

Sacred Sound in Textual Tradition

A Quest

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To know beyond what is known has remained a never-ending quest of man. Who created the cosmos? Who is the Creator? After much delving man discovered that the cosmic conundrum was also related to sound. In the Indian tradition the primal sound of creation was denoted with various names and many mantras or hymns like *Bhur* and *Aum*. They were coined to define the sacred sound. The Vedic *rishis* (sages), taking the dim sound created by the churning of these currents, remained in search of *That* whose sound this was. Therefore, in the *Rig Veda*, this very sound or *shabda* is utilized. This was the key to reveal the real thing. When they got the inkling of reality through *shabda*, the *rishis* resolved to dive deeper.

THE earliest reference to the value of *shabda* or *mantra* is found in the *Rig Veda*. "Veda is really that condition which was before the time of the creation of the universe and the *Vedas* came into existence at the time of creation of the universe in the form of books in the Sanskrit language." The language of Sanskrit is said to be the most natural. If you ponder over the alphabet of Sanskrit you will find the rise and fall in it in the form of natural vibration. And in that language the ancient *rishis* have written by feeling every vibration and they started to call it 'Sanskrit' (Divine).

In the *Brahmanas*: there is a reference to the value of *mantra*: *Nimnya Vacamsi* which means 'the word rising from the depths'. (*Rig Veda* IV 3.16). Analysing the essence of *mantra*, Srimat Nairvan wrote: "The conception of the Vedic *mantras* with rituals is very deep. The chief aim of the *Brahmanas* is to give a clear and connected account of the already perfectly familiar with the atmosphere in which these rituals arose..."

It must also be mentioned that sound vibrations accompanied by feeling and concentration have a virtue of their own. Without feeling it is a mere ritual.

According to the Hindu *dharma* there are three inaudible stages before sound is actually heard. In order to understand the

traverse of inaudible sound I quote the observations of Atal Behari Ghose who recorded in *The Cultural Heritage of India* that "Something ought to be said here about the four stages of speech, in three of which sound is inaudible; it is only at the fourth stage that men give utterance to it... The first is the vibrational stage, the next is when the sound is about to form and the third is when it is forming... The first of these stages is *para* located in the *muladhara*, the lowest of the six centers in the spinal column, commonly called *chakras*. This is but a mere stress towards articulation. As this stress takes definite shape, it becomes *pasyanti* which means 'seeing'. The next stage is reached when it arrives at the *anahata chakra* opposite the heart. It then becomes *madhyama* which means 'middling'. These are three names given in Tantra to the three silent stages of vocal sound. The last stage is *Vaikhari*..." Thus we see that the creation of sound within the micro cosmos i.e. the human body is analogous to the macro cosmic creation which also starts with initial vibration at the *sunya* or zero level.

Again in modern times the scientific theory called 'Big Bang' and creation of the universe thereafter is perhaps a philosophic extension of the same theory proclaimed by ancient Hindu sages several millennia ago. It is quite clear that ancient

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philosophers and protagonists of modern science delved deep into the acoustic theory of creation alike. However, let us come back to the concept of sound and name and view it from the universal perspective of understanding the 'naming the named' and view it from a holistic perspective.

The earliest reference to name was discussed by H. Wagenvoort in his book, '*Roman Dynamism*' where he wrote "*Nomen* (name) and *Numen* (holy) and *nomen et numen* stood for Godhood." Thus the root of modern name had a sacred context when *nomen* was mentioned in ancient Rome.

Similarly, the power of holy name is referred to in the *Old Testament* as having revealing and curing effect. William J. Jackson recorded that "Baal Shem Tor effected cures with the sacred name of God." In Christianity the concept of name especially of Jesus Christ looms large as "Hallowed be thy name." Moreover, in Christianity, there are references of the tradition of chanting the name of Jesus a thousand times a day as observed by R.M. French in his book, '*The Way of a Pilgrimage*'.

Another well known scholar, William Jackson, in his book, '*The Power of Sacred Name*', cited the Islamic tradition of *Zhekar* (recitation) of Allah as followed in Sufism. The author quoted from the Quran, "...in God's name be its course and mooring. My Lord is forgiving merciful."

Similarly, in the Indian tradition, the majesty of *mantra* and the significance of name are found in the *Rig Veda*. Thus we should first delve into the textual tradition of the *Rig Veda* which, through its subtle symbolism and metaphor, provides a pointer towards greater understanding of the sacred sound elaborated in the context of name.

'*Brahaspati*!' This word, as scholar Wendy Doniger states, "literally means 'Lord or sacred speech' and is particularly appropriate as *Brahaspati* is the patron of and inspired poets."

Thus we understand that the sacred utterance and the concept of naming had a pure beginning set in motion by the seven celestial seers who initiated the process of revealing the sacred. But the question comes up, "Who is *Brahaspati*?" Again, in another hymn we find the answer, 'Our father, who created all forms, all worlds, he is the one whom all other creatures come to ask questions.' The context of father, creator is

none else than the personality who created the sun and it is he who names all.

Furthermore, in the *Rig Veda*, sound at the metaphoric level remains 'cow' which stands for Dawn and also means Goddess of Speech—*Vac*. In some verses Dawn is referred to as the personification of woman. Likewise, in the *Rig Veda*, the creative principle is designated as woman at various levels of creation be it ushering in of Dawn or the Goddess of Speech. However, it may be kept in mind that 'cow', without a specific name should generally be referred to as Sound or the Dawn or the utterance of God.

Vac Devi or the Goddess of Sacred Speech, found a prominent place at many levels of expression—hymns, syllables, ritual laws and sacrifice. In ritual speech we find ample elaboration in the writings of David Kinsley who observed "...in the *Rig Veda*, sound, especially ritual speech, is the powerful creative mainstay of cosmic ritual order."

In the Vedic and post-Vedic literature, we find manifestation of the concept of speech highlighting the context. The Goddess of Sound or *Vac* reveals herself through the utterance of various attributes and yet she remains mystic in her exponents while retaining personification of truthfulness.

The Goddess of Sound makes her presence felt while enabling one to observe, hear and utter the noblest experience of the world. Author Kinsley disciplined the perception of this utterance when he wrote about the role of the Goddess of Sound: 'She is the prompter and the vehicle of expression for visionary perception and as such she is intimately associated with *rishis* who express or capture the truth of their vision. In an important scene she is an essential part of the religion-poetic visionary experience of the *rishis* and of the sacrificial rituals that appropriates those visions.'

It is interesting to note that the *Rig Veda* symbolizes speech as the Goddess who is the personification of sweetness and embodiment of articulate expression bestowing vital power (*Rig Veda* 3.55.15). She is also symbolically referred to as 'Cow' who is the mother-sustainer and remains the cosmic principle of utterance. These are the broad outlines of sacred sound and utterance. In the next issue we will discuss the power of Name and *jap mantra*. ■

The author has two decades of experience in the print and electronic media. He has authored eleven books