

Shabda: Acoustical and Spiritual Aspects in Hinduism

M.G. Prasad

Department of Mechanical Engineering
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, New Jersey

Introduction:

Shabda occupies a very important place in Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism). Understanding and realization of Sabda is said to be the goal of life itself. The Amrta Bindu Upanisad proclaims that

Dve brahmani veditavye sabda bramha param ca yat
Sabda bramhani nisnatah param bramhadhi gacchati

Which means, "There are two Bramhans to be realized, Shabda and Param Bramhan: one who has realized and well versed in Shabda Bramhan will realize Param Bramhan." Also it is noted by Laksmana Desikendra in Sharada Tilaka Tantra, that the essence of all beings is itself the shabda bramhan.

Caitanyam sarva bhutanam shabda bramheti me matihi

Thus, the above statements from Hindu scriptures indicate that shabda is an integral part of our life. In Vedic literature, it is given that the Shabda Bramhan is omni present through the sound of 'Om'. The philosophical analysis of this Om (A+U+M) is dealt in several Upanishads.

The modern scientific inquiry of sound, which is also termed as acoustics has shown that sound plays an essential role virtually in all aspects such as earth sciences, engineering, life sciences and arts. Sound in modern scientific view refers to the audible range, with infra and ultra sound covering the inaudible molecular vibration of the medium. Similarly, in Hindu scriptures, shabda originating from the vibratory cause is termed as ahata shabda. This article will only deal with this type of shabda (sound). In addition Hindu scriptures also refer to self-sustaining sound, without vibratory cause, termed as anahata sabda which is experienced only in higher states of yoga.

Thus it is seen that shabda (sound) encompasses the life itself. Broadly we can categorize the role of shabda in spirituality, speech, music, and literature.

Shabda and Spirituality

In Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma, spirituality includes philosophy, yoga, tantra and agama. The source of all these branches of knowledge is the Vedas. Veda is also

described as shabda. The orthodox systems of Hindu thoughts are based on the Vedas as authority or shabda pramana. Here shabda refers to the spoken words as mantras. In the process of creation, the first element is space and this all-surrounding space can only be described by shabda. The scriptures say, 'Shabdaikagunamakasa' which means 'only sound qualifies space'. However, sound propagates through other elements, namely air, fire, water, and earth. The sound as only property of space can also be observed in terms of acoustical quality of space in rooms. It is known that the sound quality of a room space is described by the reverberation characteristics. Thus it is seen that the sound plays a major role in the universe composed of five elements.

Sabda and Speech

Shabda as speech is extremely important for human speech is regarded as a gift to human beings. The goddess Saraswati is the deity of speech. The infinitely large Vedic literature in the form of mantras depicts the spiritual effect of sound or sabda. The intonations termed as swaras bring out the sounding effect. The speech seed sounds are generated at various chakras located in the human spinal cord, namely Muladhara, Swadhishtana, Manipura, Anahata and Vishuddhi. The seed sounds generated at the chakras take the form of vowels and consonants in the mouth with the help of the throat, tongue, jaws, teeth, and lips. The space variation in the mouth cavity with exhaling air will enable the production of words. Hence, word is also known as shabda. Shabda as the underlying energy in speech production plays an important role in human life.

The complete process of production of speech is mysterious. It is said in Rgveda that the process has four stages. These four stages are Para, Pasyanti, Madhyama and Vaikhari. The first three are internal and yogic and can be experienced by yogis. The fourth stage is Vaikhari is the audible speech, which is used by all human beings.

Catvari vakparimita padani tani vidurbramhana ye manishinaha
Guha trini nihita nengayanti turiyam vaco manushya vadanti

Shabda and music

Music can be described as a universal language of emotions shabda in addition to the well-known form of seed sound and words takes another important form called nada. The nada refers to the flowing energy of sound, which also refers to the expressions of caitanya or consciousness. Saranga deva in sangita ratnakara says

Caitanyam sarvabhutanam vivrutam jagadatmana
Nada bramha tadanandam advitiyam Upasmahe

Which means that 'we worship nada-brahman, that incomparable bliss, which is intrinsic in all the creatures as consciousness and is manifest in the phenomenon of this universe'. Thus, the nada and sabda direct to the same entity, which is consciousness.

However, nada relates the emotional expressions through music, whereas shabda as sound and word emphasized the philosophical inquiry. In the process of describing the origination of nada, Sangita Ratnakara gives :

Nakaram pranamanam dakaramanalam viduh
Jatah pranagnisamyogattena nadah abhidhiyate

Which means' it is understood that the syllable 'na' represents the vital force and 'da' represents the fire. Thus, being produced by the interaction of vital force and fire it is called nada'.

This nada which manifests as seven notes becomes the vehicle of emotional expressions through the nine rasas in the form of music and dance. The nine rasas(sentiments) are love(erotic), heroic, pathetic, marvelous, comic, odious, terrible, furious and peaceful. The words of a song denote the sabda(pada) while the singing tune (raga) denotes the expressing of nada. Thus it is seen that sabda and nada are connected by music. It is true that music and dance are integrally related.

Shabda and Literature

A literary work is essentially a composition of words to express the inner feelings of the writer. In the Hindu view, this writer or Kavi, after experiencing the theme, expresses it through the proper assembly of words. This choice of words indicate the role of shabda. For example: the premier poet Valmiki has demonstrated the effect of poetry and Sabda in Ramayana. It is well known that the Sanskrit language has several unique effects of sound or shabda. The poems in Sanskrit are easy to memorize due to the explicit sandhi (union of alphabets) effect. The large number of vowels and consonants as basic sounds enable the language to deal with many expressions; the metrical details in Sanskrit also bring the sound effect. The infinitely large literature in Sanskrit has been carried through generations by oral traditions not only because of its intrinsic values for life but also for the joy of sound that it provides the reader and listener with.

Concluding Remarks

Thus, shabda undoubtedly plays a key role in all aspects of life including both scientific and spiritual. Shabda or sound encompasses life itself. As Saranga Deva in Sangita Ratnakara puts it,

Nadena vyajyate varnah padam varnat padat vacah
Vacaso vyavaharoyam nadadhinamato jagat

Which means nada manifests the letters, letters constitute the word, and words make a sentence; so the entire business of life is carried on through language, and therefore, the whole phenomenon (the world) is based on nada.

In the words of Sriranga Sadguru (a seer-yogi, the founder of Astanga Yoga Vijnana Mandiram, Mysore, India, "the two essential aspects of spiritual development are in realization of the identity between 'Spoken Word-Object' (Pada-Padartha) and the integral cause – effect relationship of 'Seed Sound-Word' (Bija-Vriksha)'.

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