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Dr. Mantha Srinivasu
Joint Secretary, University Grants Commission, New Delhi, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Mantha Srinivasu
Joint Secretary, University Grants Commission, New Delhi, India

Memory science in the Indian tradition: Vedic Mnemonics, Dhāraṇā and cognitive load theory

Mantha Srinivasu

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Abstract
The oral transmission of the Vedic corpus represents one of the most remarkable feats of collective memory in human history: the Ṛgveda, a text of over ten thousand verses, was preserved with near-perfect phonetic fidelity for approximately three millennia without primary reliance on writing. This article examines the mnemonic technologies that made such preservation possible—the padapāṭha, kramapāṭha, and the eight vikṛtis culminating in the ghanapāṭha—and reads them through the lens of contemporary cognitive psychology, particularly cognitive load theory, the testing effect, the spacing effect, and research on chunking and schema automation. It further situates these techniques within indigenous Indian psychological theory, in which memory (smṛti) is analysed as a mental modification (vṛtti) grounded in latent impressions (saṃskāra), and in which sustained attention (dhāraṇā) is treated as a trainable faculty within the discipline of saṃyama. The analysis argues that Vedic recitational pedagogy constitutes a sophisticated, empirically evolved system of structured retrieval practice, interleaving, error-detecting redundancy, and distributed practice—precisely the techniques that modern learning science has validated—rather than the "rote learning" that contemporary educational discourse, including the National Education Policy 2020, rightly criticises. The article proposes design principles for integrating recitational and attentional training into modern pedagogy and outlines a research agenda for the empirical study of pāṭha training in relation to working memory and long-term retention. The argument is offered as a contribution to Indian Knowledge Systems scholarship that is both textually grounded and scientifically accountable.

Keywords: Vedic recitation, mnemonics, cognitive load theory, dhāraṇā, retrieval practice, Indian Knowledge Systems

1. Introductions

A curious paradox sits at the centre of modern Indian educational discourse. On the one hand, "rote memorization" is routinely identified as the besetting vice of Indian schooling, and the National Education Policy 2020 explicitly calls for a shift "away from rote learning" towards conceptual understanding and critical thinking (Government of India, 2020) [12]. On the other hand, the civilisation that produced this schooling system also produced what is arguably the most successful memory technology ever devised: the oral transmission of the Vedas. The Ṛgveda—10,552 mantras, roughly 165,000 words in its received recension—was carried across something on the order of three thousand years by unbroken chains of teachers and students, with a phonetic fidelity so high that when recensions preserved in geographically separated communities (Kashmir, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala) were compared in the modern period, the divergences were found to be minimal, often confined to a handful of syllables (Staal, 1961, 2008) [24, 25]. Frits Staal, whose fieldwork among the Nambudiri reciters of Kerala remains the classic ethnographic study of the living tradition, famously observed that Vedic oral transmission achieved a reliability that written transmission of comparable antiquity rarely matched, since manuscripts decay, are miscopied, and accumulate scribal error, whereas the recitational apparatus contained built-in mechanisms of error detection and correction (Staal, 1961) [24].

The paradox dissolves once a distinction is drawn that both traditional and modern learning sciences insist upon: the distinction between unstructured, meaning-blind cramming and structured, elaborated, feedback-rich rehearsal. The Vedic tradition itself drew this distinction sharply. Yāska's Nirukta, the oldest surviving Indian treatise on semantics, dismisses the reciter who carries the text without understanding as a mere "pillar bearing a load" (Nirukta 1.18), and the Taittirīya Upaniṣad enjoins svādhyāya—daily self-study and

recitation—as a lifelong discipline embedded in ethical and contemplative practice, not as an end in itself (Taittirīya Upaniṣad 1.9). What the tradition institutionalised was not rote in the pejorative sense but a graded architecture of encoding, permutation, prosodic redundancy, distributed daily practice, and social verification.

The aim of this article is analytical and integrative. It asks: what, precisely, were the cognitive mechanisms exploited by Vedic mnemonic technique and by the allied Indian theorisation of memory and attention, and how do these map onto constructs validated by contemporary cognitive psychology—working memory limitations (Miller, 1956; Baddeley & Hitch, 1974) [17, 3], cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) [26], the testing effect (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006) [21], the spacing effect (Cepeda, Pashler, Vul, Wixted, & Rohrer, 2006) [5], interleaving (Rohrer & Taylor, 2007) [22], and schema automation in expertise (Chase & Simon, 1973; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) [6, 11]? The method is that of a theoretical review: primary Indian sources (the pāṭha literature as described in the Prātiśākhyas and later manuals, the Yogasūtra, Nyāya texts, and Āyurvedic material on medhā) are juxtaposed with the experimental literature, and structural correspondences are argued for explicitly, with care taken to mark where the correspondence is demonstrated, where it is plausible, and where it remains an open empirical question. The article thus positions itself within the emerging scholarship on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) while resisting two symmetrical temptations: the dismissal of traditional practice as pre-scientific superstition, and the uncritical assertion that ancient texts "anticipated" modern science in detail. What can responsibly be claimed—and what this article claims—is that the Vedic mnemonic apparatus is an empirically evolved instantiation of principles that cognitive science has independently discovered and formalised, and that this convergence has genuine implications for pedagogy and for future research.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the Vedic mnemonic apparatus in technical detail. Section 3 reconstructs the indigenous psychological theory of memory and attention. Section 4 summarises the relevant modern cognitive science. Section 5 performs the central mapping between the two. Section 6 examines dhāraṇā in relation to contemporary research on attention training. Section 7 draws pedagogical implications, including for the implementation of NEP 2020, and Section 8 concludes.

2. The Vedic Mnemonic Apparatus

2.1 From saṃhitā to pada and krama

The foundational recension of a Vedic text is the saṃhitāpāṭha, the continuous recitation in which words are joined by the euphonic combinations (sandhi) of connected Sanskrit speech. Because sandhi obscures word boundaries and can render underlying forms ambiguous, the tradition developed, at a very early date, the padapāṭha: a word-by-word recitation in which sandhi is dissolved, compounds are analysed, and each word is recited in its isolated, pausal form. The padapāṭha attributed to Śākalya for the Ṛgveda is itself of great antiquity and is presupposed by the Prātiśākhya literature, the phonetic treatises that codify, with astonishing precision, the rules for reconstituting the saṃhitā from the pada text (Ṛgveda Prātiśākhya, passim; Scharfe, 2002) [23]. The padapāṭha is thus simultaneously a mnemonic device and an act of linguistic analysis: the student who has mastered both saṃhitā and pada versions holds the text in two representational formats, continuous and segmented, and holds in addition the rule system linking them.

Upon this foundation is built the kramapāṭha, the "step" recitation, in which words are recited in overlapping pairs: given a sequence of words *a b c d e*, the krama pattern is *ab, bc, cd, de*. Every word except the first and last is thus recited twice, once as the second member of a pair and once as the first, and every local transition in the text—every sandhi juncture—is rehearsed explicitly. The krama recitation is no longer a natural utterance of the text; it is a designed transformation of it, and mastery of krama requires the reciter to hold the sequential structure of the text with a security that mere linear repetition never demands.

2.2 The eight vikṛtis

Beyond krama lie the eight vikṛtis or "modified" recitations, enumerated in a traditional verse as jaṭā, mālā, śikhā, rekhā, dhvaja, daṇḍa, ratha, and ghana. These are systematic permutations of the krama pairs, of increasing complexity. Two deserve concrete exposition because their structure makes the cognitive engineering unmistakable.

In the jaṭāpāṭha ("braided" recitation), each krama pair is recited forwards, then backwards, then forwards again. For the word sequence *a b c*, the jaṭā pattern is:

ab | *ba* | *ab* — *bc* | *cb* | *bc*

and so on through the text. The reciter must therefore not only know the canonical order but be able to invert it at every juncture and return, and must apply afresh the sandhi rules appropriate to the reversed juxtaposition—for the reversed sequence *ba* is not simply the recording of *ab* played backwards, but a new utterance whose euphonic combination must be independently derived.

The ghanapāṭha ("dense" or "bell" recitation), the most demanding of the vikṛtis in common use, extends the braid over triplets. For words *a b c d*, the ghana pattern for the first unit is:

ab | *ba* | *abc* | *cba* | *abc*

followed by *bc* | *cb* | *bcd* | *dcb* | *bcd*, and so onward. Each word of the text is thus embedded in a lattice of forward and reverse orderings at two window sizes, and is uttered many times over in systematically varying local contexts. A reciter who has mastered the ghanapāṭha of a text—a ghanapāṭhin, a title of high honour in traditional Vedic circles to this day—can reproduce the text forwards, backwards, and from arbitrary starting points, and possesses what is in effect random-access retrieval over a serially learned corpus (Staal, 1961, 2008; Scharfe, 2002) [24, 25, 23].

The remaining vikṛtis (mālā "garland," śikhā "topknot," rekhā "line," dhvaja "banner," daṇḍa "staff," ratha "chariot") interpose their own permutational schemes—some running pairs from both ends of a hymn towards the middle, some chaining progressively longer sequences—so that the full battery, where practised, subjects the identical text to eight distinct combinatorial transformations. The very names are mnemonic images of the permutation shapes: a braid interlaces strands forwards and backwards; a garland joins its ends; a banner streams from a fixed point. It should be stressed that these are not decorative

elaborations. The traditional curriculum graded them as successive examinations of mastery, and the honorifics that attached to their completion—kramapāṭhin, jaṭāpāṭhin, ghanapāṭhin—functioned as publicly legible certifications of textual security, sustaining the social prestige that motivated the enormous investment of practice the system demanded (Scharfe, 2002) [23]. The crucial design property shared by all of them is this: the transformations are rule-governed and exhaustive, so that any error of omission, substitution, or transposition in the underlying text will, with high probability, produce a detectable violation somewhere in the permuted recitations. The vikṛtis convert the text into something functionally analogous to a message protected by redundant encoding: corruption at any point breaks the pattern in multiple derived recitations and is therefore caught and corrected against the community's shared standard.

2.3 Svara and chandas as prosodic redundancy

Two further layers of constraint envelop the verbal content. First, Vedic recitation is inseparable from accent (svara): every syllable carries a specified pitch value (udātta, anudātta, svarita), and the accentual contour of a verse is fixed as rigidly as its phonemes. A substituted word will almost always disturb the memorised melodic line, so that the accent system functions as an independent channel against which the segmental text is continuously checked. The Vedāṅga of śikṣā (phonetics) trained articulatory precision to the level of individual features—place of articulation, quantity, nasality—and the Prātiśākhyas legislate these matters exhaustively (Scharfe, 2002) [23]. Second, the metres (chandas) impose syllable-count and cadence constraints: a gāyatrī verse must scan as three octosyllabic pādas, a triṣṭubh as four hendecasyllabic pādas, and so on. A lapse of memory that inserts or drops a syllable is instantly audible as a metrical fault. Meaning could drift unnoticed in a purely semantic paraphrase tradition; in the Vedic system, phonetic form is over-determined by at least three simultaneous codes—segmental, accentual, metrical—each capable of flagging errors in the others.

2.4 The guru-śiṣya protocol and svādhyāya

Finally, the apparatus was embedded in a social and temporal protocol. Instruction proceeded by adhyayana in the teacher's presence: the guru uttered a unit, the student echoed it, typically twice, and errors were corrected on the spot—an immediate-feedback loop conducted in small groups over years of co-residence (Altekar, 1944; Scharfe, 2002; Mookerji, 1947/1989) [1, 18, 23]. Daily recitation, svādhyāya, was enjoined as a lifelong obligation upon the learned householder, not merely a phase of youth (Taittirīya Upaniṣad 1.9); the corpus was thus maintained by distributed rehearsal across the entire lifespan. Periodic communal recitations and the institution of comparing recitations across teaching lineages provided population-level error correction: an idiosyncratic corruption in one line of transmission would be exposed against the consensus of others. Transmission was, in short, redundant not only within the individual memory but across the community of memories.

3. Memory and Attention in Indian Psychological Theory

The recitational technology did not develop in a theoretical vacuum. Classical Indian philosophy of mind offers an explicit, and in places strikingly modern, analysis of memory, habit formation, and attention.

3.1 Smṛti as vṛtti; saṃskāra and vāsanā

Patañjali's Yogasūtra enumerates smṛti (memory) among the five modifications (vṛttis) of the mind, defining it as "the non-loss of an experienced object" (anubhūta-viṣaya-asaṃpramoṣaḥ smṛtiḥ; Yogasūtra 1.11). Memory is thus classified not as a passive store but as an active mental event—a present modification of consciousness that re-presents a past object. The mechanism proposed is the saṃskāra: every experience deposits a latent impression, and memories arise when such impressions are reactivated by suitable conditions (Yogasūtra 4.9). Repetition (abhyāsa) deepens saṃskāras; Yogasūtra 1.14 specifies that practice becomes firmly grounded only when cultivated "for a long time, without interruption, and with devoted care" (sa tu dīrghakāla-nairantarya-satkāra-āsevito dṛḍhabhūmiḥ)—a formula that reads, with only slight anachronism, as a prescription of prolonged, spaced, high-engagement practice. The cognate concept of vāsanā denotes the deeper dispositional tendencies laid down by accumulated saṃskāras, an early recognition that repeated cognitive events reshape the standing structure of the mind and not merely its momentary contents.

The Nyāya school likewise treats smṛti as a distinct cognitive kind, caused by the saṃskāra called bhāvanā and standing in contrast to anubhava (fresh presentational experience); Nyāya discussions of recognition (pratyabhijñā) and of the conditions that awaken stored impressions—similarity, contiguity, repeated association—parallel the classical Western laws of association while embedding them in a realist epistemology in which memory, though not itself counted a pramāṇa, is indispensable to inference, language learning, and the continuity of the knowing self (Nyāyasūtra 1.1.16 with commentaries; cf. Tarkasaṃgraha on smṛti). For present purposes the essential point is that the tradition possessed a causal, impression-based theory of memory strengthening on which its pedagogical practices could be, and were, rationalised.

3.2 Dhāraṇā and saṃyama

Attention receives an equally explicit treatment. Yogasūtra 3.1 defines dhāraṇā as "the binding of the mind to a single locus" (deśa-bandhaś cittasya dhāraṇā). Dhāraṇā is the first limb of the inner triad—dhāraṇā, dhyāna (the unbroken flow of cognition towards that locus, 3.2), and samādhi (absorption, 3.3)—collectively termed saṃyama (3.4). The three are presented as points on a continuum of attentional stability: first the repeated placing of attention on a target, then its continuous maintenance, then complete absorption. Two features of this account merit emphasis. First, attention is treated as a trainable skill, improvable by graded practice, rather than as a fixed capacity. Second, the account distinguishes attentional selection (placing the mind on the deśa) from attentional maintenance (the effortful re-placing that constitutes early dhāraṇā) — a distinction that maps intelligibly onto modern separations of orienting, sustaining, and executive control of attention. Within the recitational culture, dhāraṇā was not an exotic accomplishment but the working condition of the daily task: the reciter of a ghana sequence has no attentional slack whatever.

3.3 Medhā and the Āyurvedic regimen

A third strand is physiological. Āyurveda treats medhā—retentive intelligence, the capacity to grasp and hold—as a constitutional endowment that can nonetheless be cultivated, and prescribes a class of interventions, the medhya-rasāyanas, for its enhancement. The Caraka Saṃhitā names four principal medhya herbs—maṇḍūkaparṇī, yaṣṭīmadhu, guḍūcī, and śaṅkhapuṣpī—and embeds their use in a broader regimen of diet, conduct (ācāra-rasāyana), sleep discipline, and study (Caraka Saṃhitā, Cikitsāsthāna 1.3). Whatever the eventual pharmacological verdict on individual botanicals—an active but still unsettled research area that this article does not adjudicate—the conceptual point is noteworthy: the tradition understood memory as a psychophysical function, jointly conditioned by practice, attention, regimen, and constitution, and it addressed all four levers in an integrated pedagogy. The brahmacarya discipline of the Vedic student—regulated sleep, diet, and conduct during the years of study—can be read as the institutional face of the same understanding (Altekar, 1944; Mookerji, 1947/1989) [1, 18].

4. The Modern Cognitive Science of Memory

The experimental literature of the past seven decades supplies the constructs against which the Vedic apparatus will be read.

4.1 Working memory limits and cognitive load

Miller (1956) [17] established that immediate memory is limited not by information in the bit-theoretic sense but by the number of *chunks*—integrated units—that can be held, a number he famously estimated at seven plus or minus two; subsequent work has revised the core capacity downwards to roughly four chunks under conditions that prevent rehearsal and grouping (Cowan, 2001) [7]. Baddeley and Hitch (1974) [3] replaced the unitary short-term store with a multi-component working memory: a limited-capacity central executive coordinating a phonological loop, which maintains speech-based material through subvocal rehearsal, and a visuospatial sketchpad, to which Baddeley (2000) [2] later added an episodic buffer binding information across codes and with long-term memory. The phonological loop is of particular relevance here, since it is the component most directly exercised by oral recitation, and its properties—sensitivity to word length, phonological similarity, and articulatory suppression—are properties of exactly the medium in which Vedic training operates.

Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988; Sweller, van Merriënboer, & Paas, 1998) [26, 27] builds on these limits an account of instruction. Working memory is severely constrained when processing novel information, but effectively unconstrained when processing information organised by schemas retrieved from long-term memory. Instruction therefore succeeds to the extent that it manages *intrinsic* load (the inherent element interactivity of the material), minimises *extraneous* load (processing imposed by poor presentation), and promotes *germane* processing—the construction and automation of schemas. Once automated, schemas execute without conscious attentional cost, freeing working memory for higher-order operations; this is the classical account of how experts differ from novices (Chase & Simon, 1973; Ericsson *et al*., 1993) [6, 11]. A pointed corollary, often overlooked in polemics against memorisation, is that a well-furnished long-term memory is not the enemy of understanding but its precondition: there is nothing for the central executive to think *with* until knowledge structures have been stored and automated.

4.2 Retrieval practice, spacing, interleaving, and desirable difficulties

Three robust effects define the modern science of durable learning. First, the *testing effect*: retrieving information from memory strengthens retention far more than restudying it, an effect demonstrated in the modern era by Roediger and Karpicke (2006) [21], who showed that repeated free-recall testing produced markedly better delayed retention than repeated studying, despite producing worse performance in the short term. Retrieval practice has since proved potent across materials and populations and is rated among the most effective techniques in comprehensive reviews (Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan, & Willingham, 2013; Karpicke & Blunt, 2011) [9]. Second, the *spacing effect*, documented continuously since Ebbinghaus (1885/1913): practice distributed over time yields substantially better long-term retention than the same amount of practice massed together, with optimal inter-session gaps scaling with the desired retention interval (Cepeda *et al*., 2006) [5]. Third, *interleaving*: mixing different problem types or materials within a practice session, though it depresses immediate performance, enhances delayed retention and discrimination relative to blocked practice (Rohrer & Taylor, 2007) [22]. Bjork and Bjork (2011) [4] unify these findings under the rubric of *desirable difficulties*: conditions that make acquisition feel harder—generation, variation, spacing, testing—are precisely those that make learning last, because they force deeper encoding and repeated effortful retrieval. Deep, elaborated encoding itself has been a fixture of the literature since Craik and Lockhart (1972) [8], and Paivio's (1986) [20] dual-coding theory adds that material encoded in multiple formats—verbal and imaginal, and by extension motoric and melodic—enjoys multiple retrieval routes.

4.3 Overlearning, automaticity, and distributed cognition

Practice continued beyond the criterion of first errorless performance—overlearning—buys resistance to forgetting and to interference, and is the route to the automaticity on which expert fluency rests (Ericsson *et al*., 1993) [11]. Finally, memory is not only individual. Wegner's (1987) [29] concept of transactive memory describes how groups distribute storage and retrieval responsibilities across members, and Hutchins (1995) [14] demonstrated that cognitive accomplishments of any complexity are typically properties of socio-technical systems—people, practices, and artefacts—rather than of solitary minds. These constructs will matter when the unit of analysis becomes not the individual reciter but the recitational community.

5. Analysis: The Vikṛtis as Cognitive Engineering

With both vocabularies in place, the mapping can be made explicit. The claim is not that Vedic teachers possessed the concepts of cognitive load or the testing effect, but that a tradition under relentless selection pressure for transmission fidelity converged, over generations of practical refinement, on techniques whose efficacy those concepts now explain.

5.1 Krama pairs as chunking; pada as segmentation

The padapāṭha performs, first, an act of *segmentation*: it decomposes the continuous phonetic stream into discrete lexical units, giving the learner well-defined chunks whose boundaries are stable across contexts. The kramapāṭha then performs controlled *chunk chaining*: by rehearsing overlapping pairs *ab, bc, cd*, it builds bigram associations that stitch the units into sequence, with every transition rehearsed as an explicit object of study rather than left to incidental exposure. In working-memory terms, each krama unit is comfortably within phonological-loop capacity, so that the learner's limited resources are concentrated, at each step, on exactly one inter-word juncture—an almost textbook instance of managing intrinsic load by isolating interacting elements before recombining them (Sweller *et al*., 1998) [27]. The double occurrence of each word in krama, and its multiple occurrences across saṃhitā, pada, and krama recitations, constitutes early overlearning of every token in varied local contexts.

5.2 Jaṭā and ghana as retrieval practice under interleaving

The vikṛtis are where the engineering becomes unmistakable. Consider what the ghanapāṭha demands of the reciter at each step: the *generation*, not the passive replay, of sequences—*ab, ba, abc, cba, abc*—that never occur as such in the canonical text. The reversed and permuted orders cannot be produced by running off a motor habit; they require active retrieval of the underlying word sequence and its online transformation, with fresh application of sandhi rules to novel juxtapositions. Each vikṛti session is therefore a prolonged retrieval-practice session in the strict sense of Roediger and Karpicke (2006) [21]: memory is being tested, and thereby strengthened, at every unit. Moreover, because the permutation patterns vary across the eight vikṛtis, and because the same text is cycled through multiple pāṭhas, practice is *interleaved* in the sense of Rohrer and Taylor (2007) [22]: the learner constantly switches transformation schemes, preventing the illusion of fluency that blocked repetition breeds and forcing discrimination between orderings. The reversed recitations are a paradigmatic desirable difficulty (Bjork & Bjork, 2011) [4]—maximally awkward, feeling nothing like fluent recitation, and for exactly that reason maximally diagnostic and strengthening. It is difficult to design, even deliberately and with the modern literature in hand, a purer laboratory of effortful, variable, generative retrieval than the ghanapāṭha.

5.3 Prosodic codes as error detection and dual coding

The svara and chandas constraints admit a precise informational reading: they are redundant codes overlaid on the segmental message, in function analogous to checksums. An error that leaves the phoneme string locally plausible will almost surely violate the accentual contour or the metrical template, and a violation in any one code prompts re-derivation from the others. The tradition thus achieved what engineers call error detection through multiple independent encodings—and it achieved *correction*, not merely detection, because the pada and krama texts, plus the Prātiśākhya rule system, allow the canonical reading to be reconstructed from first principles when doubt arises. From the learner's side, the same redundancy is dual (indeed multiple) coding in Paivio's (1986) [20] sense: the text is stored as articulatory-motor sequence, as melodic contour, as rhythmic-metrical pattern, and—through the pada analysis—as a parsed linguistic object. Traditional recitation is also strikingly embodied: several schools accompany recitation with codified hand and head movements marking the accents, adding a kinaesthetic channel. Multiple codes mean multiple retrieval paths and mutual cueing among them; the recitation that stumbles segmentally is rescued melodically, and vice versa.

5.4 Svādhyāya as spacing; the community as transactive memory

The temporal protocol of the tradition instantiates distributed practice at every scale: within the day (fixed recitation periods), across the year (the adhyāya calendar with its prescribed terms and breaks), and across the lifespan (svādhyāya as a permanent obligation). The retention interval sought was, in effect, unbounded—transmission to the next generation—and the tradition's answer, ever-continuing spaced rehearsal, is exactly what the spacing literature prescribes for very long retention intervals (Cepeda *et al*., 2006; Ebbinghaus, 1885/1913) [5]. At the social scale, the śākhā (recitational branch) functioned as a transactive memory system (Wegner, 1987) [29]: different families and lineages specialised in different texts and pāṭhas, communal recitations synchronised individual copies against the group consensus, and the guru-śiṣya echo protocol supplied immediate corrective feedback during acquisition. In Hutchins's (1995) [14] terms, the preserved Veda was the achievement of a distributed cognitive system—reciters, protocols, prosodic codes, and institutions—engineered, without any single engineer, for fidelity across millennia.

5.5 What the mapping does and does not show

Intellectual honesty requires marking the limits of this convergence. The mapping establishes *structural* correspondence: the vikṛtis are formally instances of generative retrieval practice, interleaving, and redundant coding, and the practice regime is formally spaced and overlearned. What has not been established experimentally is the *differential efficacy* of these specific techniques against matched controls—no published randomised study, to the present author's knowledge, has compared ghana-style permutational rehearsal with equated linear rehearsal on delayed retention, nor measured working-memory or phonological-loop changes attributable to pāṭha training specifically. A frequently cited neuroimaging study of professionally trained Sanskrit pandits reported substantially increased grey-matter density in memory-related regions relative to controls (Hartzell *et al*., 2016) [13], which is suggestive but, being cross-sectional, cannot separate training effects from selection. The correct scholarly posture is therefore that of a well-motivated hypothesis awaiting direct test—a point developed in Section 7.

6. Dhāraṇā, Attention Training, and Working Memory

The recitational system presupposes, and systematically trains, sustained attention; the yogic system theorises and trains it directly. Can the classical claim—that dhāraṇā-type practice improves the mind's capacity to hold and manipulate content—be connected to modern evidence?

The connection must be drawn cautiously, because the contemporary literature on meditation and cognition is heterogeneous in methods and uneven in quality.

Nonetheless, several findings are pertinent. Jha, Krompinger, and Baime (2007) [15] found that mindfulness training altered performance on subsystems of attention (alerting and orienting) in a controlled comparison. Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, and Schooler (2013) [19], in a randomised study with undergraduates, found that a two-week mindfulness course improved working-memory capacity and reading-comprehension performance while reducing mind-wandering, with the reduction in mind-wandering mediating the cognitive gains. Reviews of the neuroscience of meditation report converging though methodologically qualified evidence for changes in attention-related networks with practice (Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015) [28]. The prudent summary is that focused-attention training of the general family to which dhāraṇā belongs shows credible, modest, replicated benefits for sustained attention and working memory in short-term studies, while long-term and dose-response questions remain open.

Read against this literature, the Yogasūtra's treatment is notable less for anticipating particular effect sizes than for its *task analysis*. The progression dhāraṇā → dhyāna → samādhi (Yogasūtra 3.1-3.3) describes attentional training as the conversion of effortful, repeatedly re-initiated focusing into stable, low-effort absorption—which is, in cognitive-load vocabulary, the automatisation of attentional control itself, the freeing of executive resources from the task of self-maintenance. The classical pairing of abhyāsa (practice) with vairāgya (dispassion, the down-weighting of competing attractors; Yogasūtra 1.12) likewise parses the problem of concentration into strengthening the target signal and attenuating distractor capture—the two levers modern accounts of executive attention also distinguish. And the tradition's insistence that recitational mastery and contemplative attention are mutually supporting—svādhyāya is itself enjoined as a niyama within yoga (Yogasūtra 2.32, 2.44)—suggests a virtuous circle that is empirically plausible: recitation trains the phonological loop and sustained attention; trained attention improves the quality of encoding during recitation. This looped hypothesis, again, is testable and untested.

7. Implications for Contemporary Pedagogy and Research

7.1 Reconciling with NEP 2020: against rote, for structured rehearsal

The National Education Policy 2020 both criticises rote learning and mandates the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into curricula (Government of India, 2020) [12]. The analysis above dissolves the apparent tension. What NEP 2020 rightly rejects is *meaning-blind massed cramming for one-time reproduction*—a practice the Vedic tradition itself condemned in Yāska's image of the load-bearing pillar (Nirukta 1.18). What the Vedic apparatus exemplifies is the opposite: analysed, multi-coded, generative, spaced, socially verified rehearsal aimed at permanent retention and fluent access. Modern learning science warns that the pendulum can swing too far: because working memory is the bottleneck of thought, higher-order skills ride on automated knowledge, and a pedagogy that refuses to build durable memory undermines the very conceptual understanding it seeks (Sweller *et al*., 1998; Dunlosky *et al*., 2013) [27, 9]. The defensible synthesis—and the one this article urges for Indian curriculum design—is a rehabilitation of *memory work done well*: retrieval practice, spaced review, interleaving, and overlearning of core content, framed explicitly as the substrate of understanding rather than its rival.

7.2 Design principles

From the mapping in Section 5, transferable design principles follow for contemporary classrooms. In language learning, the pada/krama/jaṭā sequence models a general method: segment (isolate units and boundaries), chain (rehearse overlapping transitions), permute (require generation in varied and reversed orders), and overlay codes (rhythm, melody, gesture) as redundant retrieval routes—applicable to vocabulary, morphology, poetry, and second-language phonology. In mathematics, the analogues are the automation of number bonds and procedures through spaced, interleaved retrieval practice—reciting tables forwards is blocked practice; being able to enter them at arbitrary points and invert them (the ghana principle) is what fluency requires—followed by problem interleaving to train discrimination among methods (Rohrer & Taylor, 2007) [22]. Across subjects, brief daily svādhyāya-style review of a cumulative corpus dominates episodic massed revision, and communal recitation or paired testing recreates the feedback and transactive structure of the guru-śiṣya protocol at low cost. Finally, short focused-attention exercises of the dhāraṇā family are a plausible, low-risk complement, with the caveat that classroom-scale evidence remains preliminary (Mrazek *et al*., 2013) [19].

Two cautions accompany these principles. First, transfer should not be oversold: the expertise literature is emphatic that highly practised skills are largely domain-specific, and a student who masters permutational recitation of one corpus has not thereby acquired a general "memory power" applicable to all content (Ericsson *et al*., 1993) [11]. What transfers is the *method*—the learner's procedural knowledge of how to segment, permute, space, and self-test—together, plausibly, with metacognitive calibration about what genuine mastery feels like, since a student who has experienced the gap between recognition-fluency and generative recall is inoculated against the most common illusion of competence (Bjork & Bjork, 2011) [4]. Second, meaning must ride with form from the outset. The traditional system paired pāṭha with the Vedāṅgas of grammar, etymology, and metre precisely so that the memorised object was simultaneously an analysed object; a modern adaptation that borrowed the permutations while discarding the analysis would reproduce the rote learning that both Yāska and NEP 2020 condemn.

For the IKS courses now entering higher education under NEP 2020, the material of this article suggests a model unit: students learn the actual structure of the pāṭhas (ideally practising a jaṭā sequence on a short text), read Yogasūtra 1.11-1.14 and 3.1-3.4 in translation, and then read Miller (1956) [17] and Roediger and Karpicke (2006) [21]—experiencing the convergence rather than being told of it. Such a unit teaches Indian intellectual history, cognitive psychology, and study skills simultaneously, and models the critical-yet-appreciative stance that IKS scholarship requires.

7.3 A research agenda

The empirical agenda is straightforward to state. First, controlled acquisition studies: does permutational

(jaṭā/ghana-style) rehearsal of matched verbal material produce better delayed retention, transfer to reversed-order recall, and resistance to interference than time-equated linear rehearsal? The design is a direct extension of the retrieval-practice paradigm. Second, longitudinal training studies with traditional pāṭhaśālā students, using pre-registered cognitive batteries (phonological-loop span, complex working-memory span, sustained attention), to test whether pāṭha training produces domain-general gains or—as the expertise literature would predict—largely domain-specific ones (Ericsson *et al*., 1993) [11]; the cross-sectional findings of Hartzell *et al*. (2016) [13] make the longitudinal question urgent and answerable. Third, componential studies isolating the contribution of prosodic coding: does accent-plus-metre encoding of matched texts improve error detection and long-term fidelity relative to plain-text memorisation? Fourth, classroom translation trials of the design principles above in Indian schools, with retention measured at educationally meaningful delays. Until such studies exist, claims about the superiority of traditional methods should remain, as here, carefully hedged; but the hypotheses are precise, the paradigms exist, and the tradition offers cognitive science a natural experiment of rare depth.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the Vedic tradition's technologies of memory constitute a coherent and remarkably sophisticated cognitive engineering system, intelligible in detail through the constructs of modern learning science. The padapāṭha and kramapāṭha implement segmentation and chunk chaining under working-memory constraints; the vikṛtis—jaṭā and ghana above all—implement generative retrieval practice under interleaving and desirable difficulty; svara and chandas implement redundant, error-detecting multiple coding; svādhyāya and the guru-śiṣya protocol implement spacing, feedback, and overlearning; and the śākhā community implements transactive, distributed error correction. The indigenous theory that surrounded these practices—smṛti as vṛtti grounded in saṃskāra, dhāraṇā as trainable attentional binding, medhā as a cultivable psychophysical capacity—supplied a causal psychology adequate to rationalise them, and anticipates in outline, though not in experimental detail, the modern understanding of memory as skill and of attention as its gatekeeper. The convergence is not an occasion for triumphalism but for work: it dissolves the false opposition between "memorisation" and "understanding" that distorts Indian educational debate, it yields concrete design principles for pedagogy under NEP 2020, and it defines a precise empirical agenda at the intersection of Indology and cognitive psychology. A tradition that kept ten thousand verses phonetically intact across three millennia understood something durable about human memory. The task of contemporary scholarship is to specify exactly what, to test it, and to teach it.

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