

Introduction of *Sahasranāma* Literature- With the Special Reference of *Lalitāsahasranāma*

Medha Deshpande Palsodkar

Research Assistant, Department of Sanskrit, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, India

1. PREFACE

Sahasranāma (SN) is a literary composition in which the names of a particular deity are enumerated. This is the metrical composition (almost in anuṣṭup metre) with a purpose of daily recitation. Thus we find *Viṣṇusahasranāma*, *Lalitāsahasranāma*, *Śivasahasranāma* are still practiced. When it is SN the number of the names listed is 1,000 (in some cases more than one thousand). Apart from SN we have the compositions entitled as *Dvādaśanāma*, *Aṣṭottaraśatanāma*, *Śatanāma*, *Ṣoḍaśanāma*, *Śatapañcasannāma*, *Daśanāma*, *Aṣṭottaraśatanāma* etc.¹

By SN I intend all these types of compositions. Apart from these, there are mere lists of names of one deity which are called *Nāmāvalī*. In SN we find the names enumerated metrically, most of the times in nominatives. However in *Nāmāvalī* we find the names disjunctively mentioned and not as it is but prefixed by 'Om' and declined with dative ending, further connected with 'Namaḥ'.²

There are more than 100 SNs available in printed and manuscript forms.³ Even we find different SNs for one single deity.⁴ In SN, we find different types of compositions. e.g. names beginning with particular letters are listed in one list. i.e. The name of *Kṛṣṇa* beginning with K, names of *Rāma* beginning with R.⁵ These SN literature has its own style of composition. The names listed there, are in nominatives and can be explained as *Prātipadikārtha Prathamā*⁶ viz. denoting just the meaning of the stem.

It doesn't yield any particular sentence, thus these are only names which are just uttered or muttered, in *Japa*. However exception to it is the *Khristasahasranāma* where the names are listed also in dative so as to connect them with *Namaḥ* or accusative as an object of a verb like *bhaje*, *Vande*⁷ etc. Elsewhere also we find the enumeration of the names of one deity but since it occurs in the frame of sentence, it is not regarded as SN.⁸ These various names of deity normally describe the deity physically e.g. *dhanvi* (in *VSN*), *Puṇḍarikākṣaḥ* (*VSN*), *Anavadyāṅgī* (*LSN*), *Pañcavakra* (*LSN*), *Jaī*, *Carmī*, *Smaśānavāsi* (*SSN*), *Gabhastimān*, *tejas* (*SON*), *Ekadamṣṭra*, *Vakratuṅḍa* (*GSN*), *Gajavakra*, *Mahodara* (*GSN*), *Ghanaśyāma* (*RSN*), *Pītavāsaḥ*, *Mahorakṣaḥ vipulāmsaḥ* (*RSN*)

Some names describes the power of that deity, e.g. *dhātā*, *vidhātā*, *amogha* (*VSN*), *parameśvarī* (*LSN*), *sarvabhūtahara*, *samvatatsarakara* (*SSN*), *bhīma kālacakra*, *kalādhyaḥṣa* (*SON*), *kāraṇātmā*, *praṇeśvarī* (*PSN*), *tīsa*, *viśvakara*, *bhīmaparākrama* (*RSN*).

Some names highlight the myth associated with that deity. e.g. *nārasimhavapuḥ*, *mādhava* (*VSN*), *dakṣayajñavināśinī* (*LSN*), *nīlakantha*, *umāpati* (*SSN*), *mūṣakavāhana*, *kumārāguru*, *tīśānaputra* (*GSN*), *mahāmahiṣaghātini* (*PSN*), *jaṭāyuprītivardhana* (*RSN*).

There are some more attributes which are found as attribute of the *Brahman* in *Upaniṣadic literature*. e.g. *anādinidhanā*, *śāśvata*, *tīśāna* (*VSN*), *nityā*, *niravadyā*, *nirākārā* etc (*LSN*), *svayambhūta*, *ādi* (*SSN*), *anādi*, *aḥṣaya* (*RSN*), *ananta*, *aja*, *sarvasyādi* (*SUN*), *gūhyam*, *param*, *acintya*, *kevalā*, *anantyā*, *anādinidhanā* (*PSN*).

In the older texts of SN, we hardly find complicated compounded expressions. On the contrary the later SN texts give longer compounded expressions. e.g. *pāṭalīkumapriyā*, *ichhāśakti*, *jñyāśakti*, *kriyāśaktisvarupīṇī* (LSN) etc.

These various names of a deity are not linguistically regarded as the synonyms, however very few of them can be called synonyms to certain extent.⁹ Almost all of them are the epithets. A point should be noted here that the metrical composition giving the list of synonyms is never regarded as a part of SN, or has no value of SN. Needless to say that aim and object behind the composition of SN is totally different than that behind the synonymy in lexicons.

2. THE OLDEST AVAILABLE ACCOUNTS OF SN

The *Rudrādhyāya* in *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* of the *Yajurveda* seems to be the rudiments for SN, where various names of the deity Rudra are continuously referred.¹⁰ However the words are in dative and connected with *Namaḥ*. In addition to that deity is described with uncompounded expressions. The *Ṛgveda* (1.4.64) has caught the germ of the SN. It enumerates the different names of the different deities, but at the same time declares that these are just the names and not the different entities. It amounts to saying that *Indra*, *Mitra*, *Varuṇa*, *Agni*, *Mātariśvan*, *Garutman* and *Yama* are different names of one object.¹¹

The later *Upaniṣads* reproduce the same idea e.g. *tvam brahmā*, *tvam viṣṇus*, *tvam rudras*, *tvam indras* etc (*Śrīgaṇeśopaniṣad*)¹². Then comes *MBH*, where we find famous, *Viṣṇusahasranāma* along with *Śivasahasranāma*. Also there is as a litany of 108 names of the deity *Sūrya*.¹³ Next to *MBH*, *Purāṇa* literature gives such *SN* for different deities. The *Tantra* literature also contributes to it. The *Lalitāsahasranāma* comes in *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*. In addition there are lots of *SN* compositions for different deities.

3. THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE EARLY SN

Before turning to the instinct behind the *SN* in *MBH* it would be better to the motives behind that type type of description in *Vedic* literature. The foresighted sage of *Ṛgveda* 1.4.64 might have experienced that when an individual poet praised his favourite deity. He sees the deity an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, kind etc. When there are many individual descriptions resulting into similarity, the corollary is the deity is one and each one sees either of the aspects of that deity with his own eyes, in his own capacity and labels it accordingly. Thus we have different names for one deity accordingly.

The *Vedic* seer has understood the logic behind *SN*, which is *ekam, sat viprā bahudhā vadanti* this implies that there are various ways of addressing of the absolute one. This further means that these names and labels remain different on the verbal level, whereas the referent is one and the same. These implications are philosophized by *Upaniṣadic* literature. The *Chhāndogya Upaniṣad* calls the *nāmadheya* (i.e. names) as mere alterations, modifications.¹⁴

It means that these names or naming the objects diversely is *Vikāra* and not *Prakṛti* i.e natural. The *Upaniṣadic* word *vācārambhanam* is very perfect description of these phenomenon. These distinction among *agni*, *yama*, *mātariśvā* is based on the sound i.e. the word which goes on changing, needless to say that the meaning, the referent remains stable.

Through this the *Upaniṣads* have provided the firm philosophical base on which is standing the edifice on the *SN* literature.

4. LALITĀSAHASRANĀMA

The *Dhyāna śloka* of *LSN* consists of one thousand names of *Lalitāparameśvarī*. *Lalitāmbā* is the *Māyā* part of the *Brahman*. She is the *Vimarṣa* form and is the cause for illusion or duality. *Lalitāsahasranāma* containing 320 *ślokas* in three chapters occurs in the second part of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* which is the last of *Śrī Vedavyāsa's* 18 *Purāṇas*. Even a cursory reading of this will impress one with the importance attached by *Śrī Vedavyāsa* to the subject of *Mantraśāstra* in the last of his *Purāṇas*. The *Purāṇas* have come to us as an explanation to some abstruse *Vedic* passages.

The *Prakāśa* form of *Brahman* is called *Śiva* and the *vimarṣa* form of the *Brahman* is called *Śakti*. *Śiva* is *nirguṇa* (without qualities) *Brahman* and *Śakti* is *Saguṇa* (with qualities) *Brahman*. The Universe cannot function without the combination of the two. *Śiva* is not created by anybody and there is nothing above him in hierarchy. Therefore he is called *athi* or the first.

Since he does not have a parentage. He is called *anathi* (Orphan). *Śiva* created *Śakti* to create, sustain and dissolve this universe. Therefore all the activities of this universe are under her control only. Why *Śiva* has chosen *Śakti*? *Śiva* wanted to create somebody who can nurture this universe with motherly love and affection. *Śiva* also knows (*Brahman* is the knower of all) that only a woman can take care of this universe, like her own child. That is how *Śakti* came into existence.

That is why we call the earth as Mother Earth, we call the nature as Mother Nature. Every mother has their own role to play in nurturing her children. In the same way, the supreme mother has her own role in sustaining us in protecting us. Her administration is based on the law of the Lord, which is called *Karma*. She is called by various names such as *Lalitāmbā*, *Rājarājeśvarī*, *Śakti*, Mother etc. We have already discussed about her *Prakāśa Vimarśa mahā māyā svarūpinī* form.

This *Lalitāsahasranāma* is said to have been recited by eight *vak devis* (*Vak devis*- considered as authorities of sound and verses, knowledgeable) in the presence of *Lalitāmbā* at her own request. This thousand *nāmas* or names were recited in the form of verses. These verses are also called *Mantras* and compared to the verses of the Vedas. Every single *nāma* has powerful meaning. If you look at these meanings, you will certainly understand the concept of *Vimarśa* or *Śakti* form of the *Brahman*, which is also called as *Saguṇa Brahman*. Her *Kuṇḍalinī* form has been beautifully described.

It will be interesting to observe how the kinetic energy of the *Brahman* functions, as every aspect of the administration of this Universe has been discussed in detail in this *Sahasranāma*. *Brahman* is in the form of self-illuminating light and this light can be realized in the higher levels of our consciousness.

Recitation of *Lalitāsahasranāma*:

Lalitāsahasranāma has three parts. The first one is called '*Pūrva bhāga*', the middle portion which is called '*stotra*' consists of 1000 *nāmas* and the last portion is called '*Uttara bhāga*'. The *pūrva bhāga* talks about its origin. The *uttara bhāga* gives details of the benefits of recitation of this *Lalitāsahasranāma*. Benefits of recitation include disease free life, no premature death, begetting children, etc. Normally such benefits are cited for all the *stotras*. The timing of recitation is clearly spelt out in the *uttara bhāga*.¹⁵

To begin with the least, it is said that one should recite this at least once in his/her life time. If thus recited, he is absolved of all the sins committed. When this *Sahasranāma* is recited, one need not perform any remedies either due to the afflictions of planets in his horoscope or for that matter any other expiation. The point driven here is that a devotee of *Lalitāmbā* would not commit any sins.

The best timings for recitations are as follows: On the birthdays of self and his family members, one's mantra initiation day, one's *pūrṇa abhiṣeka* day (the last of stage of initiation. A *Vedic* ritual bath) or any day as prescribed by his Guru, on the full moon days, on all the Fridays, on *Mahanavami* day (9th day of waning moon in the month of August – September. This coincides with *Durgā* festival in India. 9th day of *Durgā* festival is called *Mahanavami*) Though a number of such days are mentioned, it is always preferable to recite this *Sahasranāma* on all the Fridays and on the full moon day.

As far as the full moon days are concerned, it is better to recite when the moon is 100% full. This could happen at an odd hour. Therefore anytime during full moon day, preferably late in the night is the best time to recite this *Sahasranāma* to get full benefits of such recitation. In the present day context, everybody has time constraint. The proper recitation of this *SN* would take between 20 to 30 minutes. If recited in hurry, without concentration, without proper visualization of *Lalitāmbā* and reciting for the sake of recitation is not advisable.

In such circumstances (time constraint) you can choose any time convenient to you. But ensure that you recite with full concentration and after knowing the meaning of each *nāma*. Recitation without understanding the meaning will not give the desired results. No paraphernalia is required. Total concentration is the only requirement.¹⁶

5. IN BRIEF

Apparently *SN* is literary tradition but intermingled with the ritualistic practices pertaining to different cults. It has the firm foundation in *Upaniṣadic* Philosophy. It improved the in built elasticity of Hinduism by facilitating by accommodation of many deities into it. It has strong social implications. It functioned towards attuning different cults in Hinduism and thereby extirpating any possibilities of conflict between different cults.

END NOTES

¹ *Gaṇapatisahasranāmastotram*
Rāmatriśatanāmastotram
Śivāṣṭanāmastotram
Sūryadvādaśanāmastotram
Dattātreyadaśanāmastotram
Dattātreyāśatapañcaśannāmastotram
Rāmaśoḍaśanāmastotram
Śivāṣṭaviṃśattiyuttaranāma
Dattātreyāṣṭottarasahasranāma
Akārādikaśakārāntastotrasatasahasranāma

² See the verse from LSN
Śrīmātā śrīmahārājñī śrīmat śimhāsaneśvarī |
Cidagnikuṇḍasambhūtā devakāryasamudyatā ||

The traditional *Nāmāvalī* is
Om Śrīmatre Namaḥ
Om Śrīmahārājñai Namaḥ
Om Śimhāsaneśvaryai Namaḥ

³ Apart from the published material following catalogues list some manuscripts on SN
a. A descriptive catalogue of manuscripts in the Moropant collection in the library of University of Bombay Vol.I, Ed.by Dr.U.R.Bhise.
b. A descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts in Tanjor Mahal S.S.M.Library, Tanjor. Vol.XIX, Ed. By P.P.S.Shastrī
c. A descriptive catalogue of the Sanskrit Manuscripts. Vol.V.,Part II. Varanasi Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya Library, Sarasvati Bhavan, Varanasi.

⁴ *Rāmasahasranāma in Rudrayāmala,*
Liṅgapurāṇa and Padmapurāṇa,
Śivasahasranāma in Liṅga and Vāyupurāṇa

⁵ *Kakārādikaśahasranāma*
Rakārādinaśahasranāma
Kakārādi kṛṣṇasahasranāma

⁶ P.2,3,4,5.
Prātipadikārthaparimāṇavacanamātre Prathamā.

Tr. The nominative endings are added in the sense of meaning of a bare stem, to denote the grammatical gender to denote quantity and to denote the number only.

⁷ *Khristum Kanyāsutam vande mṛtam mṛtyuñjayaṃ param*
Raktikṛtāsavaṃ dehīkṛtāpūpamanaśvaram |

⁸ See the following verse from Annapūrṇāṣṭakam of Śrī Śankarācārya

Nityānandakarī Varābhayakarī
Saundaryaratnākarī
Nirdhūtākhiladoṣapāvanakarī
Pratyakṣamāheṣvarī
Prāleyāñcalavaṃsapāvanakarī
Kāśīpurādhiśvarī
Bhikṣām dehi Kṛpāvalambanakarī
Mātānnapūrṇeśvarī

All the nominatives are construed with *tvam*, which is the understood agent of *dehi*. The beautiful poem of Śankarācārya has the value of prayer but not as SN.

⁹ Following passages from svaravarga from *Amarakośa*, give the list of synonyms, but has hardly any value of any type of SN.

*Viṣṇu nārāyaṇaḥ kṛṣṇo vaikuṅṭho vistaraśravaḥ |
Dāmodaro hrīṣīkeśaḥ keśavo mādhabaḥ svabhūḥ etc upto 22a.*

Synonyms of Śiva

*Śambhuriśaḥ paśupatiḥ śivaḥ sūlī
Maheśvaraḥ īśvaraḥ śarva īśānaḥ śaṅkarascandraśekharaḥ |*

¹⁰ *Vājasneyī Samhitā- Rudrādhyāya*

Namo bhavāya ca rudrāya ca namaḥ sarvāya ca paśupataye ca namo nilagrīvāya ca śitikaṅṭhāya ca |

¹¹ *Ṛgveda (1.4.64)*

*Indraṁ mitraṁ varuṇamagnimāhur atho divyaḥ sa suparṇo gārtmān
Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti agniṁ yamaṁ mātariśvanamāhuḥ |*

¹² *Gaṇapatyopaniṣad-92*

From Upanisadsamgraha, Ed.by Jagadish Shastri, Published by Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi.p.570

¹³ *Śivasahasranāma- Mahābhārata, Anuśāsanaparva Adhyāya- 17*

Sūrya Aṣṭottaraśatanāma- Mahābhārata, Vanaparva, Adhyāya-3, śloka-15-28

¹⁴ *Chhāndogya Upaniṣad-6.3,4,6*

*Yathā soṃya ekena mṛtapiṇḍena sarvaṁ
Mṛṇmayam vijñyātam syāt
Vācārambhanam vikāro nāmadheyam
Mṛttiketyeva satyam*

¹⁵ *Saubhāgyabhāskara p.53*

¹⁶ *Sahasranāma Sahityacha Parichaya,p.48*