

Poetic Meters used in the Vedas

Extracted From

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Introduction

Knowledge of poetic meters used in Vedas, is essential for proper recitation of the mantras. In the most accepted method only the vowels used in a mantra are counted and determination of the poetic meter is made based on this count. For this purpose the long vowels represented by two roman letters are counted as one. For example –

agnimee|e purohitañ

yajñasya devam-ritvijam

hotaaraṇ ratna-dhaatamam

Rigveda 1:1:1

In this example, we have 8 vowels in each of the 3 limbs (phrases) with a total vowel count of 24, making it the gayatree meter.

Types of Poetic Meters and Counting Methods

The poetic meter system is very elaborate and complex. Based on different texts, eight methods of counting the limbs of the poetic meters have been identified. They are daiva, aasura, prajaapaatya, aarsha, yaajusha, saamna, aarcha and brahma. Out of these aarsha method of counting is primarily used in the Vedas. The aarsha method has been highlighted in red in the table on the next page. There are also 26 different poetic meters identified. These 26 poetic meters are divided into 4 parts.

- 1. Prag-gaayatree** – This consists of 5 meters with vowel counts from 4 to 20. They are maa/uktaa, pramaa/atyuktaa, pratimaa/madhyaa, upamaa/pratiṣṭhaa and samaa/supratiṣṭhaa.
- 2. Prathama saptaka** – This consists of 7 meters with vowel counts from 24 to 48. They are gaayatree, uṣṇīk, anuṣṭup, bṛihatee, pañkti, triṣṭup and jagatee.
- 3. Dviteeya saptaka** - This consists of 7 meters with vowel counts from 52 to 76. They are atijagatee, shakvaree, atishakvaree, aṣṭi, atyaṣṭi, dhṛiti and atidhṛiti.
- 4. Triteeya saptaka** - This consists of 7 meters with vowel counts from 80 to 104. They are kṛiti, prakṛiti, aakṛiti, vikṛiti, saṅkṛiti, abhikṛiti and utkṛiti.

Musical Notes and Poetic Meters

Each poetic meter should be sung in the base musical note. The base musical note assigned to each poetic meter is provided in the table on the previous page. Each and every Vedic mantra should be sung using three notes, the base note, one note higher and one note lower based on the intonation marks provided on the mantra. These intonation marks are only available in the texts that use Devanaagaree script. These marks are not available in the transliterations in other scripts including the Roman script.

Classification of Poetic Meters

A matrix of the 8 systems of counting and 26 poetic meters below should clarify it further.

Counting Method	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
	daiva	aasura	praajaa patya	aarṣha	yaaju ṣha	saamna	aarcha	brahma	svara*
Chhanda	Start =1 Interval = +1	Start =15 Interval = -1	Start =8 Interval =4	Daiva+ aasura+ praajaa patya	Start =6 Interval = +1	Start =12 Interval = +2	Start =18 Interval = +3	yaajuṣha + saamna+ aarcha	Base musical note
maa/ uktaa				4					
pramaa/ atyuktaa				8					
pratimaa/ madhyaa				12					
upamaa/ pratiṣṭhaa				16					
samaa/ supraṭiṣṭhaa				20					
gaayatree	1	15	8	24	6	12	18	36	ṣhaḍja
uṣṇik	2	14	12	28	7	14	21	42	ṛiṣhabha
anuṣṭup	3	13	16	32	8	16	24	48	gaandhaara
bṛihatee	4	12	20	36	9	18	27	54	madhyama
pañkti	5	11	24	40	10	20	30	60	pañchama
triṣṭup	6	10	28	44	11	22	33	66	dhaivata
jagatee	7	9	32	48	12	24	36	72	niṣhaada
atijagatee	8	8	36	52					niṣhaada
shakvaree	9	7	40	56					dhaivata
atishakvaree	10	6	44	60					pañchama

Counting Method	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
	daiva	aasura	praajaa patya	aarṣha	yaajuṣha	saamna	aarcha	brahma	svara*
Chhanda	Start =1 Interval = +1	Start =15 Interval = -1	Start =8 Interval =4	Daiva+ aasura+ praajaa patya	Start =6 Interval = +1	Start =12 Interval = +2	Start =18 Interval = +3	yaajuṣha + saamna+ aarcha	Base musical note
aṣṭi	11	5	48	64					madhyama
atyāṣṭi	12	4	52	68					gaandhaara
dhṛiti	13	3	56	72					ṛiṣhabha
atidhṛiti	14	2	60	76					ṣhaḍja
kṛiti				80					ṣhaḍja
prakṛiti				84					ṛiṣhabha
aakṛiti				88					gaandhaara
vikṛiti				92					madhyama
saṅkṛiti				96					pañchama
abhikṛiti				100					dhaivata
utkṛiti				104					niṣhaada

* The musical notes for the 2nd, 3rd and 4th group are used in ascending, descending and ascending order respectively. Maharshi Dayaananda in his translations has used descending order (niṣhaada to ṣhaḍja instead of ṣhaḍja to niṣhaada) for the 4th group, which according to Pt. Meemaansak, occurred due to error on the part of scribes who were helping with the compilation of the translations. One of them must have made an erroneous list showing the relationship between the poetic meter and the musical note and all of them must have followed the same list without heed. Subsequent scholars from Arya Samaj have continued on with this error.

Minor variations in the vowel count

When the vowel counts in a limb falls short, at times, a technique called vyoohana is used. In this technic the conjugated vowels as e = a+i are counted as two. Also, the vowels lost in conjugation represented by ' are counted as well. This method should be used only for counting the vowels and not while chanting/singing the mantra/shloka.

Even when the vowel count is off by ± 2 , the mantra still falls into the broad category of the same poetic meter. However, based on the difference in count an adjective is added to the name of the poetic meter. Each poetic meter hence can have 5 different categories of adjectives.

1. **No adjective** – the vowel count matched the exact requirements of the poetic meter.
2. **nichṛit** prefix is used when the count is short by 1 e.g. poetic meter for a mantra with 23 vowels is nichṛid-gaayatree.
3. **viraat** prefix is used when the count is short by 2 e.g. poetic meter for a mantra with 22 vowels is viraat-gaayatree.
4. **bhurik** prefix is used when the count is over by 1 e.g. poetic meter for a mantra with 25 vowels is bhurig-gaayatree.
5. **svaraat** prefix is used when the count is over by 2 e.g. poetic meter for a mantra with 26 vowels is svaraat-gaayatree.

Besides this, in case the vowel count is not evenly distributed in various limbs of the mantra, an adjective is added to represent that. These are

1. **saṅkamatee** – when one of the limb contains only 5 vowels.
2. **kakummatee** – when one of the limb contains only 6 vowels.
3. **pipeelika-madhyaa** – when in a mantra consisting of three limbs, the middle limb has less vowels than the other two.
4. **yava-madhyaa** – when in a mantra consisting of three limbs, the middle limb has more vowels than the other two.

Sub-Classifications of the Poetic Meters

The sub-classes of poetic meters due to the variations in count of vowels and number of limbs is identified by adding an adjective (prefix) to the names of the poetic meters.

Sub-classes of Gaayatree

Gaayatree meter normally consists of three limbs and 24 vowels. It however, can have variations with one, two, four and five limbs as well.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
1	gaayatree	3	8+8+8 (=24)	All 3 limbs have the same vowel count.
2	paada-nichṛit	3	7+7+7 (=21)	Each limb is nichṛit i.e. has one vowel less.
3	ati-paada-nichṛit	3	6+8+7 (=21)	
4	ati-nichṛit	3	7+6+7 (=20)	
5	hraseeyasee	3	6+6+7 (=19)	ṛikpraatishaakhya has identified it as atinichṛit

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
6	vardhamaanaa	3	6+7+8 (=21)	rikpraatishaakhya has identified 8+6+8 (=22) as vardhamaanaa as well.
7	pratiṣṭhaa	3	8+7+6 (=21)	Vowel count in descending order, reverse of vardhamaanaa.
8	vaaraahee	3	6+9+9 (=24)	
9	naagee	3	9+9+6 (=24)	Reverse of vaaraahee.
10	yava-madhyaa	3	7+10+7 (=24)	1 st and 3 rd limbs have lower vowel count.
11	pipeelika-madhyaa	3	9+6+9 (=24)	Middle limb has lower count
12	uṣṇiggarbhaa	3	6+7+11 (=24)	
13	bhurik	3	8+10+7 (=25)	bhurig-gaayatree
14	tripaad viraaṭ	3	11+11+11 (=33)	Maharṣhi Dayaananda has classified this as bhurig-anuṣṭup
15	chatuṣpaad	4	6+6+6+6 (=24)	
16	padapaṅkti	5	5+5+5+5+5 (=25) or 3x5+4+6 (=25)	In the 2 nd sequence the limb with 4 vowels can occur at any location.
17	bhurik padapaṅkti	5	4x5+6 (=26)	
18	dvipadaa	2	12+12 (=24) or 8+8 (=16)	
19	dvipaad viraaṭ	2	12+8 (=20) or 10+10 (=20)	viraaḍ-gaayatree
20	dvipaad svaraṭ	2	9+9 (=18)	svaraḍ-gaayatree
21	ekapadaa	1	8	

Sub-classes of Uṣṇik

Uṣṇik meter normally consists of three limbs and 28 vowels.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
1	uṣṇik	3	8+8+12 (=28)	Also known as paroṣṇik.
2	kakup	3	8+12+8 (=28)	After conjugation pronounced as kakub-uṣṇik
3	pura	3	12+8+8 (=28)	After conjugation pronounced as pura-uṣṇik
4	kakumnyaṅkushiraa	3	11+12+4 (=27)	rikpraatishaakhya defines this as nichṛit.
5	tanushiraa	3	11+11+6 (=28)	
6	pipeelikaamadhyaa	3	11+6+11 (=28)	
7	chatuṣpaad	4	7+7+7+7 (=28)	

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
8	anuṣṭub-garbhaa	4	5+8+8+8 (=29)	Since this contains 5 vowels in the 1 st limb, it is also called saṅkumatee.

Sub-classes of Anuṣṭup

Anuṣṭup meter normally consists of four limbs and 32 vowels.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
1	purastaaj-jyoti	3	8+12+12 (=32)	piṅgala-sootra defines this as tripaad.
2	madhye-jyotiḥ	3	12+8+12 (=32)	This is also called pipeelika-madhyaa. piṅgala-sootra defines this as tripaad.
3	upariṣṭaaj-jyoti	3	12+12+8 (=32)	This is also called kṛiti. piṅgala-sootra defines this as tripaad.
4	kaaviraat	3	9+12+9 (=30)	
5	naṣṭa-roopaa	3	9+10+13 (=32)	The basic nature of anuṣṭup has been destroyed due to irregular counts in the limbs.
6	viraat	3	10+10+10 (=30)	Or 11+11+11 (=33). viraat-anuṣṭup after conjugation.
7	anuṣṭup	4	8+8+8+8 (=32)	Also called chatuṣh-paad
8	paadair	4	7+7+7+7 (=28)	It is anuṣṭup by the count of limbs but uṣṇik by the vowel count.
9	mahaa-pada-paṅkti	6	5+5+5+5+5+6 (=31)	This type is not universally accepted.

Sub-classes of Brihatee

Brihatee meter normally consists of four limbs and 36 vowels.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
1	bṛihatee	4	9+9+9+9 (=36)	Or 10+10+8+8 (=36)
2	purastaad	4	12+8+8+8 (=36)	
3	uro	4	8+12+8+8 (=36)	Also known as skandho-greevee (shoulders and neck) or nyaṅkusaariṇee
4	pathyaa	4	8+8+12+8 (=36)	Also known as siddhaa or skandho-greevee
5	upariṣṭaad	4	8+8+8+12 (=36)	
6	viṣṭaara	4	8+10+10+8 (=36)	
7	viṣhamapadaa	4	9+8+11+8 (=36)	
8	mahaa	3	12+12+12 (=36)	Also known as sato, oordhva, viraat-oordhva or tripadaa

Sub-classes of Paṅkti

Paṅkti meter normally consists of four limbs and 40 vowels.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
1	sataḥ	4	12+8+12+8 (=40)	Also called sato, bṛihatee, siddhaa, viṣṭāara, siddhaa-viṣṭāara
2	sataḥ	4	8+12+8+12 (=40)	Also called vipareetaa, siddhaa, viṣṭāara
3	aastaara	4	8+8+12+12 (=40)	
4	prastaara	4	12+12+8+8 (=40)	
5	sanstaara	4	12+8+8+12 (=40)	
6	viṣṭāara	4	8+12+12+8 (=40)	
7	aarṣhee	4	12+12+10+10 (=44)	This is not universally accepted.
8	viraat	4	10+10+10+10 (=40)	
9	pathyaa	5	8+8+8+8+8 (=40)	
10	pada	5	5x5 (=25)	or 4+3x5+6 (=25)
11	akṣhara	4	5+5+5+5 (=20)	Also called chatuṣḥ-padaa akṣhara
12	akṣhara	2	5+5 (=10)	Also called dvipadaa akṣhara
13	dvipadaa	2	12+8 (=20)	Also called viraat, dvipadaa-viṣṭāara
14	jagatee	6	8+8+8+8+8+8 (=48)	Also called vistaara, viṣṭāara

Sub-classes of Triṣṭup

Triṣṭup meter normally consists of four limbs and 44 vowels.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
1	triṣṭup	4	11+11+11+11 (=44)	
2	jagatee	4	12+12+11+11 (=46)	the counts can be in any order.
3	abhisaariṇee	4	10+10+12+12 (=44)	
4	viraat-sthaanaa	4	9+9+10+11 (=39)	Or 2x10+9+11 (=40) with no constraint on the order of limbs. Or 9+10+2x11 (=41)
5	viraat-roopaa	4	3x11+8 (=41)	

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
6	purastaaj-jyotiḥ	4	8+12+12+12 (=44)	Or 8+11+11+11 (=41) or 11+8+8+8+8 (=43)
7	madhye-jyotiḥ	4	12+8+12+12 (=44)	Or 12+12+8+12 (=44) or 11+8+11+11 (=41) or 11+11+8+11 (=41) or 8+8+11+8+8 (=43)
8	upariṣṭaaj-jyotiḥ	4	12+12+12+8 (=44)	Or 11+11+11+8 (=41) or 8+8+8+8+11 (=43)
9	mahaa-bṛihatee	5	12+8+8+8+8 = (=44)	Also called pañcha-padaa. Piṅgala has called this purastaaj-jyotiḥ-jagatee
10	yava-madhyaa	5	8+8+12+8+8 (=44)	Piṅgala has called this madhye-jyotiḥ-jagatee
11	pañkty-uttaraa	5	10+10+8+8+8 (=44)	Also called viraat-poorvaa
12	dvipadaa	2	11+11 (=22)	
13	ekapadaa	1	11 (=11)	

Sub-classes of Jagatee

Jagatee meter normally consists of four limbs and 48 vowels.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
1	jagatee	4	12+12+12+12 (=48)	
2	upa	4	12+12+11+11 (=46)	Any two limbs can be with 12 vowels and the other two with 11. The order is immaterial.
3	purastaaj-jyotiḥ	4	8+12+12+12 (=44)	Or 5 limbs with 12+8+8+8+8 (=44)
4	madhye-jyotiḥ	4	12+8+12+12 (=44)	Or 12+12+8+12 (=44) Or 5 limbs with 8+8+12+8+8 (=44)
5	upariṣṭaaj-jyotiḥ	4	12+12+12+8 (=44)	Or 5 limbs with 8+8+8+8+12 (=44)
6	mahaasato	5	3x8+2x12 (=48)	Not validated by Piṅgala. The order is immaterial. Also called pañcha-padaa.
7	ṣhaṭ-padaa	6	6x8 (=48)	Also called mahaa-paṅkti.
8	mahaa-paṅkti	6	8+8+7+6+10+9 (=48)	
9	viṣṭaara-paṅkti	8	8x6 (=48)	Also called pravṛiddha-padaa
10	dvipadaa	2	2x12 (=24)	
11	ekapadaa	1	12 (=12)	

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
12	vyotiṣṭmatee			Described in nidaana-sootra as a meter where last limb has 8 vowels. Rest 40 can be assumed.

Sub-classifications for the remaining 14 poetic meters from 3rd and 4th category, are not available. The properties of the main poetic meter are enumerated below.

S.No.	Adjective	Limbs	Vowels	Comments
13	atijagatee	5	12+12+12+8+8 (=52)	
14	shakvaree	7	7x8 (=56)	
15	atishakvaree	5	16+16+12+8+8 (=60)	
16	aṣṭṭi	5	16+16+16+8+8 (=64)	Or 8x8 (=64) or 4x16 (=64)
17	atyāṣṭṭi	7	12+12+8+8+8+12+8 (=68)	
18	dhṛiti	7	12+12+8+8+8+16+8 (=72)	
19	atidhṛiti	8	12+12+8+8+8+12+8+8 (=76)	
20	kṛiti		(=80)	
21	prakṛiti		(=84)	
22	aakṛiti		(=88)	
23	vikṛiti	11	10x8+12 (=92)	
24	saṅkṛiti		(=96)	
25	abhikṛiti		(=100)	
26	utkṛiti		(=104)	