
Prapañcasāra: A Brief Study

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Introduction

The tantras are a special class of literature dealing mainly with the *upāsana* aspect—meditation and rituals—of Hinduism. One of the earliest and pre-eminent of these tantras is the *Prapañcasāra* or *Prapañcasāra-tantra*, attributed to Ādi Śaṅkara (788-820 AD). On this work there is a well-known commentary called *Vivaraṇa* by Padmapāda, one of the four chief disciples of Śaṅkara and the first pontiff of the Śāradāmaṭha at Dvāraka (in Gujarat).

Whether this work dealing with mantras, yantras and *upāsana*s of the various deities of the Hindu pantheon is a genuine composition of the famous Śaṅkara or someone else's, passed on as his, there is no doubt that it is the handiwork of a great genius.

The work has 2470 verses distributed among 36 *paṭalas*, or chapters, dealing with various topics such as creation and dissolution, development of the human embryo and birth, letters of the alphabet, *bijākṣaras*, or seed-letters, *dīkṣā*, or initiation, as also the mantras and rituals connected with the various deities.

A brief summary of this treatise may now be attempted here:

Chapter 1 (104 verses)

It starts with the questions of Brahmā, Vishnu and Rudra put to Lord Narayana. Narayana replies that they were brought forth by Akshara (the eternal Imperishable, or Brahman). He then proceeds to describe the process of creation beginning with Purusha (soul) and Prakriti (matter).

A detailed description of the concept of time starting with *lava* (a split-second) right up to the life of the four-faced Brahmā (which is

equal to 17,280 million human years) has also been given here.

Chapter 2 (67 verses)

The development of the embryo within the mother's womb and certain other topics of Ayurveda are dealt with in this chapter.

Another subject discussed here is that of *bhāvas*, or sounds, and several aspects of the kundalini.

Chapter 3 (75 verses)

The main theme of this chapter is the letters of the alphabet classified as *saumya* (lunar), *saura* (solar) and *āgneya* (fiery).

How these letters are uttered by the working of air, first through the sushumna canal and then through the vocal organ is also described.

Incidentally, the names of 50 *oṣadhīs* (herbs) like *candana* (sandal), *aguru* (fragrant aloe) and *karpūra* (camphor) have also been mentioned here.

Chapter 4 (76 verses)

This chapter deals mainly with the *bijākṣara* (seed-letter) *hrīm*, variously called *nāda*, *prāṇa*, *jīva*, *ghoṣa* and so on.

It is identified with the *devatā* (goddess) Bhuvaneśvarī, also known as Kuṇḍalī.

The *haṁsa* mantra (*so'ham haṁsaḥ*), also called *Mahāvākya*, too, finds a mention here.

Chapter 5 (70 verses)

Henceforward, this work deals mostly with rituals, normal to such tantric works.

The topics dealt with here are: *dīkṣā* (initiation), mantra (sacred formula), *vāstumāṇḍala* and *vāstudevatā* as also *vāstubali* (rites connected with the Vāstupuruṣa, a cosmic deity), and

erection of a *maṇḍapa* (a small structure, a shed) for purposes of *dīkṣā*.

Chapter 6 (125 verses)

The topics included in this chapter are the rishi (seer), *chandas* (metre) and *devatā* (deity) of a mantra; *nyāsas* (six or five); worship of the deity; establishing of the *kumbha* (pot); *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā* (infusing life into the image or symbol); the *upacāras* (special modes of offering); homa (fire-sacrifice); offering unto Brahman; *praṇāma* (obeisance).

Chapter 7 (70 verses)

This chapter deals with the rules of *sadhana* concerning Sarasvatī, the goddess of speech.

For her mantra, Brahmā is the rishi, Gayatri is the *chandas* and Sarasvatī herself is the *devatā*.

The *dhyāna-śloka* describes her form for meditation as having three eyes and of transparent brilliance. She is white in colour and holds a rosary, a pot of nectar and a book in three hands, the fourth showing the *cintā-mudrā* (the pose of knowledge, or wisdom).

Her nine attendant deities (shaktis) include the goddesses Medhā (understanding), Prabhā (radiance) and Smṛti (memory).

Other details concerning japa and homa are also given.

Chapter 8 (60 verses)

The first part of this chapter deals with *prāṇāgni-homa*. In the *mūlādhāra-cakra* (where the kundalini is resting) five homa *kuṇḍas* (pits for sacrificial fires) are imagined to exist and offerings of the letters of the alphabet are to be poured into them.

The second part deals with the worship of Sarasvatī, which includes the steps like *nyāsa* (ritual purification of limbs), puja as also a beautiful hymn on her.

Chapter 9 (44 verses)

This chapter is devoted to the worship of

the goddess Tripurā. She is called Tripurā since she is the creatrix of the *trimūrtis* Brahmā, Vishnu and Maheshvara. She is also the three Vedas and existed even before creation, filling all space. Her *bijas* (seed-letters) are *aim* and *klīm*.

Other items dealt with are the *dhyāna-śloka* (hymn of meditation), her attendant goddesses like Vāmā and a *cakra* (diagram). The effects of worshipping her are also described.

Chapter 10 (69 verses)

Worship of Mūlaprakṛti (known as Bhuvaneśvarī or Bhuvaneśī) along with her mantra, homa, *abhīṣeka* (ritual bath) and japa as also other allied subjects are discussed here.

The *dhyāna-śloka* describes her form with *pāśa* (noose) and *aṅkuśa* (goad) in two hands and exhibiting the *abhaya-* and *varada-* (protection-offering and boon-giving) *mudrās* in the other two hands.

Chapter 11 (70 verses)

The same topic is continued here with some additional information about her yantra, Gayatri mantra and attendant goddesses. There is also a long hymn addressed to her towards the end.

Chapter 12 (65 verses)

In this chapter, a detailed exposition of the worship of Śrī, or Lakṣmī, is given. For her mantra, Bhṛgu is the rishi, Nivṛt is the *chandas* and Śrī is the *devatā*, or deity.

The *dhyāna-śloka* describes her as holding two lotuses in her two upper hands whereas the two lower hands exhibit the *abhaya-* and *varada-mudrās*. Two elephants are also pouring *ghṛta* (ghee) from two pots.

After describing japa and homa, the text gives how her nine shaktis (or aspects) are to be invoked round her *piṭha* (seat).

She is also described as Ramā and 32 shaktis like Bhāratī, Pārvatī and Cāndrī are enumerated.

Her worship leads to the attainment of

purity, bodily perfection, beauty and intelligence.

Chapter 13 (90 verses)

Dealing with the goddess Tripuṭā, this section gives the rishi, *chandās* and *devatā* as Varāha, Nivṛt and Dharaṇi.

The japa of her mantra has to be done twelve lakh times.

The other topics discussed are the mantra of the goddess Tvaritā, yantras (mystic geometrical diagrams of deities) with ten and twelve lines, mantra of the deity Nityā and associated rites.

Chapter 14 (88 verses)

This chapter deals exclusively with the goddess Durgā including her several aspects and shaktis.

Aspects of Durgā are Vanadurgā and Śūlinīdurgā.

Mantras of all these aspects and their methods of *puraścaraṇa* (ceremonial repetition) are also given.

It is specially mentioned here that supplication to Durgā as Vindhyavāsini can eradicate the effects of all kinds of poisons like those of snakes, scorpions, rats and dogs.

Chapter 15 (65 verses)

This chapter concerns Sūrya or the Sun-god and his four-lettered mantra.

Aja (Brahmā) is the rishi for this mantra whereas Gayatri is the *chandās*. Bhuvaneśi, an aspect of the Divine Mother, is the *devatā*.

As in other cases, here also the *dhyāna-śloka*, *nyāsas*, homa and other rituals have been described.

Chapter 16 (65 verses)

This chapter deals with the mantra of Chandra, or Soma (the Moon), his worship and his nine shaktis like Rohiṇi, Kṛttikā, Revatī and Bharāṇi.

It also gives the mantra of Agni and his nine shaktis such as Pitā, Śvetā, Dhūmrā, Ruci-

rā and Jvālīnī.

Chapter 17 (78 verses)

This section deals with Mahāgaṇapati.

The mantra is a long one with twenty-eight letters. Its rishi is Gaṇaka, the *chandās* is Nivṛt and the deity is Mahāgaṇapati.

The *dhyāna śloka* describes him along with his shakti (who is wearing shining ornaments and holding a lotus in her hand). He has ten arms holding pomegranate fruit, mace, discus, noose, his own tusk and so on.

He has nine shaktis like Tivrā, Jvālīnī, Ugrā, Kāmarūpiṇi and others.

Other mantras including a Gaṇeṣa-gāyatrī are also given.

Chapter 18 (54 verses)

This is devoted to Manmatha (Cupid), the god of love. For his mantra, Sammohana is the rishi, Gayatri is the *chandās* and Manobhāva is the deity. He has eight shaktis to assist him, like Mohani, Trāsī and Akarṣiṇi. Two mantras are given. The first is of a single letter. The second, called *mūla* mantra, has fifty letters. A mantra of Ratividya (Kāma's consort) consisting of thirty-two letters is also indicated. This section gives a long mantra of Sri Krishna (of eighteen letters) and the ways of using it.

Chapter 19 (64 verses)

The subjects dealt with in this chapter are Praṇava (Oṅkāra), meditation on Vishnu, the four *vyūhas* of Vishnu, details concerning yoga like yama and niyama, five states of consciousness, different states of yoga and yoga *siddhis* like *aṇimā* (capacity to become small like an atom). Methods of *utkrānti* (leaving the body through its various parts), entering into others' bodies and returning are also described towards the end.

Chapter 20 (61 verses)

The *aṣṭākṣari* mantra the famous eight-lettered mantra of Nārāyaṇa is the main sub-

ject here. Of this mantra, Sādhyā-nārāyaṇa is the rishi, Gayatri is the *chandas* and Paramatman is the *devatā*.

Apart from giving the names of the ten avatars—which list omits Buddha but includes Balarama—some aspects of rituals like *arcana* (worship) and japa are also dealt with at the end.

Chapter 21 (60 verses)

This chapter deals with the twelve yantras of the twelve *rāśis* (signs of the zodiac). Bhānu (or the Sun) when associated with these twelve *rāśis* has twelve different names such as Dhātā, Aryamā, Mitra, Vivasvān and Pūṣā.

Towards the end, a beautiful hymn addressed to Vishnu is also given.

Chapter 22 (58 verses)

The *dvādaśākṣari* (twelve-lettered) mantra of Lord Vāsudeva is the subject of this section. Prajāpati is the rishi whereas Gayatri is the *chandas*. Vishnu is the *devatā*.

It is to be repeated twelve lakh times and is capable of giving moksha, or liberation.

Three kinds of *nyāsas*—*samhāra-nyāsa*, *sṛṣṭi-nyāsa* and *sthiti-nyāsa*—leading to the destruction of *doṣas* (faults) and the creation of good, as also the attainment of peace are also given.

Incidentally, the mantra of Sudarśana (Lord Vishnu's discus) and some associated rituals are also given.

Chapter 23 (72 verses)

This chapter deals with the Puruoshottama aspect of Lord Vishnu. The names of his twelve aspects like Satyātman, Acyutātman and Apratirūpa associated with twelve parts of the body for their ceremonial purification are also given.

The rishi, *chandas* and *devatā* are, respectively, Jaimini, Jagatī and Purushottama.

Other mantras mentioned are those of the Sudarśana-cakra (discus), Pāñcājanya-śaṅkha (conch), Kaumodakī-gadā (mace), Ga-

ruḍa (the eagle-mount) and so on.

The Gayatri mantra of Vishnu as Trailokyamohana (one who enchants all the three worlds) as also the description of his extremely bewitching form are given towards the end.

Chapter 24 (48 verses)

The mantras, meditation and worship of Śrīkara (Lord Vishnu, who produces wealth) and Mahāvarāha (the Great Boar incarnation of Vishnu) are the subject matter of this section.

Chapter 25 (58 verses)

Meditation and worship of Nṛsimha (Man Lion incarnation of Lord Vishnu) are the main topics here.

Nārada or Prajāpati is said to be its rishi whereas Anuṣṭubh is the *chandas*; and the *devatā* is Nṛsimha.

He can be worshipped in two aspects: *prasanna* (benign) and *krūra* (fearsome).

Garuḍa mantra and Nṛsimha yantra are the other topics dealt with.

Chapter 26 (66 verses)

It deals with *viṣṇu-pāñjara-yantra*, which affords protection to the devotee. A mantra of sixteen letters (of Vāsudeva), other mantras related to weapons like the Sudarśana-cakra and Śārṅga-dhanus (bow) are also given.

A mantra that integrates the *loka* of the *Bhagavadgīta* (11.36) describing the Lord's *viśvarūpa* (Cosmic Form) is also given with all the allied instructions.

Chapter 27 (73 verses)

This chapter is concerned with the *prāsāda* mantra, a mantra of Lord Shiva that helps the *sādhaka* to get what he wants by pleasing the Lord.

Vāmadeva is the rishi of this mantra. The *chandas* is Pañkti. Īśa (Shiva) is the *devatā*.

The *dhyāna śloka* describes him as Pañcavakra, having five faces. These five faces, or

aspects, are Sadyojāta, Vāmadeva, Aghora, Tatpuruṣa and Īṣāna.

There is also an exquisite hymn on Shiva (verses 55 to 64).

Chapter 28 (55 verses)

Dakṣiṇāmūrti, an important aspect of Shiva, is the subject matter of this chapter. He is described as sitting under a *vaṭavṛkṣa* (banyan tree), white in complexion, with matted hair ornamented by the crescent moon. He has four hands, holding the *paraśu* (battle-axe) and the *mṛga* (deer) in two hands. The third is showing the *jñāna-mudrā* (posture of giving spiritual wisdom) and the last rests on his knee.

For his mantra—a long one of eighteen letters—Śuka is the rishi, Anuṣṭubh is the *chandas* and Dakṣiṇāmūrti-Rudra is the *devatā*.

The rest of the chapter deals with the connected rituals.

Chapter 29 (46 verses)

Umeśa and Ardhanārīśvara are the two aspects of Lord Shiva dealt with here.

Their descriptions are given in the respective *dhyāna ślokas*. So also the rules for their *jaṇa* and *homa*.

Ardhanārīśvara can be propitiated for various purposes such as *puṣṭikarma* (nourishment), *śāntikarma* (offsetting the evil effects of inauspicious planets and so on) and even *ākaraṣaṇa* (attracting others) as also *vaśīkaraṇa* (gaining control over others).

The mantra of Caṇḍeśvara, a fierce aspect of Lord Shiva is also given, along with his Gayatri.

Chapter 30 (73 verses)

The special subject of this chapter is the famous Gayatri mantra, along with the Praṇava (Om), the three *vyāhṛtis*, the seven *vyāhṛtis* and the *gāyatrī-śiras*.

The three *vyāhṛtis* are *bhūh*, *bhuvaḥ* and *svaḥ* or *suvaḥ*.

The seven *vyāhṛtis* are *bhūh*, *bhuvaḥ*, *su-*

vaḥ, *mahaḥ*, *janaḥ*, *tapah* and *satyam*.

The *gāyatrī-śiras* is 'om āpo jyoti raso'mṛtaṁ brahma bhūr-bhuvas-suvar-om'.

A detailed meaning and significance of all these is also described.

Chapter 31 (103 verses)

This section gives the *triṣṭubh* mantra of the goddess Kātyāyanī (an aspect of Pārvatī, or Durgā). Actually, it comprises the first four lines of the 'Durgā Sūkta', which is a part of the *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* (2.1-7).

Marīci-Kāśyapa is the rishi of this mantra. Triṣṭubh (a Vedic metre of eleven letters in each of the four lines) is the metre, whereas Jā-tavedas-Agni is the *devatā*.

Apart from the dhyana of the goddess Kātyāyanī, this section also gives the names of her nine shaktis like Jayā, Vijayā, Bhadrakālī and Durgā.

As a part of the puja of the deity, names of some more goddesses like Jāgatā, Vedagarbhā, Tapanī and Dahanarūpiṇī, associated with the letters of the mantra, are also given.

An interesting point made out here is that the repetition of the mantra (*jātavedase sunavāma* and so on) in the reverse order makes it an *astra*, or weapon, capable of destroying all the defects in the ritualistic process undertaken.

Divisions of the *nakṣatras* into three groups (*daiva*, *āśura* and *mānuṣa*) and certain magical rites like *stambhana* (arresting), *vaśīkaraṇa* (subjugating others) and *ākaraṣaṇa* (attracting someone to oneself)—these are the other topics dealt with.

Chapter 32 (64 verses)

This section deals with the *lavāṇa* mantra, related to the goddesses Rātri, Durgā and Bhadrakālī. Aṅgiras is the rishi and the metres are Anuṣṭubh and Triṣṭubh.

The *dhyāna-śloka* of the Kātyāyanī form of Durgā describes her with three eyes and four arms holding *cakra* (discus), *śaṅkha* (conch), *asi* (sword) and *śūla* (spear).

Some magical rites like *māraṇa* (killing

enemies) and *vaśikaraṇa* (controlling a person whom we want) are also described.

Chapter 33 (72 verses)

The *anuṣṭubh* mantra of thirty-two letters is dealt with here. Vasiṣṭha is the rishi, Rudra is the *devatā* and Anuṣṭubh itself is the *chandās*. A detailed description of Rudra is given by the *dhyāna-śloka*. His thirty-two shaktis such as Ramā, Rākā, Sārā, Umā, Śāntā and Amoghā are mentioned too. There is also the mention of a mantra of 100 letters (*śatākṣara* mantra), formed by combining the letters of the three metres—Gayatri, Triṣṭubh and Anuṣṭubh. Its repetition gives longevity.

Chapter 34 (77 verses)

This chapter deals with a number of rites that can bring about the following results: longevity, cure of fever, controlling the minds of others, attracting others to oneself, conquering of enemies and so on.

Chapter 35 (22 verses)

Prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā, or infusing life into an image or a yantra, is the subject matter here. Prāṇa, or life-force, is considered as a deity and her description is given in a *dhyāna-śloka*. She has three eyes. She is seated on a lotus situated in a boat. She is holding in her hands *pāśa* (noose), *ikṣu-kodaṇḍa* and *pañca-bāṇas* (bow of sugarcane, with five arrows) as also *aṅkuṣa* (goad) and *asṛk-kapāla* (skull-cup with blood). Her companions are Mṛtā, Vaivasvatā, Prāṇalā, Ākṣya and others.

Chapter 36 (63 verses)

This concluding chapter starts with the condemnation of a person who does not have a son or sons, the reasons for it and the remedies like the performance of a yajna (sacrifice).

It also describes the qualifications of a guru (spiritual preceptor, especially the one who gives a mantra and gets all the rituals per-

formed) such as competence in this science, capacity to bless or chastise, conquest of the six enemies like lust, deep knowledge of the scriptures, being devoted to the worship of God, infinite patience, compassion towards the disciples and the capacity of good speech in order to teach well.

The disciple too must deserve the guru's grace by cultivating the following virtues: humility, devotion to the guru as if he is God Himself, service to him, observing truth and celibacy strictly, control in eating, sleep and speech, deep interest in studies, absence of calumny and so on.

Why this work is called *Prapañcasāra* is explained at the end. It is the *sāra* (essence) of the *prapañca* (the world). The treatise ends with a prayer to God as *paripūrṇa-tejas* (Overfull, or Perfect, Light).

Conclusion

The *Prapañcasāra* is a difficult work to understand since it contains an esoteric spiritual science. Such sciences used to be taught privately in the seclusion of forest monasteries or academies. That is why they were either in the form of sutras (aphorisms) or couched in an apparently unintelligible language. Only those who could unearth their special terms or symbols could understand them.

Though the *Vivaraṇa* of Padmapāda does throw light on the many aspects of this work, it still leaves much unsaid or unexplained, especially in the field of the various mantras. Since the tradition that these mantras were to be transmitted directly and secretly by the guru to the disciple was still very strong (and inviolable) during his time, Padmapāda must have played it safe by strictly following it. However, the work *Prapañcasāra-sārasaṅgraha* of Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī has untied the knots in many places and has made it easier to understand and follow. *

You can buy flattery, but envy must be earned.