

SOME SUGGESTIONS ON RESEARCH INTO *MANTRA*

The purpose of this paper is not to inform the reader of some discoveries I may have made in the field of *mantraśāstra*, nor it is exactly, in spite of its title, to make suggestions on research into *mantra*-s. Its aim is rather to draw the attention to the importance and interest of that field of research, to mention in passing what some of us are trying to do in that domain and, last but not least, to ask for (rather than suggest) some sort of cooperation between scholars working in that field, if only in the form of exchange of information on work planned or in progress.

Mantra, that peculiar form of language (or of elements of language: phonemes, sounds), efficient by itself, which is used for spiritual, religious or « magical » ends, seems to be, to a very large extent, an essentially Indian phenomenon-« Indian » being taken as « pertaining to the area of Indian culture », including therefore most of Asia. Not that such peculiar use of linguistic material should be found only in the Indian cultural area; but it has certainly nowhere been developed, systematized, and practised as much as in that area.

Despite the importance of the mantric phenomenon, despite its prevalence (one could even say: its omnipresence) in Indian spiritual and ritual practice and speculations since ages, very few serious scholars have studied it, and very few valuable studies have been published on the subject in western languages and, as far as I know, no complete and systematic exposition of the question. There have been, of course, since the time of Arthur Avalon, a few articles (notably « The Indian Mantra », by Jan Gonda, *Oriens*, 1963). a chapter of my thesis (1963) and, in India, some studies, in especial some (in English or Hindi) by the late MM. Pdt. Gopinath Kaviraj. But all that is very little compared with the vastness of the matter. I may of course, in saying so, be inaccurate in neglecting studies published in Indian languages, of which I know only Sanskrit and Hindi, or even in Europe and America: if so, I apologize; but I would also remark that any ignorance that I may

show is proof of the need for exchange of information which I mentioned at the start.

One should add however, after reading some studies on the subject in Hindi, that these are usually too much in the traditional spirit to be able to bring us something really new: they do enlighten us on facts — on which there is admittedly still a lot to be learned — but, as they usually remain within the system (if I may say so), they cannot really contribute to the interpretation, the understanding, the presentation and organization of the facts, which is precisely what one needs and what should be done. That work is all the more worth doing as it would not only add appreciably to our knowledge of the Indian spiritual, religious (and/or « magical ») practices, and of the speculations that go with them, but also because it would make known an abundance of facts and notions which would contribute usefully to a better knowledge of the spiritual, religious and magical behaviour (ideology as well as practice) of man in general.

A complete study of such a vast field, however, can be carried out only as a team-work, as the work of several teams even. It should also be carried out by a study not only of Sanskrit texts, but also of actual practice, and by the application to such texts and practices of modern scientific methods and techniques. It is a work where « classical » indologists must cooperate not only with pandits and traditional users of *mantra*-s, but also with field-workers in anthropology, not to mention other scientific disciplines.

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Such a research into *mantra*-s has therefore a twofold aspect, the first of which only concerns us here: I) indological; II) « scientific ».

I. *On the indological plane proper:*

Some sort of terminus a quo is to be set here: one can let aside the oldest period and limit the research to post-vedic *mantraśāstra*, the hindu, pauranic, tantric, period down to our days. The same time limits applies more or less, mutatis mutandis, to buddhist *mantrayāna*.

The work, then, involves:

A. The drawing up of an inventory of

- texts, documents and all other evidence on the subject, ancient works as well as modern studies as no complete inventory exist as yet;
- of *mantra*, *bīja*, *vidyā*, *kavaca* (*dhāraṇī*, etc.) including all textual references, references to schools, *amṇāya*, etc.; mentioning also uses, meaning(if any), names, etc.;
- of rites and practices in which *mantra*-s play a role;
- of all accompanying elements: *nyāsa*, *mudrā*, *yantra*, *kavaca*, *dhyāna*, *japa*, etc.

Such an inventory, in the form of a card-index, has already been

started in Paris and is to be developed as a co-operative work. It will lead to several publications such as a bibliography of *mantraśāstra* and a glossary of technical terms of *mantraśāstra*, both of which are in preparation.

B. Studies on the history (and perhaps on the problem of origins) of *mantraśāstra*.

The lack of precise historical data makes history difficult, if not impossible. Some problems can however be tackled, for instance:

- the problem of the origin, vedic or otherwise, of *mantra*;
- the problem of the geographical origin of *mantraśāstra*: probably a « faux problème »;
- the passage from Vedic to Hindu *mantraśāstra*: one can still enlarge on the very suggestive observations of Louis Renou (*Des tin du Véda dans l'Inde, EVP., VI.*);
- the origin of Buddhist *dhāraṇī* is also still far from clear;
- the relationship between Hindu and Buddhist *mantraśāstra*: the — to my mind — strange idea that Buddhism should have influenced Hinduism in this respect is still upheld by some serious scholars;
- the history and mutual relationships of the different schools, traditions, *amṇāya* (which are still very little known); of the different texts also. Much remains to be done here;
- the study of regional traditions would also be rewarding: Kashmir and Bengal-Assam of course. But also South India (Kerala especially); without forgetting « Greater India ».

C. Studies on the theory of *mantra* according to traditional texts (in Sanskrit or other languages).

Tantric texts are usually not very profuse in theoretical explanations: they prescribe or describe rites rather than explain them or expound their theoretical foundations. There are however exceptions, the most remarkable of which are to be found in Kashmir Śaivism. But some *saṃhitā* of the *Pāñcarātra*, some South Indian *āgama*, even a few *purāṇas*, sometimes expatiate on theory. Explicit or implicit, the theory always exists — this applies also to Buddhist texts.

All this is certainly no virgin soil, but the studies already made on the subject have not exhausted it, nor diminished its interest.

One may mention here the publications on Kashmir Śaivism already published or still to be published in France, several of which touch on the problem. Forthcoming translations of (and studies on) the *Tantrāloka*, the *Spandakārikā*, etc., will soon add useful contributions on the subject. A research group has recently been formed within the frame of the CNRS to pursue research on different aspects of tantric Hinduism and Buddhism, a part of which is devoted to *mantra*. A general theory of *mantra*-s, enveloping in a general frame an infinity of variations, but with a unitary ground, appears possible.

D. Studies on mantric practices, of all types and on all levels (from the highest spritual plane, through religious rites, to « magic »): it is a vast field, still relatively little known, at least to Western scholars, and that I am trying to explore — an exploration which can be carried out effectively only with the help of traditional circles in India.

One ought perhaps to distinguish between two categories of practices:

- 1) practices to activate the *mantra*-s, to make them efficient, usually of a more spritual character, or more closely associated with the spritual and vital forces (*cit*, *caitanya* and *prāṇa*, in the Kashmir terminology). These can be briefly mentioned under such headings as: *smaraṇa*, *anusamdhāna*, *uccāra* or *uccārana* which in its technical sense is a combination of *mantra* and *prāṇa*, that are combined also in such practices as *ajapājapa*, the different types of *mantra-yoga* (Hindu or Buddhist), etc.;
- 2) practices of a more ritual character (though sometimes difficult to separate from the preceding ones): methods of choice of *mantra*-s (*mantroddhāra* and *mantravicāra*, on which my paper in the BEFEO, vol. LXV), the ten *mantrasamskāra* (related to the interesting notion of *mantradośa*), the different techniques of *japa*, *nyāsa* (on which I have recently completed a study); also all the uses of *mantra*-s in rituals of all sorts, etc.

Secondary or accessory to these ritual practices are all the practices such as *maṇḍala*, *yantra*, *mudrā*, etc.: an enormous mass of facts, texts, uses and behaviours, bodily, mental and spritual, and all the speculations connected with them, all of which is still — not to be discovered — but, surely, to be systematically inventorized, classified, studied and understood.

With respect to all these facts, there appears a remarkable similarity of practices and ideas (related to the practices) throughout the whole Hindu religious spectrum. Variants do exist, of course, but on the whole there is a striking similarity, a unity even, that permits the study of different themes, separately, on an « All-India » basis, which is what I have done, or am doing, for *mantroddhāra*, *nyāsa* and *japa*.

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I must, finally, add a few remarks which will introduce problems that are admittedly outside the scope of a Sanskrit conference, but they are too fundamental for a serious study of the *mantra*, to be left aside.

All the researches hereto enumerated, important as they are, still do not suffice for a complete understanding of the problem of *mantra*, if only because they remain on the surface: they limit themselves to reporting what different texts, schools, authors, say on the subject. They report a discourse, they contribute to clarify it, they unveil its

relations to other discourses, or its historical origins and developments, but they do not *explain* it: what really *are mantra-s*? How do they « function »? What can one say about the mantric phenomenon as a peculiar type of human praxis and discourse? Those, indeed, are the most important problems.

The work of the indologist, therefore, must be completed by that of workers in other fields, or at least must be carried out by indologists conversant with other fields than those — philosophy, philology or history — with which most of us usually are.

Mantra-s are a form of language, a peculiar use of linguistic material; they should, as such, be studied from the several angles of linguistic science;

their uses in spiritual practices have psychological aspects: psychology, psycho-linguistics, should then intervene; and psycho-physiology, too, for *mantra-yoga*;

mantra-s, being forms of religious activity, are a social fact and are, as such, to be approached from the anthropological side; etc., etc.

Only such studies would permit really to understand the mantric phenomenon. They would, reciprocally, throw very useful lights on diverse aspects of human behaviour: linguistic, ritual, etc. They are therefore seriously to be encouraged. But this is a field where teamwork and cooperation between scholars and scientists, of several countries, are necessary. Some such work and cooperation do exist already, but on a very limited scale. One must hope that they will continue and increase.