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Symbolism of the Monogram Om

Introduction

Many symbols are used in Hinduism among which OM is the most important one. OM is a word of invocation, affirmation, benediction and consent.¹ Regarding its meaning there are various opinions and the most widely supported view is that the word is an exclamation.² Hence the highest *mantra* OM, does not convey any particular name of Divinity, nor recall any mythological or semi-historical event but is an inarticulate exclamation when man is confronted with the presence in himself and around himself.³ This syllable of mystical power was considered to be sacred and therefore the sudras and the other lower class of people were not allowed to utter it; but were allowed to derive some satisfaction by uttering *aun*.⁴ OM symbolizes the Reality which is the fulness and the mystery of mysteries by the meditation of which one can attain divine realization.

1. Origin and Usage of the Syllable

The origin of the syllable is uncertain. But it can be concluded that OM is not a primitive symbol of philosophical and popular usage as it does not occur neither in *R̥g Veda* nor in *Atharvaveda*.⁵ But OM appears in *Taitteria Sam̥hitā*⁶ (*OM pratistha*), *Vājasaneyi*

1. John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*, (New Delhi : Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1973), p. 124.
2. James Hastings (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IX, (New Delhi: T & T Clark, 1953), p. 490.
3. Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1969), p. 59.
4. Mani Vettam, *Purāṇanikaṇḍu* Vol. I, (Kottayam: Gurunath Book Stall, 1964), p. 308.
5. James Hastings, *op. cit.*, p. 490.
6. Tai. S. III. 2. 9. 6.

*Samhitā*⁷ and *Maitrāyaṇī Samhitā*.⁸ The distinct usage is to be found in the Brahmanas where OM is recited by the priest after each verse from the *Ṛg Veda*,⁹ and is used as a solemn 'Yes'.¹⁰ The *Upaniṣads* and *Manusmṛiti* attribute its origin to *Prajapati* who from meditation on the three worlds originated the three-fold knowledge (*Vedas*), and from meditation on them originated OM.¹¹ "*Prajāpati* (the Lord of the creatures) milked out (as it were) from the three Vedas, the sound A, U, M and the (*Vyāhartis*) *Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah*,"¹² The three *Vyāhartis* derived from *Ṛg Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and *Sāma Veda* and these in turn from the gods *Agni*, *Vayu* and *Āditya*, and these again from earth, atmosphere and air.¹³ It is said that when the Lord splits the *anḍa* (egg) the sound *Om̐kara* issued from that breaking,¹⁴ and also that OM derived from the sound *pranava* the last syllable of the offering verse.¹⁵ The combination of OM comprises the three letters A, U, M and the conceived popular euphonic combination of this can be represented thus: *avt ayam* (this) = *avam* = *Aum*, OM. This OM is the beginning and the end. The OM uttered or heard comes from the OM which is neither pronounceable nor audible.¹⁶

Chāndogya Upanisad tells the story of three persons, Silak, Satayat and Chaikitayana who discussed *Udgitha*.¹⁷ They reached the conclusion that *Udgith* is the source and strength of everything, is the most excellent, and is endless.¹⁸ Further, he who knows this by meditation attains the most excellent life on earth and also in the other world.¹⁹

Not only Hindus, but also Buddhists, Jains, Christians use OM as a *mantra*. In Hinduism the syllable is uttered by the priests in

7. Vai. S. II. 13; XIX-25.

8. Mai. S. IV. 1.11; IV. 9.21; James Hastings, *op. cit.*, p. 490.

9. Aitaraya Brah. VII. 18.

10. Śatapata Brah. I. 4. 1. 30, X. 6. 14, XI. 6. 3. 4.

11. Chand. up. II. 23; Tait. up. I. 8.

12. Manu II. 76.

13. James Hastings, *op. cit.*, p. 490.

14. Mani Vettan, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

15. James Hastings, *op. cit.*, p. 491.

16. Maitri. up. 6. 6., Abhishiktananda, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

17. Chand. up. I. viii. 1-8.

18. *Ibid.*, I. ix. 2-4.

19. *Ibid.*, I. ix. 1, 2.

the beginning and at the end of every scriptural recitation, as well as at the commencement of prayer and other religious ceremonies. All the *mantras* of Hinduism start with OM. Even in magic the recitation of Om is said to be necessary in preparing the holy water (*Kausika-sūtra*). Hence OM plays an active role in the popular and the classical Hinduism and is used by various religions though its interpretation may vary slightly according to the faith and practices of religions.

2. Symbolism of OM

OM used as a mystical symbol is believed to have contained in itself the essence of all the *Vēdas*, the universe, the *Ātman* and *Brahman*. The conception of the beginninglessness and endlessness of the syllable and its powerfulness to enter into the self and lead to the inaudible and uncomprehensible OM, enforces in its understanding a bias of comprehensiveness and fulness. The whole Reality is comprehended and realized in and through OM. Moreover, OM contains in itself all the possible sounds. *A* is a guttural sound produced by the root of mouth; *U* is a vowel produced by keeping the mouth open and tongue straight; and *M* is produced by bringing the lips together.²⁰

The *A* is enunciated with open throat; the *U* carries the sound forward and *M* then somewhat nasalized, brings all to a close at the lips. So pronounced the utterance would have filled the whole mouth with sound and so have contained (so it is claimed), all the vowels. Moreover, since consonants are regarded in this thinking as interpretations of vowel sounds, the seed of all the words will have been contained in this enunciation of *Aum* and in these, the seed sounds of all things. Thus words, they say, are but fragments or particles of *Aum*.²¹

OM is explained also as the essence of essences where the essence of all the beings is considered to be the earth, the essence of earth as water, the essence of water as plant, the essence of plant as person,

20. J. Ouseparampil, *History and Mystery of OM*, (Bangalore: Journal of Dharma, Vol. II, No. 2), p. 448.

21. Quoted from Joseph Chanipell, *The Mystic Image*, (Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 361.

the essence of person as speech, the essence of speech as *Ṛg Veda*, the essence of *Ṛg Veda* as *Sāma Veda*, and the essence of *Sāma Veda* as *Udgitha* which is OM.²² Hence OM which symbolizes the whole reality is explained as the expression of all the possible sounds and the essence of all the essences, that is, the Supreme.²³

3. OM as Brahman and Atman

All the principal *Upaniṣads* except *Iśa*, *Kēna*, and *Aitarēya* identify OM with *Brahma*. In *Kaṭha Upaniṣads* Nacikēta asks Yama what exists other than the righteousness and the unrighteousness, the cause and the effect and other than what has to be and what is to be.²⁴

Yama said, "The goal which all the Vedas declare, which all austerities aim at and which man desires when they lead the life of continence, I will tell you briefly: it is OM."

"This syllable OM is indeed *Brahman*. This syllable is the highest. Whosoever knows this syllable obtains all that he desires."²⁵

Prasna Upanisad gives an account of Satyakāma son of Śibi who asked Pippalada what benefit would get by reciting the syllable OM. Pippalada replied that the syllable OM is the Supreme *Brahman* and he who knows this attains the same.²⁶ This OM is the imperishable, the highest *Brahman* and the Lord of creatures (*Prajāpati*).²⁷ "The monosyllable (OM) is the highest Brahman (three), suppressions of the breath are the best (form of) austerity, but nothing surpasses the *sāvitrī* truthfulness is better than silence."²⁸

Om is Brahman. Om is all this. This syllable, OM is used to indicate compliance. When they (the priests) are told to recite OM, they recite. Uttering OM, they sing the Chaman Chants. With OM, they recite the prayers. Uttering OM, the *Adhvārya*-priest gives the response. Uttering OM, the *Brahma*-priest

22. Chand. up. I. 1. 2.

23. *Ibid.*, I. 1. 3.

24. *Kaṭha* up. I. ii. 14.

25. *Kaṭha* up. I. ii. 16.

26. *Prasna*. up. V. 1. 2

27. *Manu* II. 84.

28. *Ibid.*, II. 8. 8.

gives assent. Uttering OM a qualified priest gives permission for the offering in the *agnihotra*-sacrifice. When a Vedic teacher wishes to obtain *Brahman* he utters OM: thus desiring *Brahman* he verily obtains *Brahman*.²⁹

This OM symbolizes both personal and impersonal *Brahman*³⁰ or the lower and the higher *Brahman*, i.e., OM is *etat eva aksharam brama* and *etat eva aksharam param*.³¹ OM understood also as the word-form of *Brahman* through which the non-word form is revealed. Hence OM is the sound form of the *Brahman* for the Vedantins,³² the *Sabha-brahman* through which one reaches *Parabrahman*. The *Bhagavadgita* identifies OM with Sri Krishna the Lord incarnate or the impersonal personified.

OM symbolizes also the four states of *Ātman's* consciousness, namely, waking (*Vaiśwanara*) dreaming (*tējas*) deep sleep (*susupti*) and *Turīa*. when *Ātman* is described from the standpoint of OM, the syllable is divided into parts, and the letters are *A*, *U*, and *M*.³³ Thus four elements can be distinguished in the syllable in which the syllable *A* symbolizes the waking state, *U* the dreaming state, *M* deep sleep, and all the three together symbolize the fourth state called *Turīa*.³⁴ Therefore, as Mircea Eliade points out, a daring homology is opened by the fourfold vision which is related to the fourfold consciousness of *Ātman*, namely, *Vaiśwanara* represented by *A*, *tējasa* represented by *U*, *Prajña* represented by *M* and the fourth *ekātmapratyayasāram* (whose essence is experienced of its own self) which is *śāntam* (tranquil) *śivan* (benign) and *advaitām* (non-dual), which is the syllable OM.³⁵ He who knows *A* the first letter of the syllable as the *Vaiśwanara Ātman* gets all his desires fulfilled.³⁶ The knowledge of *Ātman* in the dreaming stage *tejas* as *U* of the syllable, gives a

29. Tait. up. I. viii, 1.

30. Swami Nikhilanda, *The Upanishads*, (New York: Harper and Row Pub., 1964), p. 49.

31. Katha up. VI. ii. 16.

32. Maithri up. VI. 5., Mandu. up. I. 12.

33. Mandu. up. I. 8, II.

34. H. Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 378.

35. Cited by Mireca Eliade, *Yoga Immortality and Freedom*, (New Jersey Princeton Uni. Press, 1909), p. 124 from H. Zimmer, *op. cit.*, p. 378.

36. Mandu. up. IX

superior knowledge and the reward that no one in the family will be ignorant of *Brahman*.³⁷ When one realises *Prajñātman* as *M*, the third letter of the syllable, he is able to measure all and is able to comprehend all within himself.³⁸ Finally, he who knows *Turiya*, which is without parts and without relationships, as *AUM* merges in the *Ātman*.³⁹ OM is explained also as the *Veda* whose knowledge is the knowledge of *Brahman* Himself.⁴⁰ As the sheath of *Brahman*⁴¹ OM is the *Śabda* form of *Brahman* (*Sabdabrahman*) and the *Anahatasabda* (Uninterrupted sound). Thus OM symbolizes and manifests *Ātman-Brahman*. "Just as OM manifests itself, grows, becomes transformed in its vocal quality and finally subsides into the silence that follows, so likewise the four states or components, of being."⁴²

4. OM as the Whole Reality

OM comprehends the whole universe. All that has become, is becoming and will become, and all things that are beyond time reside in the sound OM. All that is past, present and future is indeed OM. And whatever else there is, beyond the threefold division of time are also in OM.⁴³ That is, the two spheres of existence are symbolized by the sound OM. The one is the visible sphere or the sphere of time and space and the other is the transcendental or the timeless sphere.⁴⁴ The symbolism of the three letters of OM as the waking, dreaming, and the dreamless stages of existence, is regarded as symbolizing the three worlds, namely, gross, subtle and causal.⁴⁵ Thus *A* stands for the material universe which is collectively the created entity of beings containing the sun, heaven, space, earth, water, air, auditory senses, mind and intellect.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the second aspect is *Tejas* (splendour), the third is *prajna* (wisdom) and

37. *Ibid.* X

38. *Ibid.* XI

39. *Ibid.* XII.

40. Brah. up. I. iv. 1

41. Mandu. up. 1. 12.

42. H. Zimmer, *op. cit.*, p. 378.

43. Mandu. up. 1.

44. H. Zimmer, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

45. Swami Nikhilanda, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

46. Kailash Vajpevi, *The Science of Manthras*, (New Delhi: Arnold Heineman, 1979), p. 20.

the fourth is the indescribable, infinite Brahman.⁴⁷ Therefore OM is the sound-form of Brahma and all other forms of existence are included by saying OM, namely, the sex-form (feminine, masculine and neuter); the light form (fire, wind and the sun); the Lordship form (*Brahma*, *Rudra* and *Viṣṇu*); the mouth form (*Garhapatya*); sacrificial fire (the *Dakshinayin* sacrificial fire and the *Ahavaniya* sacrificial fire); the understanding form (*R̥g Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and the *Sāma Veda*); the world form (earth, atmosphere and the sky); the time form (past, present and the future); the heat form (breath, fire and moon); the intelligence form (intellect, mind and egoism) and the breath form (*prana*-breath, *Apana*-breath and *Vyana*-breath).⁴⁸ Therefore OM is understood as *Brahman* and as the whole world,⁴⁹ as the quintessence of the essences, the highest, the supreme.⁵⁰ As all the leaves are held together by a midrib, so is all this.⁵¹ Hence *Tarasara Upanisads* of *Sukla-Yajur Veda* says thus,

That which is OM is indestructible, the supreme and *Brahman*. That alone should be worshipped. It is this that is of the eight subtle syllables. And this becomes eight, being of eight forms. *A* is the first letter, *U* is the second, *M* is the third. *Bindu* is the fourth, *Nāda* is the fifth; *Kāla* is the sixth; *Kālāṛīta* is the seventh; And that which is beyond this is the eighth. It is called *Taraka*, because it enables one to cross this mundane existence. Know that *Taraka* alone is *Brahman* and it alone should be worshipped.⁵²

5. OM as Trideva

Vaisnavism and Saivism define OM according to their own respective theologies, Vaisnavites identifying OM with *Viṣṇu* and Saivaites claiming OM as *Siva* in the form of *Nadatanu*.⁵³ But OM is generally accepted as symbolizing the union of the three Lords of

47. *Ibid.*

48. Maitri. up. VI., Prasna up. V. 2, Maitri. up. VI. 21.

49. Tait, up. I. 8.

50. Chand. up. II. xxiii. 3.

51. *Ibid.*, I. 4.

52. K. Narayanaswami Aiyer, *Thirty Minor Upanisads* (Delhi : Akey Corporation, 1979), p. 125.

53. Margret and James Stulley, *Harpers Dictionary of Hinduism*, (New York: Harper and Row Pub. 1977), P. 213.

Hinduism, namely, *Visnu, Siva* and *Brahman*.⁵⁴ Gods in Hinduism are symbolic, standing for the power of God.⁵⁵ Hence the theory of Hindu pantheon is meaningful and relevant in the multi-cultural context.⁵⁶ Therefore Abishiktananda interprets OM as symbolizing the Christian Trinity, the union of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷

Therefore OM the mystical syllable is a mystical and metaphysical symbol. Besides symbolizing *Brahman* and the whole world, *Vedas, Trideva* etc. OM subsists as the root of all the *Mantras* transcending past, present and future. OM is also the true symbol of immateriality. It stands for the cosmic harmony helping the supernatural opening as it touched the layers of deeper consciousness. Listening at the delightful harmonies OM gives intrinsic vision. Hence the meditation and the realization of OM leads to mystical experience and union.

6. Mystical Experience through OM

OM introduces man to the mystery of the Divine, into the depth of namelessness, and therefore mystical experience and estatic union are possible through the meditation of the syllable OM. Rajneesh explains OM as a means to travel from chaos to cosmos. According to him we are in chaos and we are chaos and our duty is to transcend this state.⁵⁸ He speaks of three stages in the meditation of OM, namely, loud, mental and interior and identifies OM with *Hoo* his own *mantra*.⁵⁹ Any system or religion that suggests the contemplation of OM does so for the sake of Divine experience here and liberation after death. The experience of the Divine here will be mystical in character.

(a). *OM as Sadhya and Sadhana*

OM is the path. It represents also the end. Thus OM the symbol of meditation is at the same time the means and the goal of

54. John Dowson, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

55. I. K. Taimini, *Introduction to Hindu Symbolism*, (Madras : Theosophical Pub. house, 1965), p. 10.

56. Edward Moore, *The Hindu Pantheon*, (New Delhi : Asian Educational Series, 1981), p. 401.

57. Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, (Delhi : I.S.P.C.K., 1969), pp. 181-191.

58. Bhagavan Sri Rajneesh, *Yoga : The Alpha and the Omega*. (Poona : Rajneesh Foundation), pp. 179-182.

Ibid., p. 187.

meditation. Hence the path and the end are alike or the end is immanent in the path.⁶⁰ According to *Mandukya Upaniṣad*, OM is the bow, *Ātman* is the arrow and *Brahman* is the mark (*Lakṣṇa*).⁶¹ *Manusmṛti* regards OM as the gate leading to the union of the self with *Brahman*.⁶² It is said that the universal and the individual *Brahman* are to be found in the body by the use of OM.⁶³ *Katha Upaniṣad* says that the syllable, indeed, is Holy, the syllable indeed is the Supreme. By knowing that syllable indeed whatever one desires is his.⁶⁴ It is by means of OM, one is able to cross beyond the see of darkness.⁶⁵ The meditation in view of immortality should be on the three elements of OM (a + u + m); for the meditation on the element “a” causes the return to the earth after death, on elements “u + m” leads one to the moon; and the meditation on all the three elements “a + u + m” liberates one from sin and life in the world of *Brahman*.⁶⁶ This meditation is to be undertaken by making the body the lower piece of wood, and OM the upper piece, and through this practice of the friction of meditation, one perceives the luminous self, hidden like the fire, i.e., the wood.⁶⁷ It is said in the *Chandogya Upaniṣad* that the meditation of OM is to be undertaken as the *mukhya* (principal) *prāna* in order to destroy the demons and attain immortality.⁶⁸ For, when gods and demons were fighting each other the gods took hold of the *Udgitha* with the intention of vanquishing the demons, and meditated upon *Udgitha* as *prāna*, speech, eye, ear, mind etc., but the demons pierced it with evil.⁶⁹ At last they meditated upon *Udgitha* as the *mukhyaprāna* and then the demons were destroyed just as a cloud of earth hitting a stone is scattered.⁷⁰ Thus by entering into the immortal and the fearless syllable OM the gods became immortal and fearless.⁷¹ Therefore, “He who knowing

60. Mahendranath Sirkar, *Hindu Mysticism According to the Upanisads*, (London : Kegan & Paul, 1934), p. 250.

61. Mand. up. I. 9.

62. Manu, II. 81.

63. Sveta. up. I. 9.

64. Katha. up. II. 16.

65. Mun. up. II. ii. 7.

66. Prasna. up. V. 3-5.

67. Sveta. up. I. 14.

68. Chand. up. I. ii. 7.

69. *Ibid.* I. ii. 2-6.

70. *Ibid.*, I. iii. 7.

71. *Ibid.*, I. iv. 4.

this sings the praise of the syllable OM enters the same syllable called the *Svara* which is immortal and fearless. Having entered it he becomes immortal as the gods are immortal.⁷² *Manusmṛti* regards the recitation of OM as a means of purification,⁷³ and of entering into the highest *Brahman*, and the period suggested for the practice is three years.⁷⁴ Therefore the recitation of OM confers the same gift as is conferred by the recitation of the *Vedas*.⁷⁵ Even the most guilty person is saved by reciting the word OM thousand times⁷⁶ and those who do not recite the syllable are punished.⁷⁷ Hence the utterance of OM is purely a personal act, and it is done to attain immortality after death. The experience and union which takes place through the contemplation is continued even after death.

(b) OM Experience as Divine Experience

The Hindu understanding is that by the meditation on OM the aspirant is led to ecstasy or an extensive mystical experience of the Divine through which a sense of union with the transcendental will cause a complete surrender to God and to the Divine will and effect a sense of non-attainment to material well-being and worldly wealth. In other words, through the contemplation of the sound-form of *Brahman*, by ascending degrees one reaches the non-sound, a state of complete union (*Sayujya*) and peacefulness (*nirvṛtatva*). OM being the meeting point of past, present and the future and all that is beyond time brings about harmony and integrity within oneself and with the society, that is, OM experience conveys the experience of the Unmanifest, Unspeakable, Undefinable, Immortal, Impersonal, Omnipresent, Omniscient Being of beings and the Truth of truths which ultimately leads to immortality and freedom.

Conclusion

Therefore, OM, which has a very wide connotation claims a universal comprehension and stands as a symbol of man's end, aspi-

72. *Ibid.*, I. iv. 5.

73. *Manu*. XI. 249.

74. *Ibid.*, II. 82.

75. *Ibid.*, V. 78.

76. *Ibid.*, II. 8.

77. *Ibid.*, II. 79.

78. *Maitri*. up. VI. 22.

rations and the means. Meditation on OM is recommended by the Hindu scriptures as the surest means to liberation. The theory has also a psychological aspect as the meditation on a single syllable will provide full concentration or one-pointedness. The reason for its usage in many religions is that it does not symbolize any particular divinity on the one hand and, on the other, it symbolizes the whole Reality past, present and the future.