Prapāñcasāra: A Brief Study

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Introduction

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

Whether this work dealing with mantras, yantras and upāsanās 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 pātaḷas, 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 ośadhīs (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) hrim, variously called nāda, prāṇa, jīva, ghosha and so on.

It is identified with the devatā (goddess) Bhuvanēśvari, also known as Kuṇḍali.

The hānīsa mantra (so ‘hān hānīsaḥ), also called Mahāvākyya, 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), vāstumaṇḍala 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-pratiśṭhā (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 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 klim.

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 Bhuvaneśvari or Bhuvanesi) along with her mantra, homa, abhiśeka (ritual bath) and japa as also other allied subjects are discussed here.

The dhyāna-śloka describes her form with pāśa (noose) and aikūsa (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 Śri, or Lākṣmi, is given. For her mantra, Bhrigu is the rishi, Nivṛt is the chandas and Śri 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 pitha (seat).

She is also described as Rama and 32 shaktis like Bhārati, Pārvatī and Cāndri are enumerated.

Her worship leads to the attainment of
purity, bodily perfection, beauty and intelligence.

Chapter 13 (90 verses)

Dealing with the goddess Tripūtā, this section gives the rishi, chandas and devatā as Varāha, Nivṛt and Dharanī.

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 Śūlindurgā.

Mantras of all these aspects and their methods of puraścāraṇā (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 Śūrya or the Sun-god and his four-lettered mantra.

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

As in other cases, here also the dhyāna-sloka, 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 Rohiṇī, Kṛttikā, Revati and Bharani.

It also gives the mantra of Agni and his nine shaktis such as Pītā, Śvetā, Dhūmrā, Ruci-rā and Jvālinī.

Chapter 17 (78 verses)

This section deals with Mahāgaṇapatī.

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

The dhyāna-sloka 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, Jvālinī, Ugrā, Kāmarūpiṇī and others.

Other mantras including a Gaṇeṣa-gāya-три 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 chandas and Manobhava is the deity. He has eight shaktis to assist him, like Mohani, Trāsi and Ākarsini. Two mantras are given. The first is of a single letter. The second, called mūla mantra, has fifty letters. A mantra of Ratividyā (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 (Onkāra), 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, Sādhya-nārāyaṇa is the rishi, Gayatri is the chandas and Paramatman is the devatā.

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

Chapter 21 (60 verses)

This chapter deals with the twelve yantras of the twelve rāsīs (signs of the zodiac). Bhānu (or the Sun) when associated with these twelve rāsīs 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 dvādasākṣaṛi (twelve-lettered) mantra of Lord Vāsudeva is the subject of this section. Prajāpāti 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, śṛṣṭi-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), Pāncajanya-śaṅkha (conch), Kaumodaki-gadā (mace), Ga-ruḍa (the eagle-mount) and so on.

The Gayatri mantra of Vishnu as Trailok-yamohana (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 Śrikara (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 Nṛṣimha (Man Lion incarnation of Lord Vishnu) are the main topics here.

Nārada or Prajāpāti is said to be its rishi whereas Anuṣṭubh is the chandas; and the devatā is Nṛṣimha.

He can be worshipped in two aspects: prasanna (benign) and kūra (fearsome). Garuḍa mantra and Nṛṣimha yantra are the other topics dealt with.

Chapter 26 (66 verses)

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

A mantra that integrates the loka of the Bhagavadgītā (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 prāśāda 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 Paṅkti. Īśa (Shiva) is the devatā.

The dhyāna śloka describes him as Paṅca-vaktra, having five faces. These five faces, or
aspects, are Sadyojāta, Vāmadeva, Aghora, Tatpuruṣa and Iśāna.

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

Chapter 28 (55 verses)

Dakśināmūrti, an important aspect of Shiva, is the subject matter of this chapter. He is described as sitting under a vatavṛkṣa (banyan tree), white in complexion, with matted hair ornamented by the crescent moon. He has four hands, holding the paraśu (battle-axe) and the mrga (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—Śuṅka is the rishi, Anuśūthub is the chandas and Dakśināmūrti-Rudra is the devatā.

The rest of the chapter deals with the connected rituals.

Chapter 29 (46 verses)

Umesa 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 japa and homa.

Ardhanārīśvara can be propitiated for various purposes such as puṣṭikarma (nourishment), sāntikarma (offsetting the evil effects of inauspicious planets and so on) and even ākaraṣaṇa (attracting others) as also vaśikaraṇa (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 gayatri-śiras.

The three vyāhṛtis are bhūḥ, bhuvaḥ and svāḥ or suvaḥ.

The seven vyāhṛtis are bhūḥ, bhuvaḥ, su-vaḥ, mahāḥ, janaḥ, tapaḥ and satyam.

The gayatri-śiras is ‘om āpo jyoti rasoṁraṁtāṁ brahma bhūr-bhuvaḥ-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 Kātyāyani (an aspect of Pārvatī, or Durgā). Actually, it comprises the first four lines of the ‘Durgā Śūktā’, which is a part of the Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad (2.1-7).

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

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

As a part of the puja of the deity, names of some more goddesses like Jāgata, Vedagarbhā, Tapani and Dahanartipīni, 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, asura and mānuṣa) and certain magical rites like stambhana (arresting), vaśikaraṇa (subjugating others) and ākaraṇa (attracting someone to oneself)—these are the other topics dealt with.

Chapter 32 (64 verses)

This section deals with the lavana mantra, related to the goddesses Rātri, Durgā and Bhadrakāli. Āṅgiras is the rishi and the metres are Anuśūthub and Triṣṭubh.

The dhyāna-śloka of the Kātyāyani 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 anuśṭubh mantra of thirty-two letters is dealt with here. Vasiṣṭha is the rishi, Rudra is the devatā and Anuṣṭubh itself is the chandas. A detailed description of Rudra is given by the dhyāna-śloka. His thirty-two shaktis such as Rāma, Rākā, Sārā, Umā, Śāntā and Amoghā are mentioned too. There is also the mention of a mantra of 100 letters (sāṭakṣara 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-pratiśṭhā, 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-kodanda and pañca-bāṇas (bow of sugarcane, with five arrows) as also arkuśa (goad) and asṛk-kapāla (skull-cup with blood). Her companions are Mrṭā, Vaivasvatā, Prāṇalā, Ākṛṣyā 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 yajña (sacrifice).

It also describes the qualifications of a guru (spiritual preceptor, especially the one who gives a mantra and gets all the rituals performed) 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 Vīvarañā 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 Sarasvati 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.