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Akṣaraśloka: The poetic tradition of Kerala

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Abstract

Akṣaraśloka, a traditional poetic art form of Kerala, blends intellectual rigor and poetic expression, rooted in Sanskrit and Malayalam traditions. Practiced for over 300 years, it involves the recitation of four-line verses adhering to specific metrical rules, fostering linguistic skills, mental agility, and cultural preservation. Initially associated with the Namboothiri community, it has expanded to include participants of all ages and backgrounds. Akṣaraśloka sessions are central to cultural gatherings, competitions, and educational programs, promoting moral values and storytelling. Prominent figures and organisations in Kerala have significantly contributed to its growth and global reach, with innovations such as virtual forums and online competitions. By preserving Kerala's rich literary heritage, Akṣaraśloka continues to inspire intellectual and cultural development, maintaining its relevance across generations and bridging traditional practices with modern platforms.

Keyword: Akṣaraśloka, Kerala literary heritage, Sanskrit and Malayalam traditions, cultural preservation, poetic recitation competitions

Introduction

Kerala, known for its rich cultural and literary heritage, is home to several unique art forms that reflect its profound connection to tradition. Among these, Akṣaraśloka stands out as a distinct blend of literature, poetry, and performance. Rooted in Sanskrit and Malayalam traditions, Akṣaraśloka is an age-old poetic art that has flourished for centuries in the southernmost state of India. Akṣaraśloka has evolved into a widely practiced art form, transcending barriers of age, gender, and community. It continues to thrive through cultural gatherings, competitions, and educational initiatives, fostering a deep appreciation for the rich literary traditions of Sanskrit and Malayalam. This paper explores the historical background, rules, performances, prominent figures, and cultural significance of Akṣaraśloka, highlighting its role in enriching Kerala's literary and cultural landscape.

The essence of Akṣaraśloka

Akṣaraśloka is a refined form of poetic recital where verses are composed and sung following specific rules of classical Sanskrit and Malayalam meters. Four-line verses or Muktakās are used for recitation. It is an intellectual and artistic exercise that requires the participant to spontaneously recite verses that are connected through the final syllable of the preceding verse. The term 'Akṣaraśloka' translates to 'verses of letters,' signifying the meticulous composition and arrangement of words within this art form.

This art form plays a significant role in Kerala's cultural development, fostering a deep appreciation for Sanskrit and Malayalam literature. Traditionally, it has been an essential medium for storytelling, conveying moral values, and entertaining audiences in temples, cultural gatherings, and competitions.

Historical Background

Akṣaraśloka, in its early days, was mainly practiced by the Namboothiri community and was taken up by many as a serious hobby. However, it is no longer exclusive to this community, although their participation is still valued. This may be due to their better pronunciation and diction, developed through strict oral Vedic recitation and learning, at least until recent times. The origins of Akṣaraśloka are believed to be around 300 years old. It began as a popular form of literary entertainment and intellectual activity in Kerala. Initially rooted in Sanskrit, it gradually evolved to include the Malayalam language, making it more accessible to a wider

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audience.

Performance and Rules

Akṣaraśloka recitals are typically performed in groups of 10 to 15 members, with participants referred to as Akṣaraśloka Sadas (members). These performances follow specific rules:

The participants form a semi-circle, and one person recites a Śloka at the beginning as a Maṅgalaśloka, a four-line verse in one of the Sanskrit metres (छन्दस्). The first syllable of the third quarter (third pāda) of this verse is considered the starting syllable for the second verse. This same rule applies to the recitation of subsequent verses. For the third verse, the guiding syllable is determined only after the recitation of the second verse. In essence, all the verses originate from the first syllable of the third quarter (pāda) of the preceding verse. Anyone who fails to pass three times is out of the competition. The one who outlasts everyone else is the winner.

E.g.:

अपि क्रियार्थं सुलभं समित्कुशम्
जलान्यपि स्नानविधिक्रमाणि ते ।
अपि स्वशक्त्या तपसि प्रवर्तते
शरीरमाद्यं खलु धर्मसाधनम् ॥

Here, the first letter of the third line is “अ”, so the next participant needs to recite a sloka starting with the letter “अ”.

अथाजिनाषाढधरः प्रगल्भवाक्
ज्वलन्निव ब्रह्ममयेन वर्चसा ।
विवेश कश्चिज्जटिलस्तपोवनम्
शरीरबद्धः प्रथमाश्रमो यथा ॥

According to this rule, the next person should recite the śloka starting with the letter “व”. Then, it continues like this.

Any delay during one's turn is not considered good. Greatness lies not only in remembering hundreds of ślokās but also in choosing good, meaningful, and sweet ones and in reciting them clearly and melodiously. The other rules are:

- Only Ślokās in Sanskrit metres can be used for this. However, Ślokās in anuṣṭup meter are not to be used. Ninety percent of the ślokās in Itihāsa are in anuṣṭup metre, and all the Sahasranāma is also in anuṣṭup metre. Therefore, it cannot be used. All other metres can be used.
- Kavitās are not allowed to recite in the Akṣaraśloka competition.
- There is no gender barrier to participating in this Akṣaraśloka competition. Participants of all ages, from children to the elderly, can join the practice.
- The ślokās starting with letters like 'ऋ', 'ॠ', 'ऌ', etc., are very challenging. Therefore, verses containing these letters are found in limited numbers. Moreover, the use of the letters from the 'ट' group is entirely avoided in competitions.
- If the first letter of the third line is an excluded letter, then a verse must be composed using that very letter. Otherwise, recite a verse using the letter that follows the excluded letter.

- The letters that are acceptable can be clearly identified, and it can be assumed that all other letters are prohibited. The following 24 letters are unquestionably acceptable: अ, इ, उ, ए, ओ, क, ग, च, ज, त, द, ध, न, प, ब, भ, म, य, र, ल, व, श, स, ह. Although it can be stated that all the remaining letters are excluded, some of them are debatable.
- In Akṣaraśloka compositions, music has no role. Even those who are not highly skilled in music can participate in Akṣaraśloka competitions and achieve success.
- The verses must be recited from memory, without referring to books or seeking help from others during the recitation.
- Participants can compose and recite a verse independently on the spot. The verse must be metrical and meaningful. Even Nimiṣa Ślokās (made within one minute) are acceptable. Ślokās must satisfy only some minimum requirements regarding literary value, metric perfection, meaningfulness, grammar, etc. Eminent figures like Kodungalloor Kunjikuttan Thampuran and Kochunni Thampuran are capable of composing and reciting verses spontaneously.
- Verses should not be repeated during a session.
- If a conjunct consonant appears in the third line, the first letter of the conjunct should be accepted. For example, in 'स्पष्टं,' 'स' should be taken, not 'प'.
- Akṣaraśloka recitation must include proper pronunciation, accurate letters, clear word perception, and a basic understanding of the verse's meaning. By skillfully varying the meter and rhythm, the reciters can delight the audience. The audience will be able to appreciate the Śloka only if the performer himself knows the meaning well. One should be careful with pauses; incorrect pronunciation by a performer is the most detrimental.
- Another unique aspect of this art is that when there are no other members, the reciters themselves, standing as members, experience the ultimate joy.
- In ordinary competitions, three failures are allowed before a person is declared out. However, in strict competitions, only one failure is allowed. There are some special competitions in which a person will never be out. The number of failures is counted in declaring the result. In addition to ordinary competitions, there are अवतरण (presentation) competitions as well. In these competitions, literary value, the beauty of the presentation, etc., will also be considered, and marks will be given. The competitor who secures the maximum number of marks will be the winner.

This Akṣaraśloka resembles the North Indian Beit Bazi. It is similar to Antakshari, the Sistani Baas-o-Beyt, and, more generally, the British Crambo.

As a time-saving measure, Ekākṣara (एकाक्षर) competitions are also conducted. One letter will be taken by lot, and all the competitors are asked to recite it. Hard work and a lot of memory power are essential for winning Ekākṣara competitions. There are still more varieties of competitions, such as Ekavṛtta (एकवृत्त - one metre), Vṛttānuvṛtta (वृत्तानुवृत्त - metre after metre), Ekakavi (एककवि - one poet), Ekagrantha (एकग्रन्थ - one book), etc. Among Ekagrantha competitions, the Nārāyaṇīya competition is the most popular. Music has no place in Akṣaraśloka. However, in avataraṇa competitions, a melodious voice and some amount of musical talent will

surely help the competitor earn more marks. Hence, avatarana competitions are beyond the reach of the common man.

Prominent figures and organizations

Over the years, several scholars and poets have contributed to the growth and popularity of Akṣaraśloka in Kerala. Notable figures include K.P.C. Narayanan Bhattathirippad, Veliyatt Narayanan Namboodiri, Prof. N. D. Krishnannuni, Velliyaatt Narayanan Namboodiri, Maadambi Jathavedan Namboodiri, and others who have dedicated their efforts to preserving this art form.

The Kundoor Smaraka Sadas was established in 1982 by K. P. C. Narayanan Bhattathirippad with the support of N. D. Krishnannuni and Kunjunni Mash. Kairali Śloka Rangam, founded in 1988 in Edanad, Pala, is another notable institution. Prominent Akṣaraśloka organizations in Kerala include Amritabharathi Akṣaraśloka Samiti, Chunangad; Kaviyoor Sivarama Iyer Akṣaraśloka Samiti; and Palazhi Akṣaraśloka Samiti.

Koonammoochi Akṣaraśloka Vedi and Ariyannur Akṣaraśloka Kalakshethram have made significant contributions by publishing books related to Akṣaraśloka, such as the *Akṣaraśloka Directory*, which is the first and only directory listing the names and addresses of Akṣaraśloka artists.

Several active groups promoting this literary art form operate across Kerala, from Kozhikode to Thiruvananthapuram, with Thrissur serving as the central hub of its revival. The magazine *Kavana Kauthukam*, published from Thrissur, is dedicated to Akṣaraśloka. Additionally, organizations such as the Akhila Kerala Akṣaraśloka Parishath and the Kerala Akṣaraśloka Federation play a vital role in propagating this art form. Akṣaraśloka has also been incorporated into school Kalolsavam competitions, further enhancing its reach and popularity.

In recent years, the tradition has extended beyond physical gatherings. Online Akṣaraśloka forums and virtual sessions now connect enthusiasts worldwide. There is a very successful Akṣaraśloka group on the internet called Akṣaraślokasadas, and there is a Yahoo group for Akṣaraśloka.

Competitions

Akṣaraśloka sessions have been an integral part of various cultural gatherings, not only within families but also during the interval periods of festivals like the 140-year-old Peruvanam Pooram. One notable Akṣaraśloka competition is held as part of the Thrissur Pooram celebrations. Traditionally called the 'Chakolas Gold Medal,' this competition was later renamed the 'V. Kamalakara Menon Suvarna Mudra.' The first recipient of the Chakolas Gold Medal was the late U. P. Raghava Warriar, widely known as UPR, in 1955.

As per tradition, participants who have won the gold medal once are not permitted to compete again. Currently, separate competitions are conducted for different age groups. The Guruvayoor Devaswam organizes two major Akṣaraśloka competitions, each awarding a gold medal as the first prize. One competition, the "Sree Guruvayoorappan Suvarna Mudra," is held on Guruvayoor Ekadaśī day. The other is conducted on Nārāyaṇīyam day, where participants exclusively recite verses from Nārāyaṇīyam.

Books on Akṣaraśloka

- Aksharasloka Madhuri: Kavi, Kavitha, Vrutham – P Valsan

- Akṣaraśloka Padavali - Soumya Thamarassery, Viswanathan Nair K N
- Akṣaraśloka Samuchayam - Dr. K Madhavankutty
- Akṣaraśloka: Samskrithavum Malayalavum - Sarojadevi S, Dr. Jincy S
- Akṣaraśloka Rasikaranjini - G. Kamalamma

Benefits of Akṣaraśloka

The primary benefit of this art form is that it helps achieve accurate pronunciation, which is very important for Sanskrit, as highlighted in the Vedanga *Shiksha*. Regularly reciting verses helps people improve their pronunciation and naturally become fluent in pure Sanskrit.

Akṣaraśloka also improves mental abilities like memory and sharp thinking. It acts as a mental exercise that strengthens the brain and helps maintain good memory by keeping the mind active.

Starting Akṣaraśloka recitation from a young age supports mental health and leads to a happier life. Practitioners develop strong speaking skills and become excellent orators capable of delivering powerful speeches. Akṣaraśloka also builds a rich cultural tradition while promoting intellectual development and better language skills.

Conclusion

Akṣaraśloka, as an art form, embodies the cultural and literary richness of Kerala, seamlessly blending intellectual rigor with poetic expression. Its roots in Sanskrit and Malayalam traditions have made it a powerful tool for preserving linguistic heritage, promoting moral values, and fostering intellectual growth. Through its structured rules and diverse competitions, Akṣaraśloka has evolved to remain relevant across generations, transcending social and geographical boundaries. The continued efforts of scholars, organizations, and enthusiasts have ensured its revival and global reach, making it an enduring symbol of Kerala's vibrant literary culture. By nurturing linguistic skills, mental agility, and cultural pride, Akṣaraśloka holds immense value not only as an artistic pursuit but also as a means of holistic development.

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