṣā* and the *Bhāratīyanāṭyaśāstra* avoid the sūtra style of the earlier writers in defining the terms. The first work discusses the basic nature of Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta vowels in the following poem:

*ekamātro bhaved hrasvo
dvimātro dīrgha-ucyate
trimātrastu pluto jñeyo (vyañjanam cārddhamātrakam)
[Yājñavalkyaśikṣā, 1.15]*

Bharata defines the above vowels in a similar poem in his *Nāṭyaśāstra*, viz.

*ekamātram bhaved hrasvam
dvimātram dīrgham ucyate
plutañcaiva trimātram syād
akṣaram varṇasamśrayam
(17.114)*

Now, the above *sūtras* and poems, a significant word viz. *mātrā* appears time and again which deserves our attention. The word needs a proper explanation for understanding the exact significance of the three technical terms. The *Yājñavalkyaśikṣā* which belongs to the White *Yajurveda* gives us a thorough idea of *mātrā*. This *śikṣā* text states that the sound produced by the blue jay (*cāṣa*) contains one *mātrā*. The crow produces two *mātrās* at a time in cawing. The cock significantly described as *kṛkarvāku* in Sanskrit literature utters three *mātrās* in the course of its prolonged and protracted sound². The

2. *cāṣastu vadate mātrām
dvimātrām vāyasobravīt
sikhī vadati trimātrām*

Pāṇinīyaśikṣā reiterates this view³.

The authors of the above *śikṣā* texts explain to us the significance of *mātrā* or *mātrās* through a direct method. Candrakīrti, the commentator on the *Sārasvata* grammar gives a different interpretation of *mātrā*. According to him, *mātrā* denotes *akṣispandanapramāṇakāla*⁴ or the time which is involved in the twinkling of an eye.

Pāṇini, the greatest Sanskrit grammarian defines Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta in an entirely different manner, that is

ūkālojhrasvadīrghaplutaḥ (Aṣṭādhyāyī, 1.2.27).

The term *ūkāla* in this definition deserves a critical examination. According to Pāṇini, a vowel-sound which requires as much time in its pronunciation as is involved in the pronunciation of the sound *u* is called a Hrasva vowel. Similarly, the vowels of an equal duration with *ū* and *ū3* are called Dīrgha and Pluta respectively. Though *a* is the first letter in the alphabet, Pāṇini chooses the letter *u* in his *sūtra* with a specific motive. He realises that the cock utters all the three *mātrās* distinctly while making a full-throated sound, and hence, it will become easy for the hearers to gather a clear knowledge of the duration of Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta vowels, and their differences. The point has been adequately explained by Viṭṭhala in his commentary on the *Prakriyākaumudī*⁵ of Rāmacandra, and *Nāgeśa*⁶.

The term *ūkāla* meaning *ukāla*, *ūkāla* and *ū3kāla* practically refers to the views expressed by Śaunaka and others that a vowel containing a single *mātrā* or *mora* is called Hrasva in Sanskrit literature while vowels with two and three *mātrās* are known as Dīrgha and Pluta respectively. Pāṇini does not use the term *mātrā* in his *sūtra* for the reason that it might create some difficulty for his readers in understanding its meaning.

mātrānām iti saṁsthitih,

Yājñavalkyaśikṣā, 1.17

3. *Pāṇinīyaśikṣā, 49.*

4. *Sārasvata, Part I, p. 13.*

5. *Prakriyākaumudī, Part I, p. 21.*

6. *Laghuśabdenduśekhara, Part I, p. 23.*

We have discussed above some important views expressed by Vedic and Sanskrit linguists on Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta. It may be noted in this context that Candrakīrti the commentator on the *Sārasvata* alone gives the etymological meaning of the terms. Candrakīrti explains the terms in the following manner:

*hrasati hīyate dīrghāpekṣayā iti hrasvaḥ
dīrghāti vidārayatyuccāryamāṇo mukham iti
dīrghaḥ plavate langhate hrasvadīrghāviti plutaḥ⁷.*

Candrakīrti means that a Hrasva vowel is so called because it is of a shorter duration than Dīrgha vowels (*hrasati hīyate dīrghāpekṣayā*). The Dīrgha(long) vowels are called Dīrgha because the mouth is widely opened at the time of pronouncing them (*vidārayatyuccāryamāṇo mukham*). The word Pluta is derived from the verb *plavate* (limping). In the present context, it means that a Pluta vowel crosses the limit of Hrasva and Dīrgha, or in other words, it endures for a longer period than the two other vowels.

Pāṇini uses the expression *ūkāloc* in his definition of Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta, where he chooses the third letter of the Śivasūtra alphabet for a pertinent reason. Pūjyapāda Devanandi, on the other hand, defines these three vowels as *ākāloc pra-dī-paḥ* (Jainendra, 1.1.11). The technical terms *pra*, *dī* and *pa* represent Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta in his *sūtra*. The three new terms, when combined into a single word means a light (*pradīpa*). Significantly, the captive soul of the Jaina philosophy behaves like a light or a burning candle put inside a container, or covered by a hard substance. Umāsvāti, the author of the *Tattvārthasūtra* describes the captive soul in the following manner:

pradeśasamhāravīsarpaḥbyāṁ pradīpavat (5/16)

Śrutasāgara, the commentator, explains the *sūtra* with the help of a few appropriate illustrations. He says that when a burning light is covered with a drinking pot (*śarāva*) it illumines a small area. Again,

7. *Sārasvata*, Part I, p. 13.

when it is kept under a cooking pot, it spreads its light over a wider space. Such is the case of the captive soul which expands and contracts according to the dimension of the body⁸. Now, a short vowel also assumes the form of a long or prolated vowel when its *mātrā* or *mātrās* are extended, and again, a long or prolated vowel is also occasionally reduced to a short vowel. Thus, we find an analogy between these vowels and the soul of the Jaina philosophy remaining in bondage. Therefore, the definition *ākālocpradīpaḥ* appears to us as highly significant.

Jīvagoswāmī, the author of the *Harināmāmṛta* always uses technical terms related to the names of Lord Viṣṇu. This grammarian chooses the terms Vāmana, Trivikrama and Mahāpuruṣa for Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta respectively⁹. The terms immediately remind us of the Vali-Vāmana legend of the *Purāṇa*¹⁰ where Lord Viṣṇu assumes the form of a dwarf and begs him only three steps of earth for himself. When Vali grants his prayer, Viṣṇu suddenly extends his feet and covers the three worlds with his feet¹¹. The legend brings to our mind a description of almighty Viṣṇu found in a passage of the *Ṛgveda* viz.

*idaṁ viṣṇur vicakrame
tredhā nidadhe padam
samūlhaṇi asya pāṅsure*¹².

Now, in the case of the vowels, we notice that the short vowel can be extended to the long and Pluta vowels which depends primarily on the addition of more *mātrās* to the basic vowel. This phenomenon bears the analogy of Viṣṇu extending his feet to the space. Again, the long and prolated vowels can be reduced to short vowels also. Hence, Jīvagoswāmī has appropriately coined the terms Vāmana and Trivikrama. The word Mahāpuruṣa appears for the first time in a passage of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*¹³ where it means the Supreme

8. Vide *Śrutasāgara*, under *Tattvārthasūtra*, 5.16.

9. *Harināmāmṛta*, 1.5-7.

10. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, 8.10-21.

11. *Ibid.*, 8.20.33-34.

12. *Ṛgveda*, 1.22.17

13. *vedāhametaṁ puruṣaṁ mahāntam ādityavarṇaṁ tamasaḥ parastāt, Śvetāśvatara*, 3.8.

Person who pervades the entire universe. He extends over a vaster space than Trivikrama, which reminds us of the Supreme Person of the Puruṣasūkta of the *Ṛgveda* who has been described as:

*sa bhūmiṃ viśvato vṛtvātyatiṣṭhad-
daśāṅgulam (Ṛgveda 10-90).*

It may be discussed in the present context that Vopadeva also presents three other words viz. Sva, Rgha and Plu for the three distinct types of vowels¹⁴; but it bears no significance except that the grammarian reduces the original terms into small forms.

The commentator Durgādāsa Vidyāvāgīśa observes that Sva, Rgha and Plu are partial introduction of the well-known technical terms Hrasva, Dīrgha and Pluta; but it would have been better had the author introduced the original terms without any amendment¹⁵.

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14. *Mugdhabodha*, 1.3.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 5.