

Significance of the universal sound OM

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Abstract: Hinduism is mostly popular for its concept of philosophy and spirituality. OM is the sacred symbol or sound of Hindu worship which has its prominent influence on almost all kinds of meditational practice, religious observances, ritual chanting and so on. Generally this is recognized as a spiritual and holly symbol which is used in the beginning or at the end of most of Hindu texts, spiritual chapters and so on. Omkāra or Aumkāra refers to Ātman, Universe, cosmic principle, Supreme spirit, knowledge etc. It is the universal sound which has a power to organize both the mind and the body. This very mystic syllable is identified as Brahman in several Upaniṣadic passages. Thus the philosophical and spiritual significance of this universal sound is noteworthy.

Key Words: Om, Upaniṣad, Śabda Brahman, Nāda.

1. INTRODUCTION:

OM is a pure word. So the systematic chanting of this word makes one's mind serene, happy and one pointed and it also develops self realization by removing disruptions ⁽¹⁾. Further the regular practice of the intoning of OM in proper manner helps to reduce anger and frustration, increases self confidence and positive thoughts by destroying negativity in all respect. It imparts relaxation to both body and mind. It infuses new dynamism to physique, new outlook towards everything. Thus it has many physical and psychological effects and therefore its practice is emphasized in the Upaniṣads, almost all philosophical schools specially in Yoga philosophy and so on and so forth. OM or Aum represents time in three different states such as A symbolizes the waking state, U symbolizes the dream state and M represents the state of deep sleep. In the visual symbol of OM the dot represents the fourth state of consciousness i.e. *Turīya*. OM is a spiritual icon in Jainism and Buddhism also.

Patañjali in his Yoga philosophy acknowledges that the practice of OM through the levels of reality and consciousness pave the direct route to liberation (*samādhi*)⁽²⁾. Here it is identified as the omniscience or pure consciousness which is also the seed of pure knowledge⁽³⁾. This universal sound itself represents God, so its repeated practice provides the opportunity to experience the ultimate bliss. Actually it stirs up certain kinds of constructive thought. This mystic syllable OM which is also called *praṇava*⁽⁴⁾ should be remembered with deep feeling for the meaning of what it represents⁽⁵⁾. *Sāmaveda* signifies Aum or OM to the audible, the musical truth in numerous variations such as Oum, Aum, Ovā, Ovā ovā um etc. Aum signifies the three cosmic stages of creation, preservation and destruction. The same Brāhmaṇa identifies this mystic syllable with the sun which glows⁽⁶⁾. This OM is often recognized as the lord, protector or the Primeval Being.

The Upaniṣadic passages are pregnant with the description of the concept of OM. It is said in the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* that through this spiritual symbol one can know everything what is to be known⁽⁷⁾. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* suggests to meditate on the syllable OM as it is the best medium to have one pointed concentration⁽⁸⁾. According to it OM is the epitome of the core of the Brahman, the highest reality⁽⁹⁾. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* also emphasizes on the meditation of OM as the best means of attainment and realization of Brahman⁽¹⁰⁾. The OM is also recognized as the self. It covers all the past, present and the future and yet it is beyond time. It is only the syllable OM which is ahead of time-space continuum. It is regarded in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* as a bridge to immortality⁽¹¹⁾. Actually it paves the way to cross the ocean of ignorance and to get the shore of knowledge, to identify the self as the divine self. The systematic meditation on OM can only provides a peaceful and composed mind where the actual identity of the self is best understood. Therefore Satyakāma said to Pippalāda that the meditation on the Supreme Being with the syllable OM is the medium to become one with Him who is the Sun or the light. It is the way to attain the supreme knowledge⁽¹²⁾ and so the knower by acquiring this knowledge become merge in Brahman and freed from the cycle of birth and death⁽¹³⁾. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* OM is said to be Brahman. Here it is said that OM is everything and so he who utters this syllable with the intention to attain him will surely attain him⁽¹⁴⁾. The *Śwetāśvatara Upaniṣad* recognizes OM as the

triad (the individual spirit, the cosmos and the cosmic spirit)⁽¹⁵⁾. In the *akṣarabrahmayoga* of the Gītā also OM is described as the one which is the root of all knowledge⁽¹⁶⁾. He who knows the significance of the syllable can concentrate on it in the proper manner and he gets the best result. The importance of this mystic syllable is emphasized here. The way of meditation by chanting OM is also described vividly in this chapter. Here it is stated that if one quits his body at the end of life intoning the supreme combination of letters i.e. OM, he certainly reaches the supreme abode⁽¹⁷⁾.

The word OM is the representative of the Supreme God (Param Brahman or Śabda Brahman). The idea of Śabda Brahman was fully developed in the 7th century A.D. which has its origin in the *Vāksūkta* of the *R̥gveda*. That means Vāk or the power of speech as the substratum of the world (*vāgeva viśva bhūvanāni jajñye*) had marked its strong footing in the form of Śabda Brahman concept later on in the seventh century AD. Śaivism is one of the most important sects of Hinduism which leads to both material and spiritual progress. Rather, its approach is from theory to practice. In Śaivism, the causal state of Brahman is represented by Śabda Brahman or *kūlakunḍalinī* and matter is regarded as the collective organism or collocation, consisting of fourfold substratum of colour, smell, taste and contact. Discovery of modern physics that matter is only waves of different lengths, without being any essentially solid, hard stuff is really a re-discovery of what the *Trikaśāstra* conceived centuries ago as the *spanda*. *Spanda* is the energy that permeates the Universe during its process of evolution. It is actually of universal energy and its power is the dynamic aspect of the transcendental reality. This reality is the abode of all powers of manifestation and action.

The Śabda Brahman concept is very vividly described in the Śaktism also. In the theology of Śākta philosophy, Goddess is the Supreme, transcending the cosmos which is yet a manifestation of her. She unfolds the cosmos and contracts it once again in endless cycles of emanation and re-absorption. This process is conceptualized as the manifestation and contraction of word, the absolute as primal sound (*śabda, nāda*), or the syllable OM is identified with energy, light and consciousness. This subtle sound is expressed as a point or drop (*bindu*) of energy, prior to extension, which then proceeds to generate the manifold cosmos. This cosmology is symbolized by the cosmogram of the *Śrīcakra*, the central icon of the tradition, used as a focus of worship and installed in the temples. The *Sārada Tilaka*⁽¹⁸⁾ while describing the origin of the manifested world, shows the order of manifestation as follows:-

- 1) *Paramēśvara*, described as *Sakala* and *Saccidānandabibhava*.
- 2) *Śakti*
- 3) *Nāda* (para)
- 4) *Bindu* (Para)
- 5) *Bindu* (apara) *Vīja*
- 6) *Nāda* (apara)

Here *Nāda* or *para-nāda* is produced from the union between Śiva and Śakti. That means *nāda* or *para-nāda* in its condensed or gross form is called *bindu* or *para-bindu*, which is a compact aspect of Śakti wherein the *kriyā-Śakti* predominates. That means the supreme divine power desirous of creation, became *bindu* with the predominance of the power of action⁽¹⁹⁾. *Kāla*, the eternal aspect of the eternal *puruṣa*, disturbs the equilibrium of the *bindu* or *para-bindu* which is the root of the Universe⁽²⁰⁾. The great sound which comes into being when the *bindu* splits itself is known as Śabda-Brahman or *mahā-nāda*⁽²¹⁾. Actually the *Śāktas* regard the divine mother as assuming the form of Śabda-Brahman⁽²²⁾. *Bindu* divides itself through the instrumentality of time into the Supreme, subtle and gross states. *Bindu* is therefore called *para-bindu* i.e. Supreme *bindu*, or *kāraṇa bindu* i.e. causal *bindu* or *mahākāraṇa* state of Brahman, which is known as *visarga maṇḍala*. The causal state of Brahman is represented by Śabda-Brahman or *kula-kunḍalinī*, consists of three principles viz-*apara-bindu*, *apara-nāda* and *vīja*. These three principles are described, respectively as *śiva-māyā*, *śiva-śakti-māyā*, and *śakti-māyā*, or as *para*, *sukṣma* and *sthūla*, or as *icchā*, *jñāna* and *kriyā* or as *tamas*, *sattva* and *rajas*. *Nāda*, *vīja* and *bindu* are therefore regarded as the three instruments through which Śiva-Śakti creates, sustains and dissolves the world. Different accounts of *nāda*, *bindu* and *kalā* are given in the Śākta School. It is also stated that *bindu* is Śabda Brahman at the second stage. Then *kunḍalinī* is manifested as a garland of letters (*mātrkā*), fifty letters of the alphabet which are eternal. From the letter sound, the objects of the world are said to be created.

Mahā-nāda lies between the *mahā-kāraṇas* i.e. *para-nāda* and *para-bindu* and the *kāraṇas* i.e. *apara bindu*, *vīja* and *apara nāda*⁽²³⁾. *Mahā-nāda* cannot give rise to the different creative principles unless it passes through the stage of *bindu*. In the Tantras, while describing the order of *artha-srṣṭi* it is stated that Śabda-Brahman or *mahā nāda* give rise to the principles beginning from *buddhi* onwards. In the *Prapañca-sāra*, Śabda-Brahman is called *avyakta* and the category of *mahat* is said to be derived from it⁽²⁴⁾. From *mahat*, *ahamkāra* evolves out which is of three types viz-

vaikārika, *taijasa* and *bhūtādi*. From *vaikārika* or *sāttvika ahamkāra*, five cognitive organs and four internal organs (*manas*, *buddhi*, *ahamkāra*, *citta*) are produced. From *rājasa* or *taijasa ahamkāra*, the five motor organs emerge. From the *bhūtādi* or *tāmāsa ahamkāra*, *śabda tanmātra* comes forth. From that *śabda tanmātra*, *ākāśa* comes into being. After *ākāśa*, touch-essence, air, colour-essence, fire, taste-essence, water, smell-essence and earth are produced in succession. It is also important to be mentioned here that from the *vaikārika*, eleven *devatās* presiding over the *manas* and the ten *indriyas* arise, from the *taijasa ahamkāra*, emerge the *manas* and the ten *indriyas*, from *bhūtādi* emerge the five *tanmātras* again from which evolve the five *mahābhūtas*⁽²⁵⁾. Thus the Śabda-Brahman concept is described from the cosmogonical standpoint in Saivism and Śaktism. In the *Vākyapadīya* of Bhaṭṭārī also this Śabda-Brahman is stated as source of creation of this world(I.1) Thus the significance of the syllable OM as the Śabda-Brahman concept also has a different prospect. So OM is said as the sound of the Universe.

2. CONCLUSION:

OM is described in various ways in many other Hindu texts or passages. But the most important aspect of this sacred syllable is hidden in its practical usage. In today's society the level of competition and work-load on one hand and stress or depression on the other hand are increasing day by day and simultaneously the number of yoga centers is also increasing. OM as the medium of practicing one pointed meditation and thereby getting a complete relaxation of the body and the mind becomes an un-avoidable part of today's busy and hectic life.

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3. tatra niratiśayaṁ sarvagjña vījaṁ, Ibid, 1.25
4. tasya vācakaḥ praṇavaḥ, Ibid, 1.27
5. tat japastadārtha tat arthabhāvanam, Ibid, 1.28
6. AB, 5.32
7. BU, 5.1.1
8. CU, 1.1.1.3
9. Ibid, 1.1.16-10, 1.2.14, 1.4.1.5, 1.5.1, 1.5.3, 1.5.5, 1.6.8, 1.7.7, 1.9.1-4 etc.
10. KU, 1.2.15-17
11. MU, 2.2.3-6
12. SU, 2.8
13. Ibid, 1.7
14. TU, 1.8.1
15. SU, 1.7
16. yadaśaraṁ brahmavido vadanti... saṁgrahaṇa pravakṣe... GT, 8.11
17. om ityekāśaraṁ brahma vyāharanmāmanusmaran/yaḥ prayāti tyajandehaṁ sa yāti paramām gatim// Ibid, 8.13
18. ST, I.7 – 8
19. PD, I. 7
20. PS, I. 42-3
21. ST, I. 11-12; PS, I. 44.
22. PD, I. 13
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Abbreviation:

1. AB- *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*
2. BU- *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*
3. CU- *Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad*
4. GT- *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*
5. KU- *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*
6. MU- *Muṇḍakōpaniṣad*
7. PD- *Padārthasāra*
8. PS-*Prapañcasāra Tantra*
9. ST-*Sāradātilakatantram*
10. SU- *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*
11. TU- *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*
12. YS- *Yajurveda Samhitā*