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Living Mantra

Mantra, Deity, and Visionary Experience Today

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Contemporary Anthropology of Religion

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Mani Rao
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Satyam Sai Jai
Shivam Sai Jai
Sundaram Sai Jai

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Translation, Transliteration and Names

The conversations and narratives of this fieldwork were in Telugu, English and Hindi, and people rarely quoted from Sanskrit doctrinal sources. Translating from Telugu and Hindi, I err on the side of the literal to help communicate the voice of the speaker. When connotations of words or idiomatic expressions would be significantly lost in translation, I include them in parenthesis. Thus, in my conversation with Narendra Kapre, "there are winds of change" is followed by his original Hindi expression "*dhire dhire hava ban rahi hai.*" Kapre's expression in Hindi communicates a gathering momentum and a revolution taking shape, and readers who know Hindi can relish the flavor of the expression. Terms "sadhana," "mantra-sadhana" and "siddhi" are used so frequently in conversations here that I explain them in the introduction, and then use them without translation. Readers may refer to the glossary for all the important, recurring terms.

Many informants spoke in a combination of English and Telugu, and it would neither be comprehensible nor possible to indicate every shift with open and close quotes. Instead, I indicate significant words or phrases in the source language *like this*—this also draws the reader's attention to the speaker's characteristic voice or usage. In a transcript, when I retain the original Sanskrit or Telugu word, that word is in italics and my translation is in parenthesis (like this). If I need to add words to help intelligibility, I add them (like this), but when I have to intervene with a comment for clarification, I use brackets [like this]. When

speakers use technical words, I retain them in the transcript and include the translation in parenthesis. In a transcript, I use the Sanskrit forms of words so that the reader does not have to keep track of variants—thus, I change Telugu forms of "mantram" or "mantramu" and "homam" or "homamu" to "mantra" and "homa."

I do not use diacritical marks within the body of the text, as those familiar with the terms will pronounce them correctly anyway; thus, it is "sadhana," rather than "*sādhana*." Also, names and proper nouns are transliterated without diacritics—I use "ch" and "chh" instead of the diacritical marks "*c*" and "*ch*," "ri" or "ru" instead of "*ṛ*" and "sh" for both "*ṣ*" and "*ś*." Thus, the scholar Bhartrihari, "Ishvar" for "God" in Hindi, deity Krishna, the temple of Goddess Sahasrakshi and the Gayatri-mantra. I use "a" for both long and short articulations of the vowel "a," using diacritics only when a short "a" would convey a different meaning—thus *māraṇamu* (killing) vs. *maraṇamu* (death). Names of sources and literary works are also without diacritical marks, whether such popular sources as Ramayana and Mahabharata, or such scholastic sources as Vakyapadiya and Vaksudha. Having said that, several Indian legends tell of disasters that befall an inadvertent mispronunciation, or an accent in the wrong place. Therefore, I do use diacritical marks for and within all mantras, for example: "*Kṛṣṇa,*" "*Sahasrākṣī*" and "*Gāyatrī*." Additionally, I include the diacritical marks in the index for the reader's reference, and the list at the end of this section should help accurate pronunciation.

So that the reader understands I am talking about a deity and not a person, I use descriptors "goddess" and "god" and "deity" before their names. I translate references to deities in transcripts as "He" and "She" to replicate the equivalent difference established by the respectful nouns and pronouns used for such references in Telugu—"*Ammavaru* (Mother Goddess)" and "*ame*." I include honorifics of renunciates the first time I mention their name (e.g., Swami Siddheswarananda Bharati); however, subsequent mentions are of their main name (e.g., Siddheswarananda). In practice, I would address people as "Guruji," "Swamiji" or "Mataji" and address most adults with the respectful suffix of "*-garu*" (the Telugu equivalent of the Hindi "*ji*"). However, in the writing of this book, and in transcripts, I use the names by which they are known—that helps identify the speakers to the reader who may be turning to a page at random (after having read it all sequentially at first, of course).

How to Pronounce Diacritical Marks

This guide is not comprehensive, but will help the reader pronounce most names correctly. Basic tips: A dash over a vowel makes it a longer syllable; "*h*" after consonants calls for aspiration, or an out-breath. Curl your tongue back when there is a dot under the letter, except for ṃ, ḥ and ṛ (see below).

Vowels:

a as in cut
ā as in father
i as in pit
ī as in creed
u as in put or foot
ū as in brute or cool
e as in bay or fate
ai as in sigh or aisle
o as in hope
au as in sound or flautist
ṛ (which is a vowel in Sanskrit) similar to brunch, or rig
ṃ nasalize the preceding vowel so that oṃ as in the French bon
ḥ softly echoes the preceding vowel

Consonants: as for English except for:

v as wall
ś as shame (whereas s as in so)
ṣ similar to dish
c as church or chutney
t as pasta
ṅ as sung
ñ as canyon
ṇ has no equivalent in English, but it is a retroflex; the tongue needs to curl backward to touch the palate and then hit the back of the teeth.
d as in the, ḍ as in dart

When pronouncing the aspirated consonants kh, gh, ch, jh, th, dh, ph, bh, the h is pronounced along with an out-breath. This sound has no exact equivalent in English, but the following example will help approximate the sound. Thus, k as in skate but kh similar to Kate; g as in gate but gh as the country Ghana; ch as in much honey; and so on.

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PART I

Preparation

Preparation is crucial to sadhana.
—Swami Nachiketananda Puri

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Seeds

Mantras are codified sounds, clusters of syllables or words, or hymns uttered aloud or silently during religious rituals or contemplative practice. Recitations of mantras invoke deities, consecrate images of deities and mark rites of passage, from birth to marriage and cremation. In a *yajna* or *homa* ritual, mantras are offered to deities, typically via the fire-deity Agni, along with other offerings.[1] *Puja* (worship) in Hindu temples and homes is conducted with mantras, and mantras are also integral components of individual spiritual practice called "*sadhana*."

The seeds of my interest in mantra were planted in 2005. Returning to India after an advertising and television media career, and in response to a dream of Sathya Sai Baba, I began to spend some time at his ashram (spiritual community) in Puttaparthi, in the South Indian state of (what was then) Andhra Pradesh. Although Sai Baba's teachings were pluralistic, one of his missions was to promote the vedas; therefore, students at his schools and universities learned a set of vedic mantras as a part of their syllabus. These mantras were memorized and chanted on their own, detached from rituals. The word "veda" means "to know," and the term "veda" refers to a corpus believed to be the oldest source in Sanskrit and considered a revelation. This corpus is divided into four parts—Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda, and at the core of each of these is

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a collection of mantras (*samhita*). In the daily gatherings at Sai Kulwant Hall in Baba's ashram, the sound of vedic mantras filled the air—many in the crowd chanted along by memory. Whereas across India, mantras are mostly heard at temples or on religious and mythological programs on television, they are ubiquitous in Puttaparthi. The shopping center played mantras on a loop and the shops outside the gates of the ashram sold handbooks of mantras. Twice-daily *bhajans* (devotional songs) began and ended with mantras for peace (*shanti*). Additionally, among the crowds waiting in the Poornachandra auditorium for Sai Baba's public appearance, many would be occupied in *japa*, the repetitive utterance of a mantra, often using a rosary (*japamala*). I had heard about and witnessed several extraordinary phenomena attributed to Sai Baba such as manifestations of *vibhuti* (sacred ash) and materialization of objects, but did not have any understanding about spiritual practice. Living in Puttaparthi those few months, I became familiar with the idea of *sadhana*. Derived from the verbal root "*siddh*" (to achieve), *sadhana* carries the idea of earnest, hard work and of aspiring toward achievement. The culmination of sadhana is "*siddhi*" which means power, mastery or achievement. One imagines an athlete in training—no matter how many trainers she has, it is she who has to train; every sprint calls for single-minded attention and helps improve ability. A person who does sadhana is called a "*sadhaka*." When sadhana is centered around mantras, the siddhi involves gaining siddhi over a mantra, or having the ability to harness its power.

At the time, my own responses to mantras were aesthetic. Outside my day job, I was a poet and placed particular emphasis on sound structures. Admiring the rigor of mantra-sounds, I wondered, what prosodic elements made the chant of Srisuktam different in mood and effect from the chant of Rudram? What were the differences between mantras and Sanskrit classical poetry? If I accentuated the "Ṃ" in the utterance of "OṂ" (or "AUṂ") which prefaced so many mantras, I could feel the vibration on the top of my head; did the "A" and "U" also resonate in my body, and where? I was intrigued by such popular mantras as the Gayatri.[2] In vedic recitations, it was chanted in a jagged tone (*svara*) but commercial establishments in Puttaparthi played dulcet versions of it sung by the popular singer, Lata Mangeshkar.[3] During my stay on that visit, I developed a rudimentary sadhana; attracted to the Gayatri mantra—I thought, for its lofty meaning and jagged rhythms—I would often chant it silently.

It was in late 2005 when I was on a writing fellowship in Iowa City, USA, that I had what I would later call my first "mantra-experience." It was Fall, the leaves had turned red, rust and orange, and I would take a walk in the evening after a day of writing and meditation. On a walk one day, I heard a continuous tone in my right ear. I could tell it did not originate from *outside* me, and I could still hear it. The tone stayed with me, and while it was not unpleasant, it made me anxious, for I remembered reading about such a symptom in relation to some kind of motor imbalance. Searching for this symptom on the internet, I found information that suggested it could be related to meditation—an effect of certain *chakras* (energy centers) during meditation. Chakras are funnel-like structures at different points along the spinal path of the *kundalini* "energy" that may rise during spiritual practice, and the process is described as an awakening of the coiled-serpent-like *kundalini* from the *muladhara chakra* at the base of the spine to the *sahasrara chakra* at the crown. I phoned a Puttaparthi friend who engaged in full-time sadhana. She asked me a few questions—was it in my right ear, or the left? Was it continuous, and did I hear it all the time? It was in my right ear, it was quite loud, and if I forgot it, the slightest attention would bring it back to my hearing. She told me it was the *Pranava* (OṂ) and just a sign of a step forward in spiritual practice, I should pay no attention to this. I knew—from my general reading of early Indian ideas—that the sound of OṂ was said to be present in the *akasha* (etheric space), but I had never read about *hearing* it, and did not know quite what to make of it. Why me? Was there something I was supposed to do? What could I do with it? What next? Over the next few weeks, I lost this sound. Sometimes, I would hear a smallish wind-like *swoosh-swoosh* sound in the ear, but never a full-fledged and continuous sound like that first time. A decade later, when I began to study early Indian sources formally, mantra became my first scholarly project. Reviewing the scholarship, I found little or no study of the practice and experience of mantra. My methodology became ethnography; it was when I was deep into fieldwork that I realized the gaps in scholarship were also my own, eager to be bridged.

1.2 Homing In: Andhra-Telangana

Andhra-Telangana is one of the five Southern states of India. Previously a single state called "Andhra Pradesh," it was divided into two states of "Andhra Pradesh" and "Telangana" on 2nd June 2014, when I had just

begun fieldwork there. Historically, vedic communities settled along the banks of the river Godavari which flows all the way from western India's Nasik in Maharashtra for over 900 miles into Telugu-speaking regions of southeast India. Compared to other regions of India, the population of vedic ritualists is more dense in the Godavari delta (Knipe 1997, 2015). At the same time, this region is home to tantric Hinduism including the Shakta Srividya tradition in which the Goddess, Shakti, is the absolute divine power. A number of places in Andhra are *Shakti pithas*, or "seats" of Shakti (Sircar 1950), and associated with legends about Shakti.

The primary language spoken across this region is Telugu, and one of the popular explanations for the derivation of the word "Telugu" is that it may come from "*Tri-linga*," denoting three *Shivalingas* (aniconic forms of Shiva) manifested at Kaleshwaram in Telangana, Srisailam in Rayalaseema and Draksharamam in Andhra—these three locations are also *Shakti pithas* (seats of Goddess Shakti). Telugu is replete with words from Sanskrit and has retained the same alphabet (unlike Hindi which has dropped some of the letters). Sanskrit texts circulate in the Andhra region in the Telugu script; therefore, many Telugu people are familiar with Sanskrit religious texts and mantras even though they may not be able to read the Nagari script. This results in a population of Sanskrit pundits as well as Telugu-speaking laity with access to religious literature. Those who have trained in veda schools become professional priests and are called upon to conduct rituals for the laity, especially rites of passage such as weddings and after-death ceremonies. The laity may also have their own mantra-sadhana including extracts from vedic mantras and tantric mantras, often not overtly understood as such.

One may categorize ideas and/or practices at the three locations of this fieldwork as tantric Hindu, or even as folk tantra,[4] and the central role of Goddess Tripurasundari and Goddess Kali marks them as "Shakta." Typically, "sadhana" refers to Hindu tantric practices; however, many foundational ideas about mantra (e.g., Vak, or divine Speech) in tantric sources are to be found in vedic sources. Unless one is speaking to orthodox vedic practitioners, both veda and tantra are considered *shruti* (revelations). On-ground, veda and tantra are neighbors, and neighbors do speak to each other. There are several instances in the narratives of this book where vedic pundits have a private mantra-sadhana.

Therefore, staying close to ground realities in this fieldwork, while I focused on three Hindu tantric locations, I did not exclude cases of visionary experience or insights from vedic ritualists. Finally, discussions with practitioners suggested that revelations and visions occur beyond and may even confound categories. Just as Hindu religious sources may be classified as vedic (from vedas), tantric (from tantras) or pauranic (from puranas), mantras done by sadhakas in this research range wide, from *Gayatri* (vedic) to *Shodashi* (tantric) and *Panchakshari* (pauranic).[5]

My preliminary fieldwork had been in Pune and surrounds where I interviewed a number of professional vedic ritualists. Conversations were full of quotations from established religious sources. Was there no tradition of discourse about experience among vedic practitioners here, or had language been a barrier? Whatever the reason, it was when I turned to Andhra-Telangana that I met people who spoke from their own experience. A chance conversation helped provide a focus—*visionary* experience of mantra. One clue led to another, and I found myself refocusing on mantra-sadhakas with visionary experience. An advantage of working with Telugu people was that I—a native Telugu speaker—did not have to translate concepts mentally as I conversed. Not that I felt conceptual distance in the location of my preliminary fieldwork, Pune, but not as many jokes and subtleties had whizzed about in Hindi, which was neither their, nor my, language. In Andhra-Telangana, my communication challenges were after the fieldwork when I was preparing transcripts and writing; that was when I would consider how to translate Telugu expressions as closely and accurately as possible into English. One or two conceptual points become important to note at this juncture. The specific verbs attached to mantra in Telugu indicate how people think about mantras and they are also indicative of how people speak and think about mantras in many Indian languages. In English, it is more common to say "chant mantras," and this indicates singing; in Telugu, we "do" (*chesenu*) or "put" (*vesenu*) mantras. When one person instructs another in a mantra, we do not say she "said" the mantra (*chepperu*), we say she gave the mantra (*iccheru*). Already, this indicates how a mantra is an entity, a thing, as well as an action, rather than a language to be spoken. Even when the verb "to read" is used (*chadavadamu* in Telugu, and in Hindi, *padana*), it does not necessarily mean that the mantra has been read from a book or written source, for it may have been accessed from memory. In order to specify that a mantra was said aloud, we specify,

"*uccarinchenu*," or "I articulated it." "*Mantramu vinipincheru*" means "s/he had me hear it" and this shows how the source of the mantra is not a composer or speaker, but an enabler.

1.3 Overview

This chapter began with a disclosure about the experience from which the questions of this research germinated, and provided some information about Andhra-Telangana, the location of this research, and the popularity of mantra here.

Chapter 2, "A Mountain of Scholarship," surveys the literature about mantra. Such Indian sources as vedas and tantras considered authoritative contain and explain mantras as cosmic emanations, divine revelations or a priori forms that can be perceived by a *rishi*—a Sanskrit word often translated as "sage," and which means one who can *see*, thus, "seer." In many mantras and all vedic mantras, the rishi/seer is named along with the deity and the meter for that mantra. Indian legends have many anecdotes of how mantras solve problems and confer extraordinary powers upon those who utter them. Speculations about the origin of mantras, debates about their meaningfulness or meaninglessness, and commentaries and discussions including dialogs about applications and interpretations have been ongoing for over two millennia. Modern scholarship focused on mantra has mostly been of two kinds: those that categorize, translate and recapitulate early Indian sources, and those that attempt to understand mantra via music and myth and via language-based concepts including metaphors and cognitive theory, semiotics, speech act theory, prosody and structuralism including performance theory and ideological analysis. Immersing myself in this vast library of mantra, I found few insights into mantra-experience, and began to turn to fieldwork as a source of information.

Chapter 3, "Crossing Over," is about the methodological challenges and strategies in this research. From Émile Durkheim to Lévi Strauss, I thought, it was fieldwork that led to theory, and could one not also consider Sigmund Freud's interviews, fieldwork? Could I theorize mantra based on fieldwork? Determining that fieldwork would be my recourse also posed methodological issues. Can a scholar gain access to experience, or only to narratives of experience? Reading the views of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1974) about experience-near and