

Sacred Sound

The concept of sacred sound, where the spoken word has an intrinsic connection with the transcendent or the divine is not unique to Hinduism; however, within its various theologies and philosophies one will find a very robust discourse on how sound – in its many forms – relates to and helps define the human spiritual condition. From the Vedas and the earliest teachings of the Hindu tradition, through grammarian texts, as well as Yogic and Tantric philosophies and even in the classical music of India the concept of sacred sound is pervasive, important and the subject of much discussion (Beck 5). Sacred sound exists not just as a concept but plays an important role in the practice of Hinduism, permeating the daily routine through the ritual use of mantra, defining the life of the Hindu from birth to death and beyond.

The Vedas are some of the most sacred of scripture in Hinduism, they are given the designations *sruti*, meaning that they are authorless – having been heard and discerned by the *rsis*. The origins of the texts are oral, and were passed down through strict oral tradition in the sacred language of Sanskrit for generations before being committed to the page. The content of the Vedas is steeped in instructions for the appropriate pronunciation of sacred utterances known as *mantras* as well as the correct application of these powerful sonic tools in rituals (*yajna*) and for daily life. The pre-eminence of sound in the Vedas is exemplified through its role in creation: “By His utterance the universe came into being.” (Brhad Aranyaka Upanisad 1.2.4). And even more significantly by its personification in the goddess Vak. In the *Rg-Veda* Vak is viewed “as a powerful female potency who solely pervades and sustains all aspects of life...” and associated with Sakti the Great Goddess, through her personification as the metrical powers of Vedic *mantras* (Beck 28).

Mantras, which are one of the most prominent manifestations of the sacrality of sound within the Hindu tradition, are considered by some to be so powerful that their inappropriate use could cause harm to an ignorant practitioner; for this reason correct use is often restricted to Brahmin priests and proper instruction is to be ensured by a *guru* (Coward and Goa 12). The power which is present in a *mantra* could be utilised for specific ritual ends, but additionally *mantra* may be used as a salvific instrument, which is a nearly universal concept within Hinduism. The *mantra* as a tool of sacred sound leading to “...release (*moksa*) from beginning-less and seemingly endless cycle of birth-death-rebirth (karma-samsara)” is a concept developed in the Upanisads. Various schools of Hindu philosophy such as Mimamsa, grammarian and Yoga, as well as sectarian movements such as Tantra, Vaisnavism and Saivism all incorporate the use of sacred sound as a path to *moksa*, while maintaining distinct explanations for the mechanism behind it.

A *yajna*, (a Vedic ritual performed by a Brahmin priest) has two fundamental components: the sacrificial fire and the recitation of verses from the Vedas as sacred *mantras*. The sonic component of Hindu rituals is so important that many *mantras* are considered rituals in and of themselves (Beck 31). The spoken word is linked to the performatory aspect of the ritual, and consequentially associated to the divine through the sacredness of the Vedic verses and the Sanskrit language. Ritual use of sacred sound permeates the spiritual life of a Hindu practitioner; for example, the initiation into the spiritual community is done through a rite of passage known as the *upanayana* or the sacred thread ceremony. Not only is the ceremony itself defined through the recitation of sacred *mantras*, but additionally it is the occasion on which the young Hindu is invested with the Gayatri Mantra. This mantra is said to contain the entire wisdom of Vedas, and is to be recited at the beginning and the end of

each day (Coward and Goa 19). One can see how integral the *mantra* is to the ritual practice and everyday spiritual life in Hinduism.

The concept of god manifest as the word is known as Sabda-Brahman. The orthodox philosophical school of Mimamsa expounds the idea that each word or *sabda* is a manifestation of some aspect of the eternal divine cosmic order known as *rta*. From the perspective of a Mimamsata "...the ultimate reality is nothing other than the eternal words of the Vedas..." which exist even between cycles of creation; the word or *sabda* is the sum of creation, Brahman (Coward and Goa 33). A comprehensive theory of Sabda-Brahman can be found within the works of grammarian writers, the most paramount of whom being Panini, Katyayana, Patanjali and Bharthari. While the grammarians and Mimamsa agree that each *sabda* is sacred, "a major division exists between those who conceive of Ultimate Reality itself as Absolute Sound (Sphotavada)" and the view that sacred sound is embodied solely in the Veda, known as Varnavada (Beck 53). Indian grammarians hold that all sounds have inherent meaning or *artha*, which is revealed through a process known as *sphota*. Therefore to the grammarians it is manifest in all sound whereas the Mimamsa restrict Sabda-Brahman to the Vedas. Interestingly, the literature on the subject of this debate has been very influential in the modern field of linguistics and "the impetus for serious study of language and phonetics in the West seems to have come initially from India" (Beck 50).

In the philosophical school of *Yoga*, the concept of sacred sound is developed through the *nada*, a term which like *sabda* refers to sound. *Nada* however, encompasses sounds which are resonant or reverberating, whereas *sabda* is more specifically related to linguistic sound. Examples of *nada* include rolling thunder or the nasal vibration which is created when chanting OM. As in the Mimamsa and grammarian writings sacred sound, in the form of *nada*

is associated with absolute reality to form Nada-Brahman. A whole branch of Yoga known as Nada-Yoga is devoted to achieving release through meditation on sacred resonating sound in the form of Nada-Brahman. While the chanting of the Pranava, the sacred *mantra* (OM/AUM) is one way of meditating upon the *nada*; another method involves focusing inward and listening to subtle inner sounds. Some Yogis believe that if one can make *nada* the entire focus of one's mind by listening to increasingly subtle inner sounds one can come to the realization that Atman is Brahman and achieve the goal of salvation through release known as *moksa* (Beck 93). In Yoga, like the sectarian traditions, (Viasnavism, Saivism and Saktism), the concept of sacred sound is often related to a specific deity, such as Isvara.

The mantra most commonly related to Isvara is the Pranava which while central to the philosophy of *Yoga* is also very important for the rest of the Hindu tradition. *OM* is considered the divine sonic representation of god; it is the sound which begins the Vedas, the Upanisads and the Vedanta Sutras and therefore considered the beginning of "...the divine journey, or the search for transcendental knowledge..." (Rosen 217). While giving instruction to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krsna proclaims: "I am the wetness in water / the light in the moon and the sun; / I am Om in the Vedas. / 'Om' is God's magic word" (Gajjar 135). While it often precedes sacred texts, many *mantras* begin or end with the Pranava including the one prescribed in the *Bhagavad Gita* as ideal for achieving union with Brahman: "Those who want to reach God say Om Sat Tat / These three words explain God" (Gajjar 275).

The Yogic association of sacred sound to the divine personality of Isvara has its parallels in the sectarian traditions. In Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism, divine sound is associated with the deities Visnu, Siva and Sakti respectively. "In the Hindu theistic experience *mantras* have both meaning and power – power to purify the mind and reveal the

transcendent lord to the devotee in an existential encounter” (Coward and Goa 41). Tantra has influenced all three but especially Saivism and Saktism. Tantra conceives of sacred sound as the divine feminine, the active principal in a dualistic conception of the universe where the neuter Brahman divides itself in the during the act of creation into both the masculine and the feminine. “Several Tantric cosmogonies describe Nada-Brahman (cosmic sound) as being the vibration resulting from the sexual act of Siva and his consort Sakti” (Beck 124). This relates back to the manifestation of sacred sound in the form of the goddess Vak in the Vedas as discussed previously.

Indian classical music is rooted in the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, and plays its own part in defining the sacredness of sound within the tradition. The combination of the world’s oldest instrument (the human voice) along with other classical instruments such as the *sitar* and *tablas* is used to make sonically rich recitals of sacred verses. The classical style of Indian music and dance is known as *sangita*. The theological importance of musical sound “...gives rise to its ultimate equation with Nada-Brahman in the tradition of *sangita*” (Beck 107). The arts of *sangita* – vocal music, instrumental music and dance – are related to a rich theory of music numbers and astrology, and play a vital role in the recitation of the *Sama-Veda* (Vijayadevji 27). This again illustrates the importance of sacred sound in performance of ritual and is yet another example of the diverse role that it plays in Hinduism.

From the resonating Pranava, pronounced at the beginning of sacred scriptures, to the anthropomorphization of sonic vibration as the Great Goddess Sakti and the divine word Vak. Within the philosophical schools as well as the theistic traditions, one finds sacred sound as a principal factor in the theology of Hinduism. The sacred use of sound can viewed as an adjunct to ritual performance, but also as a tool for various paths which lead to ultimate

release or *moksa*. While the reverence of sound is not overall unique to India the concept is broadly developed and widely pervasive throughout the whole of Hinduism.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_philosophy

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