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THE HISTORY AND MYSTERY OF OM

OM¹ is the most important tri-syllabic symbol in Hindu tradition. There is no action, no prayer started and ended, without uttering Om.² The story of Om is as old as the Vedas.³ The Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and the Upanisads have their own philosophy on Om. Not only the Hindus but also the Buddhists, Jains and all the other religious sects—and in modern times Christians and even Muslims—give their own commentary on Om. So much is philosophized on Om that it has been regarded as the utmost limit of what can be uttered or heard. In a sense, therefore, it is better fitted than any other sound to express the bankruptcy of word and thought. What all thought and words fail to express Om succeeds in expressing. According to *Māndukyopanisad*, Om is the “seed-syllable” of the universe, the magic word *par-excellence*. Om is the primordial sound of timeless reality which vibrates within us from the beginningless past and which vibrates in us if we have developed the inner sense of perfect pacification of our mind. It is the transcendental sound of the inborn law of all things, the eternal rhythm of all that moves, the rhythm in which the law becomes the expression of perfect freedom.

Om is not the exclusive property of any particular school of thought; it expresses what is beyond words and forms and is beyond limitation and classification, definition and explanation. Om

1. Om is written as “OM” or “Om” or “AUM” or “Aum”. I generally use “Om”.

2. W.J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology* (Calcutta: 1975), P. 95

3. Om is sung by all the Vedas. Cf. 1 *Tai Up.* I. 8; *Manu.* II. 74.

is God in the form of *Sabda* (sound), which is the means and end of our realization⁴. Om is the positive name of God and *neti* "not thus" the negative; Om is the *Sunya* of Buddhism and the *Pūrna* (plenum) of Advaita. The "*Purnamadah*" ...etc. of Br. Up. 5.1. 1.; is the positive statement on Om, the "*Tatō vācō*" etc.⁵ of *Taittiriyaopanisad* (2.9) and the "*Vāoo yasya*" etc. of *aparokṣānubhūti*⁶ are the negative statements on Om. "This short syllable contains a whole philosophy which many volumes would not suffice to state"⁷. However, here is a modest attempt to study Om in its different aspects.

Different Names of Om:

Om has three other important names: *Udgiṭha*, *Pranava*, and *Aksara*. The Chhāndogya Upanisad begins with an advice to do *Upāsana* of Om which is *Udgiṭha* (I. 1. 1.; I. 1. 7, 8). It is interesting to note that the Taittiriya Brahmana II. 11 interprets the *aksara* of Rgveda to mean *Omkāra*⁸. The word *pranava* is that which is roared, bellowed, sounded etc. The verb "*nu*" means to make a humming or droning sound, to utter the mystic syllable Om⁹. According to Taittiriya Samhita that which the *Udgatr* sings is *Udgiṭha*¹⁰. *Udgatr* is the priest of Sāmaveda. The *Amarakośa* identifies Om with *Pranava*¹¹.

O and Om

In the Vedic times *Pranava* had two forms: 1) *Sudha* 'O'-*kārānta*, 2) *Makārānta*; that which ends in "O" and that which ends in "M". In the four *Sambhitas* we do not see the Om written.¹² Om, as such, must have been used in the Yajurveda tradition at

4. Cfr. M.P. Pandit, *Shining Harvest* (Madras), passim.

5. *Yatō Vācō nivartante aprāpys manasā saha*, *Tai. Up.* II. 9.

6. *Vācō yasyānnivartante tadvaktum kena sakyate*, *Aparōkṣānubhūti*, 107.

7. Sir John Woodroffe, *Garland of Letters*, 1922, P. 214.

8. *Rcō aksare paramē*, RV 1. 164. 39.

9. Monier Williams, *Sanskrit English Dictionary*.

10. *Udgiṭha eve Udgātr (ṛ) nām. SV* 3. 2. 9. 5.

11. *Omkara pranvau samau (Amara)*

12. Franklin Edgerton has interpreted two passages in AV to mean Om though the original text does not mention Om explicitly. "To you have mounted the *Usnika* (RV meter), the sacred syllable (Om), the sacrificial cry *Vasat*... (AV 13. 1. 15); upon whom rests the six wide (space), the five directions, the four seas, the three sounds (Om analysed — A.U.M.) of the sacrifice" (AV 13. 3. 6).

the performance of sacrifices. *Sudhōkāranta* is found in RV.¹³ Both are found in *Jaiminiyopanisad*.¹⁴ In the vedic tradition this book is called *Jaiminiyopanisadbrāhmana*.¹⁵ In the Sāmavedic singing we always hear "O" only. Om is found in Brāhmanas and Upanisads.¹⁶ According to L.A. Ravi Varma, "one cannot assert that the vedic ritualism did not use *bijaksaras* (seed-syllables). The *pranavam* or Om, and the terms such as *svāha*, *Svaahā* etc. should really be classed with *bijaksaras*; at any rate the *pranavam* cannot be any other than there. The meaning given to Vedic *pranava* and *Agamic bijaksaras* are both artificial and derived in the same manner. All *bijaksarās* end in *anunāsika* (m). It seems very likely that the *Agamic bijaksarās* were fashioned after the *pranava*, the most sacred and by all known accounts, the earliest *bijaksara*".¹⁷

The Original Use and Meaning of OM

The term Om originally appears to have had only an affirmative sense. It is still used in that sense in certain religious and social ceremonies.¹⁸ But later, gradually, it acquired different meanings. As N.K. Venkateram Panthulm states, the value of *Aum* as an esoteric mystic symbol must have originated at a time later than the Samhita period and developed during the Upanisadic period and worked into a wonderful system of philosophic speculation from the point of view of *Jñāna* and on the basis of *Upāsana*

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13. *O hi vartante rathyena cakrā* (10. 117. 5c).
O srstir cidāthya sam etu (7. 40. 1a).
O cit sakhayam sakhyā vaurtyam (10. 10. 1c).
O te yante ye (1. 113. 11d; 1. 104. 2a; 8. 22. 1a).
14. *hum bha eva ityetadevopagitam* (3. 131-41).
O va iti dve aksare (3. 13. 4).
Tametadugata yajamanamityetenaksarente svarge loke dadhati (3. 13. 8).
15. V.P. Limave and Vadekar R.D. (Eds). *Eighteen Upanishads*, Poona, 1958.
16. *Omiti brahma/ Omiti idam sarvam/ Omityetedanukrti ha sma va avyo srāvayatyapraṭhanti/ Omiti Sāmāni gāyanti/ Om Omiti sastrani samsanti/ Omityadharyu pratigaram pratigrnāti/ Omiti brahma prasauti/ Omityagnihōtramanujānāti/ Brahmaivo. prāpnōti/ Tai. Ara. 7. 8. 9; Tai Up. 1. 8. 9; Omiti vai sāma... Omiti manah... Omitindra/ Jai. Up. 1. 2.2 2; Omkāra sarvamaṇnoti, Go. Bra. 1. 9. 26. Cfr. idem 1. 9. 26. ff.*
17. L.A. Ravivarma. "Rituals in Worship", *Cultural Heritage of India*, (Calcutta. Vol. IV), P. 445.
18. Ravivarma, *ibidem*, P. 446.

or meditation for realization through *Karma* and *Bhakti*.¹⁹ The syllable *Aum* was a syllable of invocation, as it still is during the Sacrifices.²⁰

Amarasimha gives it the following meaning: "*Omevam paramam mate*; "Om", "evam" "paramam", these three are used in the sense of approval. The *Avyayakośa* states that in the sense of calling, remembrance and showing of pity, "O" is used.²¹ The same dictionary explains Om: To show the beginnings, approval, permission, ending, Brahman, silent (prayer), Om is used as an indeclinable.²² "O" or "Om", similar to "ā" was a word of solemn affirmation or respectful assent, equal to that of "yes" or "Amen" or "Hail". "Om" first appears in Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanisads as a mystic monosyllable and is there set forth as the object profound religious meditation, the highest efficacy being attributed not only to the whole word but also to the three sounds *a, u, m*, which constitute it. The splitting of "om" into *a, u, m*, is a later addition.

Panini gives two rules regarding the use of Om in the beginning and at the end, respectively: "The vowel in Om is prolated (*pluta*) in the beginning of a sacred text, e.g. *O'm agnimile purohitam* (RV 1. 1. 1.). In work of a sacrificial nature, Om is substituted for the final vowel along with the consonant, if any, that may follow it in the sentence, e.g. *Devan jigati sumnayom* (RV 3. 27. 1).²³

Another meaning attributed to Om is 'auspiciousness'. According to Smṛti, "*Atha*" and "*Om*" came through the mouth of Brahma first and, therefore, they are called *mangalarthaka* meaning auspiciousness.²⁴ We have a long discussion on this use

19. N.K. Venkatesam Panthulu, *The Mystic Significance of Pranava (AUM)*, PAIOC, Vol. IX, P. 177ff.

20. Ibidem, note, P. 179.

21. *Ahvānasmarananukumbhādisvarthesu nipatoyam*/ cfr. Srisatyasankaracharya, *Avyayakosa*, MSES, Madras, 1971.

22. *Prarambhāṅgikāṅujna abrahmatuṣṇībhāvādisvarthesu cadisu athyante*/ Cfr. also Chh. Up. 1. 1. 8.

When, in course of time, Om came to be—called *pranava* and different meanings were attributed to it, it is called an *Avyaya*, constituting of A, U, and M. cfr. *khilsa sutram*, 2. 9. 4; 4. 2. 9-11; 7. 7. 6., cfr. also, Visvabandhu Sastri, *Vedic Word Index*, V. V. R. I.

23. *Omabhyādāne* (8. 2. 87); *Pranavaṣṭeh* (8. 2. 89).

24. *Omkaracāthaṣabdasca dvāvetau Brāhmanh pura Kantrambhitū vinyatau tena mangalīkāvubhau* (Smṛti)

of *mangala* at the beginning of a work in the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patanjali and also in *Brahma Sutrā* Bhasya of Sankarāchārya.²⁵ But it does not follow that all works should begin with “Om” or “atha”. There are examples of *Dharma Sūtras* and even *Srauta Sūtras* beginning without Om.²⁶ Generally Sacrifices, penance and prayers are started with “Om”. The Parabrahman is defined in three ways as “*Om-Tat-Sat*”. On the basis of this definition the Brahmins, the Vedas, and the sacrifices were originally created. Therefore the Brahmvadins start their sacrifices, charity and penance and all other scriptural actions after first uttering the word Om (*Gita* 17:23-24).

The Grammar of OM

Om has two grammatical explanations. The first explanation gives the derivation of Om as follows: There is the verbal root “*av*” which means to protect, to offer (as a hymn to the gods, to animate etc.). “*Man*” suffix is added to *av*; By the *Unādi Sutra* “*Avatestilopasca*” (I. 141), “*man*” becomes “*m*”. Then according to Panini’s rule 6-4-20 “*av*” becomes “*a*” plus “*u*”, and again by rule 6-1-87 “*a*” plus “*u*” becomes “*o*” Hence the word form is Om. The second grammatical explanation is that Om was originally composed of *a*, *u*, and *m*. Hence by the application of the Paniniyan rule stated above, the word-form “*om*” resulted. This splitting of Om into *a*, *u*, *m* is a more recent addition belonging to the post-Samhita period. In actual fact the above stated rules had no part in the derivation of Om: Om is underived.

We have so far examined the following: how Om was used in the beginning, its origin, lexical meaning, primary use, grammatical derivation down to the Upanisādic period. Now we shall turn our attention to the study of its various interpretations—philosophical, philological, psychological and sectarian.

Analysis and Interpretation of Om:

Māndukyaopanisad initiated the tradition pertaining to the sound elements of *Aum* as corresponding to and signifying the

25. *Mahābhāṣya*, 1. 1. 1; Br. Su. Bha. 1. 1. 1.

26. *Vedo dharamamūlam (Gautama Dharmasūtra)*
Yajnam vyākhyāsama (Sam. Srautasūtram)

27. Cfr. Srisatyasankarācharya, *op. cit.*, “Om”;

Rāmabhadra Dikṣita, *Unadimanidipika*, University of Madras, 1972, I. 131;
Jvaradhvarasrivyanimavanupadhasca (6. 4. 20), *Adguna* (6. 1. 87).

phases of the Self, conditioned by the three bodies of gross, subtle and causal, and as manifesting itself in the three phenomenal states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. The *Vārttika* elaborates the correspondence between the sound-elements and the planes of spirit corresponding to their manifestation. This theory rescues the syllable Om from the realm of the meaningless and the occult, invests it with supreme import and converts it into the highest vedantic truth.²⁸ Also *Tripurātāpani Upanisad* of Atharvaveda gives the philological analysis of Om²⁹. More attention was given to the build-up of the syllable when it was used in mantras. In *Aitareya Brāhmana* and *Jai. Brā. (I. 136)* we see Om split into *Aum*. Once the splitting of Om and assigning different meanings to each component had started, there was no end to such a process. In the sectarian traditions it underwent various divisions and gave numerous interpretations. Realities of macrocosm, microcosm, various psychic planes, meditation methods, yogic practices, Brahma-Atma relations practically everything was explained by Om.

“A” is the state of Atman which is called *Viśva*³⁰ in the isolated form but identical with the waking condition. The same “A” is *Viśvānara* when all *Viśvas* are thought of cumulatively. It illuminates and relishes all the gross objects. It has links with the senses. All this mundane existence that is visualized in the waking state has its beginning in the portion “A” of Om. “A” is, therefore, the tutelary deity in which the whole world (*prapañca*) of waking state merges at the time of dissolution. Next follows “U”. This is identical with *Taijasa*, that individual functioning portion of Atman who enjoys things in the dream state. Taken cumulatively, it is called *Hiranyagarbha*. The third portion is “M”. This is identical with *prājña*, taken singly, and the same is called *Īśvara* collectively. This *prājña* is the active part of Atman who enjoys pleasure in sound sleep. He neither desires anything, nor does he dream. He is fully *Ananda*. He is *cetōmukha*. The collective form of *Prājña* or *Īśvara* is the cause of all. From him issues the whole world and in him, again, it dissolves at the time of destruction.³¹

28. Sankara, *Pañcikaranam*, (Calcutta: 1971), P. xix.

29. *Akāra ukāra makāra iti tenaikya sambhavati tadomiti*.

30. Consciousness in the waking state is called *Viśva*, dream state is *Taijasa* and deep sleep *Prājña*. *Turiya* is beyond all these states and is divested of ignorance. It is Atman.

31. Cfr. Belvakar and Ranade, *History of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: 1974) P. 323.

Om, as identical with Atman, is one composite whole. It is then *Asvara* and *Aksara*. The same when tripartitioned into *A U* and *M* is identical with *Viśva*, *Tuijasa* and *Prājña* in singular capacity, respectively; and with *Visvānara*, *Hiranyagabha* and *Īśvara*—in that order—taken collectively. All *jivas* remain in either of these conditions—waking, dreaming or sleeping and enjoy various objects of pleasures. Even beyond these states there is the *turiya*, the fourth condition, which transcends the limits of all measures.³² This is Atman.

“*Omkara*” is written with a *nāda* and *bindu*, like a crescent and a dot over it. *Nāda* is the first going forth of power which gathers itself together as a great strength—as *bindu*, to create the universe, and this *binduas* creating differentiates into the trinity, *A-U-M*. Hence *nada* and *bindu* are the unmanifested form from which immediately follows all the animated life in the three conditions of waking, dreaming and deep-sleep. This *nādbindu* differentiates into the trinity of “cognition”, “volition”, and “action”; sun, moon and fire; the *A-U-M* are Brahma, Visnu and Rudra. These are all manifestations of one and the same power. These three aspects of *nāda-bindu* are operating all the time.³³

A-U-M and *nāda-bindu* correspond to the four stages of the expression of a word: *Vaikhari*, *Madhyama*, *Paśyanti* and *Para*, respectively.³⁴ All realities, all speech, all the states of consciousness are implicitly contained in the *nāda-bindu*, and when they are differentiated they are expressed in audible sound form as Om which in turn gets differentiated into *A-U-M*. The causal stress which produces the *dhvanis* (sounds) and the *varnas* (letters) are uncreated. It is the *anāhataśabda* (uninterrupted sound); it is Brahmā which is the cause of all that is pulsating. This *anāhataśabda* can be heard in some stages of yogic practices. Om is the only expression of the eternal sound. So it is the *mahabijamantra*.

Aitareya Brahmana (XXV) says “Prajapati created the three worlds—earth, space and heaven; these three in succession gave

32. Cfr. B.S. Agnihotri, “The Implication of Om in Philosophy”, J. O. I., Baroda, Vol. 14, No. 1, P. 70-74.

33. For a study of *Nāda*, *Bindu Kala* etc. in *Advaita and Sivāgama* vide, Gopinath Kaviraj, *Nāda, Bindu, and Kala*, J. G. J. R. I., Vol. III, Pt. “, Feb. 194-6, P. 97-108.

34. J. Ouseparampil, “Spirituality of Vāk in Indian Tradition”, *Jeevadhara*, No. 36, P. 497.

birth to Agni, Vāyu and Aditya, which in turn created Ṛk. Yajus, and Saman: these three Vedas created out of their essence the three *Vyābrtis-Bhub*, *Bhuvah* and *Svah*, which finally came to be represented by the three letters A, U, M (AUM). The sixth chapter of *Maitrayani Upanisad* mentions various triads of the forms of Brahman. The threefold Om is the sound-form; fire, wind and sun, the light-form; Brahma, Visnu and Rudra, the lordship-form; Ṛk, Yajus and Saman, the knowledge-form; earth, atmosphere and sky, the world-form; past, present and future, the time-form; breath, fire and sun, the heat-form; food, water and moon, the growth-form; intellect, mind and egoism, the intelligence-form; *Prāna*, *Apāna* and *Vyāna*, the breath-form. All these are praised and honoured in saying Om; Om is both higher and lower Brahman.³⁵

Ṛg Veda itself praises the Ṛks as the seat of the gods and as the source of every other reality.³⁶ The *Sākapurni Nirukta* explains how the whole reality was deduced from Om. From the first syllable came earth, fire, *Ṛgveda* and earthly beings; from the second atmosphere, air, *Yajurveda* and the inhabitants of the atmosphere; from the third syllable came sky, *Sāmaveda* and the heavenly beings. Therefore Om is the whole reality. Speech is the essence of man, since speech distinguishes him from animals. *Ṛcas* (hymns) are the essence of speech. *Sāman* are the essence of *Ṛcas*, since music represents the highest achievement of voice. Om is the essence of all *Sāmanas* (Chh. Up. 1. 1. 2). This Om is the name and symbol of Brahman. "*Om iti Brahmi*" (Tai. Up. 1. 8; Ka. Up. 1. 2. 16). Again we have to deduce everything from that Om, everything is from Om and everything is penetrated through and through by Om; Om is everything (Chh. Up. 2. 23. 3; Mai. Up. 1).

In *visnupurāna* (II. 8) we read that Om is Visnu; Om is the substance of three vedas and the lord of speech.

The *bhakti* movements give an eightfold division of Om: A, U, M, *nāta*, *bind*, *kāla*, *kālātita* and *tatpara*. *Tatpara* is the highest state. From A came Brahmā, the *Jāmbavat*; U produced Upendra, the *Hiranyagarbha*; from M emerged Siva, the same as

35. Belvakar and Ranade, *Op. cit.* P. 218.

36. RV 1. 164. 39; AV 9. 10. 18; Tai. Brhī. 3. 10. 9; 3. 10. 18; Tai Ār. 2. 11. 1; Nir. 13. 10.

Hanumant; from *bindu*, *Satyakāma*; from *tatpara* came Rama. "Omkāropāsana" is considered identical with the *upāsana* of Devi in *Tripurātāpani* Up. In it *Bālagāyatri* is *A*, *Sāvitrī* is *U*, *Sarasvatī* is represented by *M*. *Pranava* is *Paramjyoti* (transcendent light) in the form of a Devi. *Gāyatri*, *Sāvitrī* and *Sarasvatī*-mantras are equivalent to the *upāsans* of *pranava* or OM.

The division of Om when applied to Kṛṣṇa works out as follows: *A* generated Rama; *U* generated Pratyumna; *M* Anirudha and the *Turiya* is Kṛṣṇa in whom rested the whole world. The *mulaprakṛti* is Rukmini from whom the whole world came into being. *Asvara* and *Aksara* are Gopals. His *svara* is the *plute*.³⁷ According to *Manusmṛti* (II, 74-76), the three letters-A, U, M,—constituting Om were milked out of the three Vedas by Prajapati and so they represent the quintessence of the *Trayi* (three original vedic canons). The *Man. Up.* (9.11) gives another meaning to A, U, M; *A* means *ādimitiva* or *āpti*-attainment. *U* stands for *utkarsa* or exaltation, for it means *ubhayatva* i.e. intermediateness. *M* means *miti* or *apiti*, because it signifies measurement or destruction. The fourth *amātra* has nothing corresponding to it. So it must stand for Brahmā who has no symbol.

The first evolution which Om undergoes is *śabda*—word. So Om begets *ākāśa* whose characteristic mark is *śabda*. From *ākāśa* is born wind, which is the carrier of the word. From wind is born Agni, which has the characteristic of form. That which expresses the word and gives it a definite shape is Agni. From Agni is born water; *rasa* or taste is its special characteristic. *Prāna* is of the nature of water and only when there is *prāna* (breath) can a word be uttered. Water gives rise to earth. Sound is produced by the intermediary of earthly elements.³⁸

37. B.S. Agnihotri, *Op. Cit.*, P. 72.

38. B.S. Agnihotri, *ibidem*.

The following table shows the evolution of everything from Om:

<i>Lokās</i>	<i>Tattvas</i>	<i>Avasthas</i>	<i>Purusas</i>	<i>Kosas</i>
<i>bhuh</i>	<i>prthvi</i>	<i>sthula</i>	waking	<i>annamaya</i>
<i>bhuvah</i>	<i>apa</i>	<i>sukṣma</i>	dreaming	<i>prānamaya</i>
<i>svah</i>	<i>agni</i>			<i>manomaya</i>
<i>maha</i>	<i>vāyu</i>			<i>vjnānamaya</i>
<i>janah</i>	<i>ākāsa</i>	<i>kāraṇa</i>	deep sleep	<i>ānandamaya</i>
<i>tapah</i>	<i>ahamkāra</i>	<i>jīva</i> or	<i>turiya</i>	
<i>satya</i>	<i>mahat</i> or	<i>purusa</i>	<i>turiyātīa</i>	
	<i>ādi</i>	Hiranya garbha or Brahma ³⁹		

According to Hindu scriptures, there exist six planes above the earth (*bhuh*). They are known as *bhuvah*, *svah*, *mahab*, *janah*, *tapah* and *satya*. *Bhuvah* (inter-space) is the intermediary world between the earth and *svah* or heaven. *Xanah*, *tapah* and *satya* from the *Brahmaloka*. *Mahab* is located between *Brahmaloka* and the plane of *svah*⁴⁰.

It is important to note that all these analyses of Om into its philological, psychological, cosmological and phonological components thus follows immediately are attempts to show that Om comprises everything: God, world and man i.e. every reality takes its origin from Om. The above chart clearly shows the all pervasiveness of Om as it is conceived by Hindu thinkers.

The Phonology of OM

The Philological break-up of the sound into A, U, M, as the first, middle and the last of the scheme of sounds, gave a new significance to *pranava*, standing in the language of philosophy for the ultimate *Brahmā* who embodies in himself all that exists in the universe⁴¹, "A" is a guttural sound produced by the root of the mouth. "U" is a vowel produced by keeping the mouth open and keeping the tongue straight. "M" is produced by bringing the lips together. Hence it is argued that Om represents all the sounds which can be produced by the human mouth. So Om is all

39. Sankara, *Pancikaranam* with Sureśvara's Comm. (Calcutta: 1977) Narayanaswami Ayer, K., *The Thirty-two Vidyas* (Adayar: 1975), P. 22.

40. Cfr. Swāmy Nikhilānda, *The Upanishads* (New York: 1949, Vol. 1), P. 274.

41. Venkatesam Panthulu, *Op. Cit.* note, P. 179.

the possible sounds. The Almighty in the beginning produced this first sound by which the universe of atoms started the vibration. This vibration is ever present and the yogis hear it⁴². To quote from Joseph Campbell:

“The A is announced 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 (as they say) all the vowels. Moreover, since consonants are regarded in this thinking as interruptions of vowel sounds, the seeds of all 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 Aum⁴³.

Om contains all the *nādās* (sounds) that can vibrate in all the worlds (Hamsa Up.). Swamy Abhishiktananda shares his meditation with us on this point:

Since Om contains all that man can say of God, it was right that all Vedic chants should end with Om, it was equally fitting that they should begin with Om, since Om is the first sound that comes to man's lips when he returns from the silence in which he has heard the mystery and tries to express it for the benefit of his brothers as he gives praise to the glory of the Lord⁴⁴.

After having discussed at length the analysis of Om we shall now turn our attention to the philosophical treatment of Om in relation to Brahman.

OM and Brahman:

Out of the ten principal Upanisads *Iśavasya* does not discuss the word *AUM*. *Kena* and *Aitareya* refuse to accept the identity of the word with Brahman. The remaining seven Upanisads state the identity and difference between “word” and Brahman. Here

42. Swamy Abhēdānanda, *Yoga, Theory and Practice* (Calcutta: 1967), Pp. 82-87.

43. Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (Princeton: Uni. Press, 1974), P. 361.

44. Swamy Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974), P. 182.

word means any phonetic form which can represent the state of Brahman. *Sabdabrahman* is mentioned in the minor Upanisads such as *Maitrayani* (7.22), *Tripurātapani* (5-17), *Brahmabindu* (4-16), *Yogāsikha* (3.2) etc. These Upanisads hold that in so far as all the other words fail to express Brahman Om succeeds.

Brahman has no image. He cannot be known from above or below or from any direction; He is described only by one word or symbol, Om. The *Chāndogya Upanishad* begins with the advice that one must do the *upāsana* of Om. Om is given a mystic meaning by which the vedic seers wanted to solve the riddle of the world. In *Katha Upanishad* Naciketa is told by Yama that this Om is the best and the highest of all the supports. By knowing this Om one attains glory in *Brahmaloka* (kingdom of God).

But Brahman has two forms: "Word-form" and "non-word-form". The non-word form is revealed only through word form. Om is the word. By meditating upon Om and by basing oneself upon Om one attains absorption in the non-word. This non-word is perfect bliss and immortality. This is the mystic sound which the spiritual aspirants hear. By transcending the word man becomes indistinguishable like flower-juice in the honey. At the end of the word Brahman is the supreme. Soundless-Brahman; and he who worships these two, "word-Brahman" and "non-word-Brahman" attains final liberation (Mai. Up. 2. 22-13). In chh. Up. Om is higher than the high and greater than the great. In Br. Up. Om is as pervasive in power as Brahman (3.3.8,9). Sankara holds that Om is the common subject of all the Vedas. According to Sureśvara 'AUM' is the essence of all the Vedas and it reveals the highest truth.⁴⁵

OM in prayer and Meditation:

We have already discussed the use of Om as benedictory and affirmative syllable, and also as *Udgita* and *Brahma-Atma-relation*. Now we shall examine Om as a *yantra* and *tantra* for meditation. Here the sonoric and hypnotic effect of Om also must have been made use of.

The spiritual master describes Om as the symbol for meditation. It is the supreme means as well as the goal of meditation. Om is the most prominent symbol under which the *upāsana* of

45. *Pancikaranam*

the supra sensible Brahman is to be carried out. The *sanyāsi* is expected to meditate on Om even by leaving out the whole of the Vedas. Om is more expressive of Brahman than the Vedas, which are limited. Om is, as we have already seen, the root of the tree of the Vedas.⁴⁶

Tagore writes thus of Om:

Om, that means completeness; it is really the symbolical word meaning the infinite, the Perfect, the Eternal. The very sound is complete, representing the wholeness of all things. All our meditations begin with Om, and end with Om. It is used so that the mind may be filled with the sense of the infinite completeness and emancipated from the world of narrow selfishness.⁴⁷

The first *prapātaka* of the Chh. Up. identifies Saman with Om. Om typifies the very essence of spiritual realization. It is the source of internal and external life and also of fearlessness and immortality. Meditating on Om one attains fearlessness and immortality. Even a dog that would sing Udgitha will attain all its desires! The sun goes round the earth singing Udgitha. Om which was used in the beginning of all the sacrificial endeavours should have also had some mystical connotations. Om ties together the pearls of existence. If Om were not immanent from the very beginning to the very end world would be just a chaos (Chh. Up. 1.1.1, 11).

In the ten principal Upanisads we see Om under three heads: 1) As prefix, ending, and assent—29 times. 2) As Udgitha, Sun, world, Brahman—28 times. 3) As the essence of the Vedas, Meditation, elements of Om, analogy, satrie—18 times. Altogether Om is used 75 times.⁴⁸ *Katha*, *Svetasvatara*, *Mundaka* and *Praśna Upanisads* deal with Om as an object of meditation. We shall first consider *Mundaka* II. 2-6. The Upanisad already dealt with the temporal happiness which people attain through Yogas and

46. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* (Poona: BORI) Vol. Pt. 2, P. 957.

47. Tagore, *Personality*, (London: MacMillan & Co. 1970), P. 152.

48. Gadbre Pramod B. "The Origin of Mystic Syllable Om", address delivered at the XXXIX Congress, International des Orientalistes, Sorbonne Uni. Paris; This excellent study I made use of more in the next section, not because I agree with his view but because it is worth our consideration.

other means, but now exhorts to know Brahman and be dissolved in him. This "being-one-with-Brahman" is the "Immortality" or "Eternal Liberation". In order to know Brahman one should meditate. How? The aspirant should concentrate his mind on the oneness of Brahman and the Self through the help of Om.

The *Katha Up.* praises and extols the great importance of the seer and the *guru*. What can a *guru* do so exceptionally? He teaches us to contemplate on the mystic syllable Om. For this Om is Brahman itself. Do not the Vedas throughout expatiate on the significance of this symbol? Are not all penances directed Om-Ward? Is it not on account of realising its full significance that people lead a mystic life and is it not the best support of spiritual thought? (I.ii.15-17). The *Mundaka* (II. 2-4) advocates the help of Om to reach Reality.

Verily is the Pranaya or the Om like the bow and the soul is like an arrow, which is discharged at the target of Brahman, by the undistracted efforts of the disciple, so that the arrow finally becomes one with the target.

According to the *Mait. Up.* the syllable is hidden in the secret place of the heart. It is the only enlightener of man. "Therefore" the text continues, "one should worship Brahman continuously with OM, just like the inspired sacred words of R̥gveda which are to praise and strengthen the divine powers."⁴⁹

The *Sve. Up.* I. 12-14 speaks of meditation on Om, using the simile of friction sticks. The above meditation used a bow and arrow as a simile. The following verse speaks of Om as the symbol of Atman. The yogi communes with Atman through Om. The method is the repetition of the word and the meditation on its meaning (vide Yoga sutra I.27,27). This form of meditation is explained by the friction of two pieces of wood. According to the interpretation of Nikhilananda Swamy,

The visible form of fire, while it lies latent in its source (the fire wood), is not perceived; yet there is no destruction of its subtle form. That very fire can be brought out again by means of (persistant) rubbing of the wood, its source. In like manner, Atman, which exists in two states, like fire, can be grasped in this very body by means of Om.⁵⁰

49. J. Gond, *The Visions of the Vedic Poets*, (The Hague: 1963), P. 283, 4.

50. Nikhilananda Swamy, *Op. Cit.* Vol. I, P. 84. His translation also is consulted here.

The Atman is present in the body; but due to ignorance we do not see it. Atman is revealed by rubbing away the ignorance by Om. The word friction is symbolic of meditation. By meditating on Om constantly, the Atman becomes manifest as by friction the fire becomes manifest. "By making the body the lower piece of wood and Om the upper piece, and through the practice of the friction of meditation, one perceives the luminous Self, hidden like the fire in the wood" (Yoga Sutra I.14).

In all the religious practices for realization, we see that the procedure is from the concrete to the spiritual, from gross to the subtle. Om has two forms as we have already seen: *Aksara* and *Asvara*—"sound-form" and "non-sound-form". The meditation must proceed from the sound to non-sound i.e., to the silence. One goes from the physicality of the sound to the spirituality of it. Brahman is hidden in Om. Through the sounding of Om one must reach the non-sound-Brahman hidden in it. Meditating on each constituent of Om and advancing one must reach the *turiya* and *turiyatita* state and find his dissolution in Brahman. As Om ends up in the serenity of silence, man by meditating on Om must end in the unconditional effulgence of pure transcendent Self. Om is the model of our cosmos and Self. Om represents the Impersonal Absolute as well as the personal aspect of God. Om is the undifferentiated word which has produced all the manifestations. Hence, from the manifested sound of Om or the personal aspect of Om one should reach the unmanifested or Impersonal God.⁵¹ In the words of Campbell,

The inconceivable sphere of undifferentiated consciousness, experienced not as extinction but as light unmitigated, is the reference of the fourth element of *Aum*: the silence that is before, after and within and around the sounding syllable. It is silent because words which do not reach it, refer only to the names, forms and relationships of objects either of day-light world or of dream.⁵²

Om is the *Sabdabrahman*. He who knows well *Sabdabrahman* reaches the *Parabrahman*.

51. Ruegg, D.S., *Contributions A L' Historie De La Philosophie Linguistique Indienne*, (Paris: 1959), Pp. 118-9.

52. Joseph, Campbell, *Op. Cit.* P. 362.

Om Meditation in Tantra:

Indian philosophy and religion generally give more importance to things like spiritual, subtle, and impersonal transcendent. The tantric school starts with the sense and proceeds to the soul. By proper handling of the senses the highest Atman or Brahman can be achieved. It gives more importance to the ritualization of our senses and the gratification of these for attaining the spiritual goal. The utterance of Om in meditation has a psychological and physical effect. One can achieve assimilation of Om and its connotations by reciting it and meditating on it.

The entire body may be spiritually activated through the articulate or inarticulate utterances of mantras (meaningful formulae in the form of syllables). The mystic resonance of the body is known as the *nāda* (mystic sound). This mystic sound is not produced by the friction of tangible substances. This sound is produced without friction (*anābata*). A *sādhaka* may hear this sound very clearly. *Nāda* is intermediate between consciousness and produced words. It is more subtle than spoken words, but more gross than consciousness. Once a *sādhaka* becomes aware of the meanings of the *mantras* he may produce the desired effect in the empirical reality at will. Finally, when he becomes aware of *Sabdabrahman* (reality as sound) as the supreme source of the universe he may hear the resonance of Om (the name of Isvara) within himself. During that state there is perfect concord between sound (*śakti*) and meaning (*Siva*).⁵³ The hearing of the *anābataśabda* is described in the following state of *tantrayoga*: "The sound AUM, then is not made by the things striking together, but floating, as it were, in a setting of silence, is the seed-sound of creation, heard, when the rising kundalini reaches the level of the heart⁵⁴.

In spiritual life, especially in meditation, Om is a *yantra*, a *tantra* and *mantra*. *Yantra* is that which represents something or symbolizes some reality in any shape to help concentration. The ideographic form of Om is used as a *yantra*. The section which follows is devoted to the consideration of Om in its present form as a *yantra*. *Tantra* is that which is performed during the meditation. Om is recited during the meditation time to bring about a

53. Cfr. Dr. A.K. Sinha, "Mysticism In Tantra", *Bharata Manisha*, (Vārāṇasī 1976, Vol. I, No. 3), P. 15ff.

54. Joseph, Campbell, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 362-3.

psychophysical unity and assimilation of the self to the Self. *Mantra*, as already stated above, is a meaningful formula in the form of a syllable.

The Ideographic and Phonographic form of Om:

Om is an ideograph, a symbol and a phonograph. When nobody is certain about something many opinions are likely to arise. Om also is not an exception to this rule. In the following passage Joseph Campbell gives a description of the present form of Om:

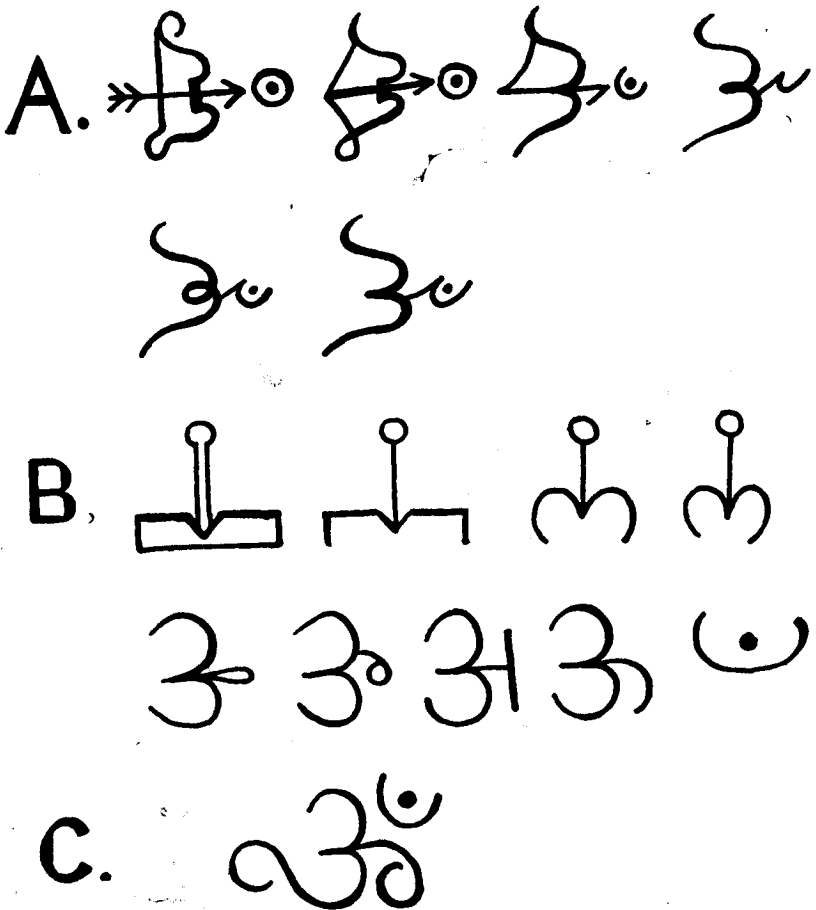
From the mouth of a double-headed mythological water-monster called a *makara* the flaming aureole issues by which the dancer is enclosed; and the posture of his head, arms and lifted leg within this frame suggests the sign of the symbol Om.⁵⁵

Dr. Pramod B. Gadre has made an attempt to account for the ideographic as well as phonetic form. His attempt is based on two hypotheses: 1) The Upanisadic simile of Atman-Brahman relationship. The abstract idea and the psychic experience is presented in graphic symbol when it cannot have a phonetic expression. 2) The syllabic and symbolic forms of Om, though designed to serve identical purposes, are two separate innovations. Dr. Gadre tries to argue that the development of Om has a pictorial thought background and the philosophic similes of Atman-Brahman relation would provide the clue to its understanding.⁵⁶ It is true that Om was used as an object of meditation in some of the principal Upanishads—*Katha*, *Svetasvatara* of black Yajurveda *Praśna* and *Mundaka* of Atharvaveda tradition. The *Svetasvatara* and *Mundaka* try to explain the meaning of Om through analogies whereas *Praśna* and *Mandukya* endeavour to explain the syllabic components of Om. These facts are more important, for the object of the similes is to explain the use of Om in the course of meditation. The Upanisadic references hint at its origin, according to Dr. Gadre. Hence, we have two possibilities: 1) Om was innovated during the formative period of these Upanishads. 2) During the Aranyaka phase Om evolved as an “aid” among certain esoteric groups when such contemplative practices and symbolizations were gradually substituted for elaborate rituals.

55. *Op. Cit.* P. 359.

56. *Op. Cit.* Pp. 1-20.

We have already shown above the use of pictographs of friction of sticks and bow and arrow in aiding meditation (Sve. I.14; Mun. II.3,4.). Dr. Gadre holds that the pictorial presentation of these must have given the ideographic form of Om. The following graphs show the various stages of development the bow and arrow and the friction stick underwent artistically.



“A” series depict Om through the symbol of bow and arrow as indicated in the *Mundaka Upanishad*. “B” series present the ideograph of Om by the symbol of the friction-stick as mentioned in *Svethasvetara Upanishad*. In the hands of the artists both have undergone many modifications according to the rule of progress “from complexity to simplicity”. “C” stage exhibits the most

common and perfect pattern of Om. The pictures show the gradual change in details and perfections. Bow and arrow was the most powerful weapon of the Aryans. The fire sticks were used to make fire. Hence, these two analogies are from the very culture of the people. *Dharani* was used for meditation to retain the image in the mind. Om was a *Dhārni*. So it is referred to as *tāraka tarakam, tāram dhṛuvam* etc. In the Aranyaka period, the analogies were replaced by ideographs. Ideograph and chant both serve as aids to meditation in producing a harmony between the physiological and psychological aspects. Atman-Brahman relationship was considered as the theme of both the chant and ideograph.

These arguments have their own weakness too. Om can be pictographed in a more simplified manner from the phonographic forms. In Devanagari script "o" is written with a crescent and a dot above long "A". It is the same as is found in the present form of Om. Even if we consider "A" and "U" in their present form the phonograph comes much closer to the pictograph. Therefore, the complicated "shape-change theory" of Dr. Gadbre can be questioned. Friction-sticks, if used, are used one over the other never one by the side of the other.

Has Om undergone Sound-change?

An attempt is made by Dr. Gadbre to derive the sound Om in its present form. It is thought of as part of the Upanisadic meditation, to show the Atman-Brahman unity "Sah aham". According to Panini's rule⁵⁷ it becomes "so aham". Again according to another rule of Panini⁵⁸ the form must be "soham". When this "Soham" is repeated many times in prayer it first becomes "som" and then Om.

This explanation is a highly imaginative attempt to explain the fact. First of all, as we have seen, "Om" as such was the original form in use; hence an advaitic concept expressed in a sentence need not be condensed as Om. This theory presupposes an already well-developed advaitic concept and form of meditation. But Om is much older than the present Advaita.

57. *Ato ro raplutādaplute* (6. 1. 133).

58. *Ena Padāntādāti* (6. 1. 109).

Concept of "Hamsa":

The later Upanisads exalt Siva using the attribute "hamsa", which used to signify persons who are highly placed in spiritual merit and achievements. The spiritual merit is connected with one's identity with Siva or Brahmā. One must be able to say that "I am the Hamsa". Hamsa means goose or gander or swan or flamingo—an aquatic bird. It is a poetical and mythical bird.⁵⁹ It is argued that when "sa aham" is repeatedly uttered it becomes "Hamsa". Also, it is suggested that the shape of the bow and arrow appears to be like that of a flying bird. So this shape also is suggestive of "Hamsa".⁶⁰

Hamsa is a bird which is highly extolled in Indian classical poetry because it is supposed that this bird has so many extraordinary qualities. It can fly very high and far. It lives in pure water and it can separate milk from the water and Soma from the the water if they are mixed. It is used to signify soul or spirit due to its immaculate white colour, and at times the Universal soul or the Supreme Spirit identified with Virāja, Nārāyana, Visnu, Siva, Kama and the Sun; the Universal and individual spirit. The spiritual preceptor is one who knows and has "nityānityaviveka", one who has the prudent, distinctive knowledge of the temporal and eternal. He is able to separate truth from falsehood just as the Hamsa is able to separate milk and Soma from the water. His thoughts are concerned with eternal and sublime truths like the Hamsa which always flies far and high. His life is chaste and pure like the pure white colour of the Hamsa. Therefore, a spiritual preceptor of high merit is called a Hamsa or Paramahamsa. It is not the shape of the flying bird and the similarity it has to the appearance of the bow and arrow which makes us identify the self with Hamsa; it is the qualities of the bird. So it does not seem reasonable that "sa-aham" must be repeated to get at the "hamsa" form.⁶¹ The Hamsa, Nāḍabindu and Pranava Upanisads describe the ideograph of Om in an advaitic sense.

59. Cfr. Ai. Ar. 2. 3. 8.

60. According to Sāyana "hamsa" is resolved into "Aham" "sa".

61. Cfr. Monier William, Sanskrit English Dictionary.

Conclusion:

Om was used as a word of assent and affirmation in Vedic times. In the Brāhmana, Aryanaka and the Upanisadic periods it became a mysterious subject and was studied by different groups and sects. It became an object of meditation: the ideograph became a yantra, the sound became a *mantra*, and both together became a tantra. It appears that there is no other word in the Hindu world which has given rise to such high philosophical, theological, ritualistic and sectarian interpretations.