

# “OM” : THE ETERNAL CREATIVE FORCE

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## Abstract

'Om', having with its three constituent sounds a, u and m, is a mystic monosyllable in the Vedic panorama. It is treated as the eternal creative force bringing forth the universe. So, it is called 'Aksaram Brahma. It is the most sacred syllable to be uttered at the beginning of each Vedic mantra. it is usually called Pranava that which is uttered with a droning sound.

If Om is with a preceding a. or a, the o of Om absorbs in it itself e.g. Sivaya + Om = Sivayom. If it precedes a consonant its m' becomes nasal (anusvara). e.g. Om + namah = Om namah. If it precedes a vowel, it is not changed in any form, e.g. Om + iti = Omiti. Thus, it indicates that the OØ, while being interacted with other letters, remains always intact. Moreover, the Om, beginning with a and ending with m, is understood as the base of all the letters.

While we go through the extraordinary nature of the 'Om' we do come across with the following problems.

- (a) How 'Om', having three constituents, is a monosyllable ?
- (b) How it is eternal and what enables it to be a creator and how?

This paper is an attempt to solve these problems rationally.

'Om' has a special and authentic place in the Vedic hymns. We can not even imagine the Vedic Mantras without this syllable. It precedes each Mantra during utterance. Not only its placing is important but also a meaningful and mystic philosophy prevails with it. It has been told Akṣara or eternal, irrespective of any branch of the Vedas. This eternity has a unique force to create, guide and supervise the whole creation. Thus, the Om has both sides of importance: (1) external (2) internal. Its external utterance creates an atmosphere of sanctity and dignity and its internal vibration during utterance has an ability to create a mental strength, to protect the body from disease and to collect the egoistic pursuit. These actions are conventionally told sṛṣṭi, sthiti and saṁhāra.

Om is derived from the root 'Av' meaning to protect (अवति = रक्षति इति अव् + मन्, अवतेष्टिलोपश्च उणादि. १/१४७, अन् of मन् is elided (अव् + म्), expansion ऊद् replaces व् (vide ज्वरत्व० p. 6.4.20) (अ, ऊ, म्), guṇa

= ओम्). Thus etymologically the word means that which protects. It has another meaning, 'the acceptance.'<sup>1</sup> This Om is not in use in the Vedic Samhitas. It is seen in the Brahmanic age. In Aitareya Brahmana it has been shown with its constituent syllables a, u and m:

तानि ... त्रयो वर्णा अजायन्ताकार उकारो मकार इति तानेकधा समभरत्तदेतदोमिति...<sup>2</sup>

Fifteen (15-30) kaṇḍikās of the 1<sup>st</sup> Prapāthaka of the first part of Gopatha Brahmana are called *Pranava Upanishad*. Here Indra is asking Prajapati

भगवन्, ओङ्कारः किमिति?

Prajapati answers -

ओङ्कारः ... या सा प्रथमा मात्रा ब्रह्मदेवत्या ... द्वितीया मात्रा विष्णुदेवत्या ... तृतीया मात्रा शानदेवत्या ....<sup>3</sup>

Mysticism behind the monosyllable Om appeared first in the Upanisads. Explaining the 17<sup>th</sup> hymn of Isopanishad Ādi Śaṅkara says that the Om is symbolic and, therefore, truth and Brahma.<sup>4</sup>



Kāthopaniṣad says that Om is the abridged form of the eternal reality.<sup>5</sup> In Praśnopaniṣad the utterance of Om and its special effects have been elaborately delivered by the sage Pippalāda to his disciple Satyakāma. Here he says that whoever meditates the God with the prolated (pluta) syllable 'Om' he obtains the very delighted abode of the Sun.<sup>6</sup> With the meditation of the Omkara an intellect is able to be associated with the peaceful, eternal, fearless and immortal entity.<sup>7</sup> Adi Sankara elucidated here that the eternal entity exists in each particle of our body and his very existence may be clearly and keenly felt by the observation-cum-meditation of Om.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, these Upanishadic elucidations clarify the nature of the Om in this manner: (1) Om is symbolic, (2) it is one and unfragmented, (3) it is an instrument of meditation and (4) its meditation leads to unite with the Para Brahma.

Om is widely known as Pranava (प्रणूरये स्तूयते इति प्र-णु 'स्तुतौ' + अप् (ऋदोरप् P. ३.३.५७). It means that which is invoked. Here it is not merely a means of attainment, but it is itself attainable. It shows that the Om has two aspects-(1) it is an instrument to attain the ultimate reality and (2) it is itself the reality. Both may be called Sādhana and Sādhya, respectively. In the Bhagavadgītā both of the aspects have been narrated. There it is the goal or sādhyā where it is told that the monosyllable Om is named after Brahma<sup>9</sup> and Brahma is manifested in these three-Om, Tat and Sat.<sup>10</sup> And there it is the instrument or sādhanā where Bhagavan says that all these actions say sacrifice, donation and meditation begin with the utterance of the Om.<sup>11</sup> Ādi Śaṅkara on Kāthopaniṣad also admits that the syllable Om means Brahma, i.e. the supreme reality and on the other hand it becomes the symbol of Brahma. While uttered it becomes the symbol of Brahma and otherwise, it is the way, i.e. sādhanā.<sup>12</sup>

Śivapurāṇa emphasizes on Japa, i.e. the silent repetition of Om in a droning sound.<sup>13</sup> It was that a

person awakened by this Praṇava ought to achieve full attainment.<sup>14</sup> Here Praṇava is treated as a way of the greatest achievement.

Bhartrhari in his Vakyapadīya says that the Pranava is the instrument for knowing the paramount knowledge.<sup>15</sup> It is, according to Puṇyarāja, to signify the essence of the Vedas. Moreover, its eternity is established due to its unchangeability in respect of earthly possession or negation.<sup>16</sup> It indicates that in comparison with the other syllables this Om is exclusively ceaseless. We can very well observe the unfragmentable nature of the Om while it is in connection with other syllable in a sentence. If 'Om' is with a preceding a or ā, the usual single substitute of the both, i.e. अ or आ + ओ of ओम् e.g. शिवाय + ओम् = शिवायोम् (in stead of normal शिवायौम् by वृद्धिरेचि P. 6.1.88). It means that the O of Om absorbs that अ or आ in itself. If it precedes a consonant its 'm' becomes nasal (अनुस्वार), e.g. ओम् + नमः = ओं नमः if it precedes a vowel, it is not changed in any form, e.g. Om + iti = Omiti. If it is with a vowel other than अ or आ, then that vowel is substituted by some other syllable and, thus, the Om remains unabated, e.g. इति + ओम् = इत्योम् जातु + ओम् = जात्वोम् ते + ओम् = त ओम्/तयोम् and so on. Thus indicates that the Om, while during interacted with other letters, remains always intact and unchanged.

According to Panini the vowel in Om is pluta in the beginning of a sacred mantra or a Vedic text<sup>17</sup>, e.g. ओ३म् अग्निमीले पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमृत्विजम् (Rg 1.1.1). In a sacrificial work, ओ३म् is substituted for the final vowel, with the consonant, if any, that may follow it, of sentence, i.e. टि.<sup>18</sup> Thus for अपां रेतांसि जिन्वति (Rg 8.44.16), we may have अपां रेतांसि जिन्वतो३म्; so also for देवाञ् जिगाति सुमन्युः (Rg 3.27.1), we may have देवाञ् जिगाति सुमन्यो३म्. If it is not the indication of the commencement of a Text or Mantra, i.e. अभ्यादान then the vowel of ओम् is not pluta, i.e. ओमित्येदक्षरमुद्रीथमुपासीत.<sup>19</sup> Here it is only the subject of a comment.



From the religious point of view the highest spiritual efficacy is attributed not only to the whole word but also to its constituent three sounds, a, u and m.<sup>20</sup> The Om is also taken as the mystic name for the Hindu triad and it represents the union of those three gods, viz. a (Visnu), u (Siva) and m (Brahma). It may be also typical to the Trayi, i.e. three Vedas.

Buddhists place Om at the beginning of their विद्याषडक्षरी 'ओम् मणिपद्मे हुम्'. In Jainism the Om in नमोकार मन्त्र is very important. Here there are five sentences of oblation: (१) नमो अरिहंताणं, (२) नमो सिद्धाणं, (३) नमो आइरियाणं, (४) नमो उवज्झायाणं and (५) नमो लोए सव्वसाहूणं, अ (अर्हन्त), आ (अशरीरी), आ (आचार्य), उ (उपाध्याय) and म् (मुनि) are treated here as abridged syllables. The combination of these five अ + अ + आ + उ + म् makes the Om meaning the whole नमोकार मन्त्र. In their religious meditation the utterance of ओम् अ सि आ उ सा नमः or only ओम् is equally fruitful.

It shows that in the changing phenomenon of religions the meditative value of the Om remained unperturbed. It became nourished in different ways in those streams of religions which were the outcome of the protest of Hinduism. It means that the force behind the utterance of Om was very much understood by all the sages of all sects of religion and meditation.

Yogic performances in individual life have got a noteworthy importance in the current time. Each yogic performance including Sūryanamaskāra, Prāṇāyāma, etc. starts with the Om. The internal vibration caused by the utterance of Om with a droning sound has a deep-rooted impact on the body and mind. This impact causes the creation of foresightedness and the ability to negate the egoistic consciousness. This sort of creation makes an individual perfect and praiseworthy. Therefore, we may draw here a conclusion that the importance of

the utterance of Om was very much felt, observed and studied by the seers of Vedic Mantras and they with their farsighted vision placed it in the beginning of each and every Mantra and Yogic performance. And this placement remained unabated in every stream of Vedic knowledge and in Buddhism and Jainism too. So, this very thought of performing Om, that has come to us through the ages and through different streams of intellectual pursuit, must be kept intact and be made widely publicised for the welfare of each and every individual in particular and for the peace and harmony in this Universe as a whole.

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