

Shabda and Mantra

Dr. Udoyan Banerji
Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi

Dr. Moumita Bhattacharya
Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit
Sanskrit College and University
Kolkata

Abstract

Shabda (sound) occupies a very important place in Sanātan Dharma (Vedic Hinduism). Understanding and realization of *Shabda* is said to be the goal of life itself. The Brahma Bindhu Upanishad (which is one of the five Bindu Upanishads. Also called Amrita Bindu, meaning a drop and Amrita means nectar of immortality) proclaims that: Two *vidyas* (sciences) are fit to be known *Shabda Brahma* and *Para Brahma*. One who has completely mastered *Shabda Brahma* attains *Para Brahma*. Also it is noted in *Shārada Tilaka Tantra* that the essence of all beings is itself the *Shabda Brahma*. *Chaitanya* in all beings is *Shabda Brahma*. Thus, the above statements from Hindu scriptures indicate that *shabda* is an integral part of our life. In Vedic literature, it is mentioned that the *Shabda Brahma* is omnipresent through the sound of *Om*. This is called *Shabda Maya* or an illusory presence of sound around us. Thus the objective of this paper is to throw some light on this relation between *Shabda* and *Mantra* which enables us to see the world in a new scientific light.

Keywords: Sabda, Mantra, Conciousness, Acoustics, Vibrations

Shabda

The modern scientific enquiry of sound which is also termed as acoustics has shown that the sound plays an essential role virtually in all aspects such as earth sciences, engineering, life sciences and arts. Sound in

modern scientific view refers to the audible range, with infra and ultra sound covering the inaudible molecular vibrations of the medium. Similarly, in Hindu scriptures, *shabda* originating from the vibratory cause is termed as *āhata shabda*. It also refers to the self-sustaining sound, without the vibratory cause, termed as *anāhata shabda* which is experienced only in higher (deeper) states of yoga. Thus it is seen that *shabda* (sound) encompasses the life itself.

The fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet form the garland of heads (skulls) in Mahakali. She is the causal source of Sabda or sound and speech; she absorbs them back into herself at Maha Pralaya. Sabda Brahman or Sound Brahman is the manifest Brahman of sounds in all breathing creatures. Sabda finds expression in various creatures according to the level and sophistication of Sound Consciousness of Sabda Brahman in each species.

It is interesting to learn that the formation of the universe out of chaos is brought about by sound. Certain sounds produce certain sets of vibrations in the ether. Some of these are of such low frequency that they form particles of what we call matter. The clairvoyant primitive people actually saw the shapes produced by various sounds in the ether.

They represented these shapes as the letters of their alphabets. So most of the words and sounds of the early languages actually controlled and represented that which they expressed. Throughout history we learn of the deliberate and effective use of sound. Priests have always employed it creating certain definite reactions on the people by the use of chanting and intoning. In the ancient magical rites, words, sounds and shapes were combined to gain certain ends. Sound is therefore eternal and is the matrix of all creation. The science of sound holds the key to the mysteries of the universe. Even thought is a sound and sound is the cause not the effect of vibration. There can be sound without vibration. Yoga has developed the theory of static sound; in developing this theory it says that there is no vacuum in this universe. Sound changes its property according to pitch, rhythm, volume, speed, frequency, harmony, intonation and utterance. The sound energy has to be organized and channeled in a particular way to produce particular results. *Mantra*-yoga is an attempt to organize and channelize sound energy to produce particular results.

Mantra

According to Vedic texts the Sanskrit word *Mantra* consists of the root ‘*man*’ (to think) (also in ‘*manas*’ which means mind) and the suffix ‘*tra*’ meaning, tool, hence a literal translation would be ‘instrument of thought’. Another explanation is that the suffix ‘*tra*’ means ‘protection’. *Mantra* in its most literal sense means ‘to free from the mind’. *Mantra* is therefore that which protects one from aberration. According to *Vishnupurāṇa*, it is said that in *Satyayuga* (The Golden Age), spiritual illumination is attained through meditation and in *Dwāparayuga* (Brazen Age) through worship. But in *Kaliyuga* (Iron Age), Mahābhārata declares that *Mantra japa* is the best amongst all spiritual practices. *Mantra* is, at its core, a tool used by the mind which eventually frees one from the vagaries of the mind and instills one-pointed concentration. In the strictest sense, a *Mantra* is a pure sound vibration which delivers the mind from its material inclinations and illusion. Chanting of *Mantras* is one of the best spiritual *sādhana*.

A *Mantra* (or *Mantram*) is a religious or mystical syllable that has been used since the Vedic ages as spiritual conduits, words or vibrations that instill one-pointed concentration in the devotee. This has endeared its utility in realization of the universal consciousness which has manifested in the form of sound. This is more so emphasized in the Bhagavad Gīta. .

Mantras are syllables that produce specific resonance and vibrations with a specific spiritual intent and modulate the flow of *prāṇ* thereby restraining the mind and senses from their sense objects and indrawing them into subtler aspects of their conscious states. By making use of these resonances one can move to subtler layers of consciousness stilling the manifestation of the consciousness until one attains self realization or bliss.

One such *Mantra* that has been known to reduce fear of death is the Mahāmṛtyunjaya *Mantra*. The general meaning of the *mantra* is: *tri-ambaka-m* (‘the three-eyed-one’); *yajā-mahe* (‘we praise’); *sugandhi-m* (‘the fragrant’); *pusti-varadhana-m* (‘the prosperity-increaser’); *urvāruka-m* (‘disease, attachment, obstacles in life, and resulting depression’); *iva* (‘like’); *bandhanāt* (‘from attachment like the stem of the gourd, but more generally, unhealthy attachment’) *mṛtyor* (‘from death’); *mukśīya* (‘may you liberate’); *mā* (‘not’); *amṛtāt* (‘from immortality’).

“We worship and adore you, O three-eyed one, O Shiva. You are sweet gladness, the fragrance of life, which nourishes us, restores our health, and causes us to thrive. As, in due time, the stem of the cucumber weakens,

and the gourd is freed from the vine, so free us from attachment and death, and do not withhold immortality."

Another important *Mantra* that addresses the basic principle of human existence is the *Gayatri Mantra*. For ages this *mantra* was a well guarded secret and out of reach even for most Hindus. It is said that if the true meaning of the *mantra* is realized, an individual transcends all boundaries of consciousness and ultimately unites with God Himself.

The *Gayatri mantra* reads as: *Om (Brahma); Bhur (embodiment of pran), Bhuvah (destroyer of suffering), Svah (realization of happiness), OmTat (that), Savitur (bright like the Sun), Varenyam (choicest), Bhargo (destroyer of sins), Devasya (divine), Dheemahi (may imbibe), Dhiyo (intellect), Yonaha (who), Naha (our), Prachodayat (may inspire).*

"May the divine light of the Supreme Being illuminate our intellect, to lead us along a path of righteousness."

"We meditate on the glory of the Creator, Who has created the Universe, Who is worthy of worship, Who is the embodiment of Knowledge and Light, Who is remover of Sin and Ignorance, may He open our hearts and enlighten our Intellect."

Concept of *Mantra* according to ancient Indian texts

Understanding the concept of evolution in terms of the universal consciousness and supreme bliss will help altering ones perception towards cancer and death. This is facilitated by using an integrated yoga program that operates at all *kośas* (Taittirīya Upanishad) and helps build internal awareness and takes one across various levels of relaxation and conscious states facilitating removal of deep-rooted fears and misperceptions. Yoga is both, the goal as well as the means to achieve a state of perfect harmony. Yoga is a state of complete absorption, union (*Yoga sthiti*) with absolute Reality i.e., Universal Consciousness.

Philosophical basis of *Mantra* yoga

In the beginning was the word, thus is the importance of sound emphasized to us.

The philosophical analysis of this *Om* is dealt in several upanishads). *Sabda* is the known form of the seed sound and words takes another important form called *nāda*. The *nāda* refers to the flowing energy of sound which also refers to the expressions of *chaitanya* or consciousness. Sāranga deva in Sangīta Ratnākara (Sarangadara 1978) says: We worship

Nāda-Brahman, that incomparable bliss, which is intrinsic in all the creatures as consciousness and is manifest in the phenomenon of this universe. Thus, the *nāda*, *sabda* and *ananda* are inseparable from consciousness. It is also said that, the syllable *nā* represents the vital force and *da* represents the fire. Thus being produced by the interaction of vital force and fire is called *nāda*. (Pandit Usharbudh Arya 1985). This *nāda* which manifests as seven notes becomes the vehicle of emotional expressions through the nine *rasas* in the form of music and dance. The nine *rasas* (sentiments) are love (erotic), heroic, pathetic, marvelous, comic, odious, terrible, furious, and peaceful. The words of a song denote this *sabda* (*pada*) while the singing tune denotes the expression of *nāda*. Thus, it is seen that *sabda* and *nāda* are connected by music.

Concept of evolution

The evolutionary order of elements is also stated in more explicit way in Brahmānandavalli of Taittirīyopanishat in Krishna Yajurveda in the following statements (Mahadeva shastry A 1990). From that verily, from this self (*Ātman*) is *ākāsh* (ether) born; from *ākāsh* the air; from air the fire; from fire the water; from water the earth; from earth the plants; from plants the food; from food the man. It is given in the statements above that, the production of elements begins from the all pervading *Ātman* (*Brahman*). Then the first element *ākāsh* is born, here *ākāsh* refers to absolute space (which is mistaken for vacuum). This most subtle element *ākāsh* is qualified by sound as its property or *guna*. Then from *ākāsh*, air comes into being with two properties or *gunas* namely, touch, which is its own and the sound property of *ākāsh* already evolved. Then from air, fire came into being having three properties composed of two preceding and property of form which is its own. Then from fire was born water with four properties, comprising its own property of taste and the three preceding one. Then from water, earth came into being with five properties namely smell, taste, form, touch and sound. Then from earth the herbs, the food and the man came into being. Although, it is noted above that *vāyu* (air) came from *ākāsh* (ether) and so on, but truly the *vāyu* is born from *Ātman* assuming the form of *ākāśa*, as *ākāśa* is only an effect with *Ātman* as source and cause.

Thus, the statements referred above traces the evolution of the great elemental powers which have brought forth the external as well as the

internal universes, that is the world that is outside man as well as the one that is within him (Subhash Kak 1999). The world outside is referred from cosmological point of view, however, so far as the inner world is concerned, as per yoga, their evolution takes place in the chakras which are strung in the sushumna, hence the saying that the chakras are abode of the elemental powers. The chakras namely Mūlādhāra, Swādhištāna, Mañipura, Anāhata and Viśuddhi correspond to abodes of five elemental powers earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space respectively. It is noted that in human body the location of the chakras correspond to, the coccygeal triangle at the termination of spinal cord (Mūlādhāra), the source of genitals (Swādhištāna), region of umbilicus (Mañipura), cardiac region (Anāhata), and the cavity of the throat (Viśuddhi).

The yoga maintains that if the mind could reach these chakras and pass from one to the other until it reaches the Āgnā chakra, then the reverse process of involution will take place leading to the realization of Ātman. This yoga based implications of elemental powers is only provided as an indication of the wealth of spiritual knowledge both practical and theoretical, which needs to be acquired by a serious spiritual aspirant under a genuine yogi who has the power to guide one.

Concept of involution by *Mantra* Yoga

It is said that the union of the Word-Principle and prāṇa that produces speech. Hence, is speech the function of prāṇa or is prāṇa the essence of speech? When one is in the process of articulating, moving from within outward, the speech is a function of prāṇa a process of evolution of consciousness, but when one is using the *Mantra* to take speech to its origin, one is moving from coarser to finer, from body to essence a process of involution of consciousness or yoga. Then prāṇa may very well be called the flavorful essence of speech, which is the —husk|. The same applies to the relationship between mind and speech. The process of yoga involves transcending the sthūla śarīra, sūkshma śarīra (panchatanmātrās, panchamahābhūtas, prāṇa), kāraṇa śarīra (Manas, Buddhi, Chitta and Ahankāra), guṇas and finally Mahat to be one with pure consciousness (Subhash Kak 1999). It is said that pure Consciousness will dawn on whosoever has mastered the pathways for returning articulate diversified speech to its deeper origins in the Word-principle. This is the purpose of the practice of japa, mental recitation of *Mantra*. The same principle is much more elaborately explained by the philosophers postulating the

fourfold unfoldment of speech. The four states of the progression from the Word Principle to articulate speech are called: Parā – The supreme one Pashyanti – The seeing one Madhyama – The middle one Vaikhiri – The articulated utterance. To summarize the philosophy, Parā: The transcendental Word-Principle in God (Brahman, parameshvara, parama-shiva etc.) Briefly, parā is the knowledge as it exists within the ultimate consciousness of God. It represents the unity of all powers of will, knowledge and action. The phenomena, the objects, the names and the sounds of those names have not yet appeared in any diffusion of multiplicity, but dwell in the singularity of a great coalescence. In a yogi parā dwells in the thousand petal lotus (The sahasrāra chakra or the 7th chakra). Pashyanti: This power becomes the kundalini in individuated beings. She descends to the mūlādhāra and svādīstāna chakras. The individual being experiences a presence of energy which vibrates between the lowest and the highest centers. The divine consciousness has become individuated. In other words, the divine knowledge is being infused into the jiva, the spirit of individual life and consciousness. At this stage the *Mantras* are a pure vibration without yet a distinction into syllables. Of the three powers of God, will, knowledge and action which dwell undifferentiated in parā, pashyanti is called a seer, as God sees all knowledge inward. Without reaching here, an ordinary mortal does not become a seer. 21 Jnāna Śakti: The power of knowledge, crystallized in this seeing state, then brings into focus the will, Icchā śakti, to distinguish the phenomena that are lying within it. Nāda, the universal sound, is then heard in the heart center. It becomes, first, the sound of Om. As the diffusion of transcendental light and sound continues to occur the strings of kundalini produce an inner music. It is thus that all music began. This brings us to the next stage. Madhyama: At this stage the Word-Principle becomes a state of intellect and mentation. The kundalini awakens the mind, and sends into it the vibrations from the various centers of consciousness. The differentiated syllables become the units of thought. Each syllable of the *Mantra* bears within it a ray of consciousness, a certain power, which becomes a particular psychic aspect. The knowledge revealed to the soul has been infused into the mind. At this point the yogi experiences a stirring within himself. The sphota, the explosion, the bursting forth of the Word – principle, from divine to spiritual and from spiritual to mental plane, awakens the prāṇa. The *Mantras* at this stage of

experience cause a surge of the *prāṇa* – wave which must then impel the airs of breath within the body to serve as vehicles between mind and *prāṇa* on one hand and the sense of articulation on the other. *Vaikhiri*: Impelled by mind and *prāṇa*, the airs divided into the areas of heart, throat, palate, etc., become the spoken word. Silence is now broken (Pandit Usharbudh Arya 1986). To summarize, in *pashyanti*, as divine knowledge is being transfused into the individual spirit, the knowledge of the phenomena and the distinctive syllabic sounds exist like fruits in a seed. In *madhyama*, the manifestation is diversified like many nuts in a single pod, the syllabic knowledge now remains in the mind and has become sequential. Intuitive wisdom now gives way to rationality. The *Mantras* are mental vibrations, and gradually become thoughts through their resonance, affecting *prāṇa*. In *vaikhiri*, the fruits, branches and twigs of language and words are all seen separately and one has to search for some semblance of unity behind them. A seeker does not easily become a seer. He must traverse the path that the Word – Principle has taken to become an oral utterance. He must take the uttered *Mantra* and go upstream along the river *Saraswati*, the river of speech, the goddess of wisdom. As the *Mantra* is refined the seeker goes from *Vaikhari* to *Madhyama*, then to *Pashyanti*, where the silence is indivisible. At this point, the *Mantra* ceases to be a composition of words and syllables. *Madhyama* begins to merge into *Pashyanti*. In other words, the highest *Mantra* „Om“ comes as close as possible to the Word-Principle in God's Consciousness, representing all His powers, all the rays of consciousness. It is in this form that seed of all sounds exists in the depth of human intelligence. It is only when the intelligence is pulled outwards, downwards, and into the realm of the senses of articulation that it emits nouns and verbs and, as the philosophers of *Tantra* claim, the *Mantras* specific to the rays of consciousness. Both the sound (*Nāda*) and the Word-Principle (*Śabda* – *Brahman*) exist originally in consciousness as one universal undivided point. Only in association with the realm of phenomena does it become —many and divide into numerous sounds and words. According to *Vedānta* philosophy, the Word-Principle is *Nitya*, eternal.

The words, their significance and the relationship between the two are eternal. Speech thus acts as a bridge between *Prāṇa* and mind and between

mind and intellect thereby by stilling the mind and altering ones perception and helping him to ascend in the path of spirituality and bliss.

References

Arya , Usharbudh 1986). Mantra and Meditation, Himalayan Institute Press .

Bhattacharya, B. (1985). Bhartrihari's Vakyapadia and linguistic monism. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental research Institute.

Bohr, N. (1958). Atomic physics and human knowledge. New York: John Wiley.

Brown, N. (1958). Class and cultural tradition in India. American Folklore, LXXI(281), 245.

Burgess, P. (2018). Science blurring its edges into spirit: the quantum path to atma. Millennium: Journal of International Studies, XLVII(1), 128-141.

Charon, J. E. (2005). The spirit: that stranger inside us. West Conshohocken PA: Infinity Publishing.

Chattopadhyaya, D. (1986). History of science and technology in ancient India- the beginnings. Calcutta: Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd.

Chen, G., & Starosta, W. (2003). Asian approaches to human communication: a dialogue. Intercultural Communication Studies, XII(4), 1-15.

Coward, H. G. (1980). The sphota theory of language: a philosophical analysis. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers.

Coward, H. G., & Kunjunniraja, K. (1990). Encyclopedia of Indian philosophies. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Deshpande, G. (2011). Pre-Paninian grammar. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.

Doniger, W. (2000). The Rig Veda. Gurugram: Penguin. Einstein, A. (1952). Ideas and opinions. New York: Crown Publishers.

Evans, N. (2010). Dying words: endangered languages and what they have to teach us. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Faddegon, B. (1963). Studies on Panini's grammar. Amsterdam: UITGAVE.

- Furlinger, E. (2009). The touch of Sakti: a study in non-dualistic Trika Saivism of Kashmir. New Delhi: DK Printworld.
- Garcia, H. F. (2014). The Power of communication. New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Ghosh, M. (1938). Paniniya Siksa. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
- Hayakawa, S. (1968). Language in thought and action. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Heisenberg, W. (1962). Physics and philosophy. New York: Harper and Row.
- Iyer, K. S. (1992). Bhartrihari: a study of Vakyapadia in the light of ancient commentaries. Poona: Deccan College.
- Iyer, K. S. (1971). The Vakyapadiya of Bhartrihari. Poona: Deccan College.
- Jha, V. (2010). Language, grammar and linguistics in Indian tradition. New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal.
- Kak, Subahsh .(1999) Science and Civilization in India, Vol. 1, The Dawn of Indian Civilization, Part 1, edited by G.C. Pande, ICPR/Centre for Studies in Civilizations, New Delhi,
- Sastri, Mahadeva Alladi (1990) The Taittiriya Upanishad: With the commentaries of SANKARAC HARYA,SURESVARAC HARYA AND SAYANA (VIDYARANYA)
- Saussure, F. De. (2009). Course in General Linguistics. Illinois: Open Court.