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Vāc – Its Ontological Status and Importance in Prayers and Rituals of Śakti Oriented Tantric Tradition

Aryya BHATTACHARYA

Vāg eva viśva-bhuvānāni jajne
Vācayet sarvam amṛtam yacca martyam iti (Ṛgvarṇa)¹

Yasyām antarviśvām etad vibhāti
Bāhyābhāsam bhāsamānam viśṛṣṭau
Kṣobhe kṣīṇe' nuttarāyām sthitau tām
Vande devīm svātmasaṁvittim ekām²

¹This universe has been manifested from *Vāc*. Whether mortal or immortal, all are caused by *Vāc* or *Śabda*.

²*Parātrīśikā-Vivarāṇa* (1–2): “I bow to that one Goddess in the form of Self-consciousness in whom this universe which appears as an external objective existence in the state of manifestation, shines, at the extinction of that delusive understanding which makes one identify oneself with one’s vehicles, inwardly in the state of Supreme Reality”. Abhinavagupta, *Parātrīśikā-Vivarāṇa*, tr. J. Singh, Delhi 2007.

1 INTRODUCTION

Tantric³ theories, whether Śakti oriented or Śiva oriented⁴, are seldom expressed through clear language. They are, more often than not, garbed in cryptic metaphors and symbolism and are subject to myriad interpretations⁵. Moreover, many of the original scriptures of Śākta Tantra have been lost over time for various reasons⁶. The surviving Śaiva and Śākta Tantras do not clearly mention Śakti to be *Praṇava* or the Primal Sound energy ॐ (Om, AUM). However, the identity of Śakti and ॐ is a necessary postulate for proving the fruitfulness of rituals and prayers of Tantric traditions. This article attempts to prove that the Absolute, whom Śākta Tantra proclaims as *Parā-Śakti*, is identical to *Parā-Vāc*, designated by the Primal Sound energy ॐ. In doing so, I have based this article on the Trika school of Śaiva Philosophy and Śākta school of thought, and compared the same with the Vedic traditions.

³Grammatically, the word *Tantra* is derived from the root *Tan*, which means ‘to spread’. Therefore, etymologically speaking, *Tantra* is that scripture by which the knowledge spreads. If so, then broadly speaking, the doctrines of Śaivism, Śaktivāda and Vaiṣṇavism – all come under the broad heading of *Tantra*. To elucidate further, *Āgama* and *Nigama* are two very important parts of the Tantric tradition – *Āgama* being the part where Lord Śiva is the speaker and *Devī* is the listener and *Nigama* being the part where *Devī* is the speaker and Lord Śiva is the listener. *Āgamas* are further classified into three sections, viz., *Śākta-āgama*, *Śaiva-āgama* and *Vaiṣṇava-āgama* or *Pañcarātra*. It is worth mentioning that Śākta Tantra is not the only tradition that holds the existence and essence of Śakti as ‘The Supreme Power’, but Vedas, along with other Tantras, i.e. Śiva oriented and Viṣṇu oriented Tantras, as well as different *Saṁhitās* also consider Goddess or *Devī* as the Supreme Divine Power. But what is so typical about Śākta Tantra is that it not only advocates the worship of Śakti but also considers Her to be the efficient as well as material cause of the Universe.

⁴Although there are several points of differences between the Śiva oriented *Krama* system and the Śakti oriented *Kula* system, the two are not fundamentally opposed to each other. The word *Kula* refers to the family of or grouping of the *Yoginīs* or of the ‘Mothers’. It is also taken to mean the corporeal body, the body of power, the cosmic body, the totality of things etc. Therefore, by entering into a family, a *Kula*, the worshipper enters into the totality of cosmic powers.

⁵For instance, in the first verse of the *Śāradā Tilaka Tantra* the Supreme Being is addressed as *Mahā* which can be interpreted as ‘Supreme’ in either its Female or Male aspect.

⁶The books on Śākta Tantra that are available are *Kulārṇava Tantra*, *Śāradā Tilaka*, *Tripurā Rahasya*, *Śrī Cakra Saṁbhava Tantra*, *Śakti Saṅgama Tantra*, *Yoginī Hṛdaya Dīpikā* etc.



2 ŚAKTI AS BRAHMAN

The Vedas announce the importance of ‘Word’, not only at an empirical level but also at a transcendental level. *R̥gveda Saṁhitā* declares:

Gaurīr mimāya salilāni takṣaty ekapadī dvipadī sā catuṣpadī |
Aṣṭāpadī navapadī babhūvuṣī sahasrākṣarā parame vyoman ||
(RV 1.164.41)⁷

The Vedas proclaim that in the beginning was *Brahman* and *Brahman* is *Vāc*⁸. The word *Vāc* comes from the verbal root *Vac*⁹ and in Sanskrit can mean both the voice and the word it utters. This ‘Word’¹⁰ is created by alphabets (*akṣara*) and alphabets are the products of sounds. Sound or *Nāda* can be of two types – one that is produced by the contact of two objects and another (called *Anāhata-Nāda*) that is uncreated and self-produced. The supersonic primordial sound AUM – ॐ – is described as *Anāhata-Nāda* i.e. this sound is primordial and not created by the friction of objects created, and is identical to *Brahman*¹¹. So, Vedic words along with the alphabets and the primordial sound AUM are never created by any mind but revealed to it¹². The ‘Word’ is

⁷During creation the fair goddess *Vāc*, like waves of water created words through alphabets, terms etc. At first she appeared as single syllabled in the heart of the void, and then as two syllabled, four syllabled, six syllabled, eight syllabled, twenty-four syllabled and thousand syllabled in the Supreme Sonic Space.

⁸*Brahman* is *Or̥nkāra* or *Nāda*, also referred to as *Śabdabrahman*: “Akṣaram paramo nādah śabda-brahmeti kathyate”, *Yogaśikha-Upaniṣad* (3.2–5). It has the same sense of the Sanskrit word *Śabda*. In *Mahābhārata* *Vāc* is called ‘The Mother of Vedas’ and the same is said of *Vāc* in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* declares that *Vāc* is the Supreme *Brahman* or the unqualified Absolute. So, the concept of *Vāc* is not exactly the same as that of speech in its ordinary implication. *Vāc* is more sacred than speech and also carries a deeper significance.

⁹The verbal root *Vac* means ‘to speak’, *Vac* + suffix *kvip* = *Vāc* (the feminine noun).

¹⁰Words can be of two types – *Vaidika* (relating to the Veda) or *Laukika* (ordinary).

¹¹“Om̐ iti brahma, om̐ itīdam sarvam”, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (1.8).

¹²Indian philosophical systems are not unanimous in opinion where ‘word-object’ relation is concerned. In *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* the relation between a word and its meaning depends on convention. Most of the *Naiyāyikas* also hold the same view. *Mīmāṃsakas* hold the opposite view. Patañjali in his *Yogasūtra* considers the relation between word and meaning to be eternal. It is not created by any human convention but is given to us. Jaimini in his *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* (1.1.5) says that the relation between a word and its meaning is *autpattika* i.e. ‘non-derivative’ or ‘uncreated’, which signifies that it is not created by any human convention. Many grammarians also hold that the linguistic units are non-products, therefore eternal. Their relationships with meanings are also eternally given.



eternal in nature, and even after *Mahāpralaya* or the complete annihilation of the universe, Vedic words are not destroyed but remain in a seminal form (*bījarūpa*), to be evoked again till the next creation¹³. Tantra worships *Śakti* as *Parā Vāc* who creates, sustains and dissolves the universe. She is the *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti* – the serpent power residing in the human body in the subtle form coiling around the *Mūladhāra Cakra*. This *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti* when awakened through *Sādhana*, goes up through the *Cakras* to the *Sahasrāra*¹⁴. This *Śabdabrahman*, which assumes the form of all breathing creatures (*Prāṇin*) also appears in the form of letters in prose and verse. Brahman in its Mother aspect is *Parā Śakti* or *Devī*¹⁵. Therefore, *Śakti* is no other than nor different from *Brahman*¹⁶. This hypothesis is supported by the *Devīsūkta* of *Ṛgveda*, which proclaims that *Hiraṇyagarbha Brahmā* (not to be confused with *Brahman*) is the creator of this world and *Śakti* is the One who even created the *Hiraṇyagarbha* and thus becomes the First Creator of this Universe¹⁷. The goddess *Vāc*, whom *Brahmasūtra* has termed as the birthplace of this universe, is no other than *Śakti* Herself.

3 ŚAKTI AS VIMARŚA

But who is *Śakti*? According to Kashmir Śaivism which is also known as Trika philosophy *Śakti*, who is not non-identical with *Śiva*, The Ultimate Principle, is not only the creator of this universe but is also *Svatantra* (freedom), Pure consciousness and *Vimarśa* or the awareness of consciousness. *Śakti* is also the vibration or the throb of the 'I', holding within itself or visioning

¹³J. Woodroffe, *The Garland of Letters (Varṇamālā)*. *Studies in the Mantra-śāstra*, Madras 2010, pp. 51–58.

¹⁴The human body has three states – *Sthūla* (gross), *Sukṣma* (subtle) and *Karāṇa* (causal).

¹⁵J. Woodroffe, *Hymns To The Goddess And Hymns To Kali*, Madras 2014, pp. 3–4.

¹⁶Ibidem.

¹⁷*Vāc*, the daughter of a sage, announces that: “I have given birth even to my father”. Cf. the following: “Aham suve pitaram asya mūrdhan mama yonir apsv antaḥ samudre || tato hi tiṣṭhe bhuvanā anu viśvā uta amūm dyām varṣmaṇopa sprṣāmi”. That is: “I generate the Father on the summit of this world, my origin is in the waters, in the ocean. Thence I extend through all beings and I touch the yonder heaven with my body”. *Devīsūkta*, ed. S. Bandhyopadhyaya, *Vaidic Patha Samkalan*, p. 245. The famous scholar Panchanan Tarkaratna in his *Śaktibhāṣya* has explained the famous sutra of *Brahmasūtra*: “Janmādyasya yataḥ” as “Janma adyasya yataḥ” i.e. one who is even the cause of the first creator, and not as “Janmādi asya yataḥ” i.e. as traditionally explained. Thus explained *Śakti* becomes the creator of even the first creator.



within itself the world of objects¹⁸. It is mentioned in the texts of this school that when Śakti opens herself out (*unmiṣati*), the universe comes into existence and when She closes herself up (*nimiṣati*), the universe disappears as a manifestation. Reality, according to Trika school of Philosophy, is *Cit* or *Parāsamvid*, which is *Śakti* or *Parā Vāc*. *Cit* or *samvid* is generally translated as Consciousness. But *Parāsamvid* or *Parā Vāc* is not mere consciousness. It is that changeless principle, that immediacy of feelings where neither the 'I' nor the 'This' is distinguished.

The famous tantric scripture *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* declares – “Yat kiñcin nādarūpena śrūyate śaktir eva sā”, i.e. whichever is heard as sound is *Śakti* herself. Where there is sound there must be movement however subtle that might be. Prior to manifestation, *Prakṛti* – the Absolute One – exists in a state of equilibrated energy. Then at the dawn of creation, like the flash of a gemstone, the will to become many occurs in that Absolute Divine consciousness. The will to become many – “Bahu syām prajāyeya” (“I shall be born/manifested as many”) – is the first creative impulse of *Śakti*. This creative impulse brings about the first pulsation (*Spanda*) in the so far silent waveless ocean-like void of equilibrium of Śiva-Śakti, *Idam-Aham* or Ying-Yang, as some might say. This is the first pulsation of creation.

Although *Spandana* or pulsation may denote any sort of movement, the word *Spanda* is used as a technical term. Movement or motion occurs only in a spatio-temporal framework. But the 'Supreme' transcends all notions of space and time. *Spanda* therefore, in the case of the Supreme, is neither physical nor any kind of psychological motion (like pleasure, pain etc). Here *Spanda* is identical with *Vimarśa* – the throb of ecstasy of the Divine I-Consciousness¹⁹. In other words, *Spanda* is only a throb, a heaving of spiritual rapture in the essential nature of the Divine *Śakti*. *Spanda* is therefore spiritual dynamism without any movement per se yet serving as the *causa sine qua non* of all movements²⁰. This first creative pulsation, the first vibra-

¹⁸Kṣemaraja and Rajanaka Rāma proclaim *Spanda Śakti* as the *Krama* Goddess of Consciousness, *Samvid-devī*, and she is none other than *Parameśvarī* or Supreme Goddess who manifests Herself as all the principles.

¹⁹In Śaivāgama, the divine is termed as *Maheśvara* – the great Lord. Another name of His self-awareness is *Spanda*. As Kṣemaraja puts it, *Spanda* also connotes the *Svatantra*, or absolute freedom of the Divine. *Vimarśa*, *Parāśakti*, *Sphurattā*, *Spanda* etc. are synonymous in Śaivāgama. Abhinavagupta, *Spanda Kārikā*, ed. J. Singh, Delhi 2005.

²⁰“Spandanam ca kiñcit calanam. Svarūpāt ca yadi vsāvantarakramaṇām, calanameva, na kiñcitatvam. Na cet, calanameva na kiñcit. Tasmātsvarūpa eva kramādiparihārena cam-



tion in the calm eternal void is *Vāc*, the *Om̐kāra* – the Super Sonic sound AUM. This creative vibration of *Śakti*, the *Nāda* or supersonic sound AUM is also known as *Parā Vāc*²¹.

4 ŚAKTI MANIFESTED AS CREATION

At the dawn of creation when *Śakti* starts vibrating with the Supersonic Sound AUM, abstract and so far unmanifested consciousness starts manifesting itself in the concrete form. The supersonic sound AUM starts reflecting energy which subsequently starts manifesting into subtle forms of fire, water, earth, air and void²². The subtle forms of these five elements, either through *Pañcikaraṇa* or through *Trivṛtkaraṇa*²³, take the forms of the gross elements of fire, air, water, earth and *Ākāśa* or void and consequently transform into

atkarātmikā ucalata (...) spanda ityucyate.” *Parātrīśikā-Vivaraṇa*

²¹“Vāg evark prāṇaḥ sāma om̐ ity etad akṣaram udgīthaḥ || tad vā etan mithunaṃ yad vāk ca prāṇas carḥ ca sāma ca”, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (1.1.5).

²²In the 17th verse of the *Śāradā Tilaka Tantra*, while describing the creation of the *Tattvas*, it has been said that during creation “there is a change in the unmanifest *Prakṛti* – the Supreme Substance and the root of all – there emanates therefrom *Mahātattva* which is the aggregate of three *guṇas* (*Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*) and is one with *Buddhi*, *Ahaṁkāra* and *Citta*. The Śaivas identify *Mahātattva* with *Buddhi-tattva*.” The *Ahaṁkāra* here spoken of is of three kinds, viz. *Vaikārika*, *Taijasa* and *Bhūtādi*. From the first which is *Sāttvika* emanate *Devas*, viz. *Dik*, *Arka* et al. From *Taijasa Ahaṁkāra* which is *Rājasika* emanate besides *Manas*, ten organs of sense, namely five of perception and five of action. And from *Bhūtādi Ahaṁkāra* which is *Tāmasika* in character first appears five subtle elements or *Tanmātras* viz Ether, Air, Water and Earth (*Ākāśa*, *Vayu*, *Agni*, *Jala Pṛthivī*) in the order of the *Tanmātras* which first originated. From Sound (*Śabda tanmātra*) originated Ether, from Touch (*Sparśa tanmātra*) Air, from Form (*Rūpa tanmātra*) Fire, from liquidity (*Rasa tanmātra*) Water and from Smell (*Gandha tanmātra*) Earth (*Śāradā Tilaka*), *Śāradā Tilaka Tantra*, Delhi 2001, p. xii, tr. A. Avalon. Cf. also “Carācarātmakamidaṃ śabdārtharūpaṃ jagataṃ” – *Śāradā Tilaka Tantra* (1.1).

²³*Pañcikaraṇa* – from the *Tamas* aspect of the 5 great elements, the grossified 5 elements are born. This process of *Pañcikaraṇa* is as follows:

1. The *Tamas* aspect of each of the 5 elements divides into two equal parts.
2. One half of each remains intact.
3. The other half of each gets divided into 4 equal parts.
4. Then to the intact half of one element, 1/8th portion from each of the other 4 elements gets joined.
5. Then *Pañcikaraṇa* is complete.
6. From these 5 grossified elements, the gross body is formed. This process of *Pañcikaraṇa* can be shown in a tabular form as below:



innumerable insentient objects and sentient beings. These five *Bhūtas* (elements) are forms of *Śakti* or energy. Thus, the whole world evolves from the Supersonic Sound AUM or the conscious energy in vibration which is personified in *Brahman* the Creator or *Kriyā-Śakti*, *Ichhā śakti* and *Jñāna-Śakti* (roughly translated as action-energy, volition-energy and cognition-energy)²⁴.

5 VĀC AS KUṆḌALINĪ ŚAKTI

Śabdabrahman or undiversified infinite conscious energy, out of which appears this diversified world of subjects and objects, also appears in the individual body as conscious spiral energy or *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti*. The same sound movement that has produced the world as a macrocosm is therefore represented within the human body as a microcosm. Both the macrocosm and the microcosm are subject to the mysterious power of sound and letters. The line of evolution is from the subtle to the gross.

The letters of the alphabet that comprises language have originated from *Bindu* from which the five *Bhūtas* or elements have emanated. The letters of the alphabet are pushed by the channel of the *Suṣumna* and articulated through the throat and other vocal organs. In *Kāmakalāvīlāsa* tantra it is

Gross Elements	The Tamas aspect of the subtle elements				
1. Space	½ S	⅛ A	⅛ F	⅛ W	⅛ E
2. Air	½ A	⅛ S	⅛ F	⅛ W	⅛ E
3. Fire	½ F	⅛ S	⅛ A	⅛ W	⅛ E
4. Water	½ W	⅛ S	⅛ A	⅛ F	⅛ E
5. Earth	½ E	⅛ S	⅛ A	⅛ F	⅛ W

Cf. [www 01] [accessed:]

Trivṛtkaraṇa – each element is divided into two equal halves and leaving one half the other half is again divided into one fourth each of other two elements and then these three parts get joined e.g. the gross body of the element Fire is created by 1/2 of fire + 1/4 of earth + 1/4 of water. Cf. *Śāradā Tilaka Tantra*, Delhi 2001, p. 28–29.

²⁴Trika philosophy holds that the entire manifestation of this universe is an expression of *Parā Śakti* or *Parā Vāc* or Transcendental logos. Particularly in *Parātrīśikā-Vivaraṇa*, the great Tantric philosopher Abhinavagupta presents the metaphysics of language, of the Word (*Vāc*) and its various stages in relation to consciousness. Śrī Sitārāmdas Omkārnāth Maharaj in his famous book, *Nāda Lilāmṛta*, done likewise.



said that there are six *Adhvans*²⁵, of which alphabets, terms and mantras are called *Śabda* or *Vāc* and the world and objects are called *Artha*. The first three categories i.e. alphabets, terms and mantras are also termed 'designator' whereas the following three categories i.e. *Kala*, *Tattva* and *Bhuvana* (loosely translated as elements, objects, world) are called 'designated'²⁶. The Absolute One is *Para-Praṇava* and its designating sound is AUM. Yoga Sage Patañjali, the propounder of *Yoga Darśana*, in his *Yogasūtra* has declared that here the designator and the designated are not different but remain in a relationship of absolute identity. Therefore, as *Śakti* is not non-identical with *Para-Praṇava* and *Para-Praṇava*, by the famous law of Patañjali (*Śakti śaktirmatoravedaḥ*) it is identical with *Oṃkāra* (AUM), hence by the relation of transition *Śakti* is logically identical with *Oṃkāra*.

6 THE CONCEPT OF VĀC IN TANTRIC TRADITIONS

This segment of the article delves into the concept of *Vāc* as elucidated in Tantric traditions. The Primordial sound ॐ is composed of three letters – A, U, and M, of which first two vowels coalesce into O and over O is written the sign of *Candrabindu* or *Nāda*, and *Bindu* is shown as the crescent with a dot or point over it. *Nāda* and *Bindu* represent the Mother or conscious power who, as already mentioned, is the efficient and material cause of this universe. The Universe is a modification – from the subtle to the gross. Interestingly enough, the sound itself also undergoes such a modification. *Vāc* has four stages viz. *Parā*, *Paśyantī*, *Madhyamā* and *Vaikharī*. The absolutely subtle sound form is called *Parā* stage. The next stage is *Paśyantī*, which, though less subtle, is yet undifferentiated. The grosser yet unarticulated sound is *Madhyamā*, and the articulated sound is called *Vaikharī*.

Śabda is present in different points known as *Cakras* of the subtle human body. There are six such *Cakras* in the subtle human body. In the first *Cakra* named as *Mūladhāra*, *Śakti* or *Vāc* – the Absolute speech is present as a sweet indistinct murmuring sound like the humming of a black bee, and from there *Śabda* originates and manifests upwards as *Paśyantī*, *Madhyamā*

²⁵The term *Adhvan* is difficult to translate in English. Roughly speaking, the term *Adhvan* might be translated as way, means, path etc.

²⁶*Śabdārthayogaveda* in: *Śārādā Tilaka Tantra* (1.1)



and *Vaikharī* through different *Cakras*. *Vaikharī* or uttered speech which is the manifestation of the inner naming or thought of that inner naming that occurred through the cognitive aspect of the mental movement in the subtle form, constituting the object in the form of the subtle *Artha*. The words in the *Vaikharī* stage (i.e. in the form of uttered speech) vary from country to country and culture to culture but the intrinsic necessary relation between *Śabda* and *Artha* remains the same.

When the creative energy is predominant in *Parā-Śakti* she manifests Herself as *Parā Vāc*, which is the first stage of *Śabda* or word or language. From the epistemological point of view, the self-awareness of consciousness constitutes the supreme word or *Parā Vāc*. The *Parā* stage is that which exists on the differentiation of the *Mahābindu* before actual manifestation. This is motionless (*Niṣpanda*) causal *Śabda* in *Kulakuṇḍalinī* (spiral energy) in the *Mūladhāra* centre of the body. *Parā Vāc* is not a stage of the word but of which all the other stages of the word are an expression. At the *Paśyantī* level, though subjectivity remains, objectivity begins to appear. That aspect of *Parāśabda* in which it commences to move with a non-particularised motion is *Paśyantī*, from the *Mūladhāra* to the *Maṇipūra Cakra* i.e. the next centre among six centres (*Cakras*) of the human body. It is here associated with *Manas*. Then comes *Madhyamāśabda* which is associated with *Buddhi*. *Madhyamā* is *Hiraṇyagarvarūpa* or *Hiraṇyagarva* – sound that extends from *Paśyantī* to the heart. At this stage objectivity predominates leaving a space for lingering subjectivity²⁷. The goddess *Parā Vāc*, who assumes different states such as *Paśyantī*, *Madhyamā* etc., attains her chief mode i.e. *Madhyamā* which is the goddess *Mālinī* Herself. This state is also known as *Parāparā* state. At this stage she assumes the state of letters (*Varṇa*), *Mantra* and sentence (*Pada*) through the predominance of three aspects viz. *Parā* (supreme), *Parāparā* (subtle or *Sukṣma*) and *Aparā* (gross or *Sthūla*) which means that even in the *Parāparā* state She appears as *Parā*, *Parāparā* and *Aparā*. So at the level of *Madhyamā* the external expansion of *Śakti* becomes more and more perceptible. The *Madhyamā* sound or *Śabda* is the ‘inner naming’ by the cognitive aspect of the mental movement and its *Artha* is the subtle object. So at the *Madhyamā* level there is no outer *Artha*. It is the Cosmic Mind that projected this *Madhyamā Artha* into the world of sensual experience and named it in spoken speech or *Vaikharī*, the final stage where objectivity alone is

²⁷The difference between the word and its referent is, in the stage of *Madhyamā*, only in a subtle mental state; it has not yet been externalised.



found. This stage is the state of spoken or written words. It is from *Vaikhari* that all the gross letters (*Varṇa*), syllables (*Pada*) and sentences (*Vākya*) are manifested. The all-pervading AUM, being the pure energy of consciousness is beyond all manifestations on the transcendental plane of language – a non-phoneme. However, the *Paśyantī* level is the starting point for the manifestation and the origin of all phonemes. It contains within it the whole energy of the universe in seed form²⁸. These seed syllables, which are manifestations of *Oṃkāra* or *Parā-Śakti* are known as *Mātṛkā* or little mothers. *Sāradā Tilaka Tantra* declares that from *Parā-Śakti* comes *nāda* and from *nāda* comes *Bindu* which possesses the qualities of the highest *Śakti*. From the divisions of this highest *Bindu* sound is produced which in turn takes shape into letters and words. This is the descending process. In the ascending process the journey is from the gross to the subtle.

7 SEED SYLLABLES AND MANTRAS

Tantric *Bījas* or seed syllables are the primal sounds behind the universe. They are the strongest of all syllables. In Tantra, language and revelations are intimately connected. The phonemes of Sanskrit alphabets are taken to symbolise revelations, and as revelations and reality are coterminous, the study of phoneme is the study of being. Phonemes can be called the seed or *Bīja*, which contains within itself the essence of reality. Eight such seed syllables and fifty phonemes or *Mātṛkā Varṇa* originated from *Oṃkāra-nāda* and go back to their place of origin at the time of dissolution. *Śakti*, manifested as Goddess *Kālī*, is the Deity in this aspect. *Kālī* is so called because She devours *Kāla* (Time)²⁹. The goddess *Kālikā* who is also called *Adya-Kālī* or

²⁸“The metaphysical view of Bhartṛhari is that whatever is called *Śabda*, ‘language’ and *Artha*, ‘meaning’, ‘thought’ or ‘things meant’, are one and undifferentiated in their pre-verbal or potential state. Before the utterance, it is argued, the language along with whatever it conveys or means is like the yolk of a peahen’s egg. In that state all the variegated colours of a full-grown peacock lie dormant in their potential form. Later these colours are actualised. Similarly in the self of the speaker or hearer, or whoever is gifted with linguistic capability, all the variety and differentiation of linguistic items and their meanings exist as potentialities, and language and thought are identical at that stage. Bhartṛhari even believes that the nature of the self is nothing but identical with the nature of language-thought. This state of language and thought is called the *Paśyantī* stage of language.” – B. K. Matilal, *The Word And The World*, Delhi 1990, p. 86.

²⁹The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (4.30–34) says of The Supreme Mother: “Thou the Supreme *Yoginī* (...) doth create, maintain and withdraw the world with all that moves and is motionless



Primordial Deity wears a garland of fifty or fifty one severed heads. According to some Tantric traditions this “string of severed heads is the Garland of Letters (*Varṇamālā*), that is fifty, and as some count it fifty one letters of the Sanskrit Alphabets”³⁰. A certain aspect of the *Devatā* (Deity) is inherent in certain *Varṇa* but perfect *Śakti* does not appear in anything other than a whole *Mantra*. In *Tantra Śāstra*, letters are generally arranged into two schemes. They are *Mātrkā* or phonemic creative energy and *Mālinī*, which literally means the woman (Goddess) who wears a *mālā* or garland of fifty letters.

The eight primary *Bija* or seed syllables are *Om*, *Hrīm*, *Śrim*, *Klim*, *Krīm*, *Trim*, *Strim* and *Hlim*. Among the gross elements *Lam* is the seed form of earth, *Bam* is that of water, *Ram* fire, *Yong* air and *Hong* void.

Speech is the original form of the Goddess Sarasvatī or Vāc and the creative force behind the universe. The very body of this Goddess is made up of *Mantra*, defined through the root sounds of the Sanskrit alphabets, through which She fashions all things, forming myriad forms of sentient and insentient objects out of the vibratory power of the Word. Yet Vāc or Śakti herself is also the Word and this universe with all its things and beings is the aspect of her own self-expression. Therefore, primal sounds or *Mantras* are neither mere words with a dictionary meaning nor are they meaningless, as some might believe. *Mantras* contain entire spectrums of meaning from the physical to the spiritual and reflect various qualities of energy. Letters are forms of *Śakti* as sound powers. The *Śakti*, of which they are a manifestation, is the living energy, which projects itself as the universe.

The relations of the letters or *Varṇas* (whether vowel or consonant), *Nāda* and *Bindu*, in a *Mantra* indicate the appearance of a Deity in different forms. So, *Bījas* always indicate the Deity that they represent³¹. AUM is the primor-

therein. *Mahā-Kāla* (Great Time) the Dissolver of the Universe is Thy form. At the dissolution of things it is *Kāla* who will devour all and by reason of this He is called *Mahā-Kāla* and since Thou devourest *Mahā-Kāla* Himself it is Thou art called the supreme primordial *Kālikā* (...) From Her then, the state, which is *Aśabda* issues all letters and words (*Śabda*) and the world of things (*Artha*) which they denote. Into her as *Kālī* they are dissolved”, J. Woodroffe, *Garland Of Letters*, Madras 2010, p. 236.

³⁰The same interpretation is given in the Buddhist *Demchog Tantra* in respect of the Garland worn by the great *Heruka*, according to *Śri Cakra Saṃbhara – A Buddhist Tantra*, cf. Ibidem, p. 238.

³¹For example, the *Bija Mantra* of Goddess Kālī is *Krīm*, where *ka* represents Kālī, *Ra* is Brahman, long *ī* means *Mahāmaya*, *Bindu* means dispeller of sorrow and *Nāda* means Mother of the universe. So when someone repeatedly utters the seed syllable *Krīm*, what that person



dial *Bija*, which is the source of all other *Bijas*. As *Kārya Brahman*³² appeared from the *Karaṇa Brahman* AUM, in the same manner the Eight Seed Syllables appeared from it.

8 SEED SYLLABLES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN TANTRIC RITUALS

As shown above, seed syllables are not an ordinary collection of words or syllables, but are a mass of radiant energy generated from *Śakti* herself. Neither are they like prayers of self-dedication because in that case the worshipper could have chosen any word or sentence that expresses his/her emotions, but not so in the case of Tantric prayers and rituals.

Tantra holds that *Śabdabrahman*, which is *Mantra* personified, also exists in the body of the individual human beings and is the subtle aspect of their vital power. The same fifty alphabets are present in the subtle human body. That is why during worship there is a Tantric contemplative divinising ritual called *Nyāsa*, establishing the seed syllables on the joints and sense organs of the body and the fingers. Not only that, Tantra also recommends that the worshipper should himself perform this syllabic purification of his own body before also purifying the idols body with the same ritual. One can already see how the worshipper and the worshipped are equalised in the process.

9 MANTRA AND THE CONCEPT OF SALVATION IN TANTRIC TRADITIONS

As mentioned above, AUM is not only the Vedic *Bija* but is also the source of all the Tantric *Bijas*. Thus, from the creation of the universe to the production of sound in the human body, Tantra stresses the importance of sound as a divine substance and vehicle for salvation. *Mantra*, which is built upon *Śabda*, *Nāda* and *Prāṇa* is an infallible path towards liberation or *Mokṣa*. The main purpose of repeated utterance of the Seed Syllable is to reach a climax of the performance – identification with the primordial sound AUM – the origin

is praying is that – *Devī Kālikā*, who is primal sound personified, dispel my sorrows. The other seed syllables also have their Deities and prayer.

³²Earth, water, fire, air, and void.



of all manifestations. In other words, the practice of mantra meditation is conceived as a gradual regressive process whereby the individual merges back with the original cosmic sound AUM – to be identified with the ecstasy of Divine I-consciousness. *Mokṣa* is another term for this. This ascending journey starts from *Vaikharī* and ends in *Parā* stage. Then what remains is the all-pervading conscious realization – *Sāyam* – I am she – I am *Śakti*.

10 CONCLUSION

In Śākta Tantra the entire physical universe, which is composed of the five elements – Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether – is represented by a set of sound combinations. The *Śāktādvaita* view proclaims the manifestation of *Śakti* in different phases.

From *Nāda* comes *Bindu*, and from the division of this highest *Bindu*, sound is produced. Sound then takes the forms of letters and words. *Mantra* is formed by letters and words. The fifty letters of the alphabet are located in the six bodily *Cakras* called *Mūladhāra*, *Svādhiṣṭhāna*, *Maṇipūra*, *Anāhata*, *Viśuddha* and *Ājñā*. *Nāda*, despite being all-pervasive, manifests only in the *Mūladhāra* – a mystic nerve centre of spiritual energy which Tantra describes to be at the base of the spinal column. The token ‘word’ i.e. spoken or written *Varṇa* might be temporary but the ‘Word’ (*Varṇa*) type is eternal.

Word, object and cognition i.e., *Śabda*, *Artha* and *Pratyaya*, in reality, are identical in nature. That is why Śākta Tantra declares that *Śabda* = *Artha* = *Pratyaya*.

At the time of creation *Parā-Śakti* or The Absolute – who is designated by the primordial non-phonetic supersonic sound AUM and another name of whom is *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti*, manifests herself, along with this world of objects, as letters from *A* to *Kṣa*³³. “Of these letters and names and their meaning or objects, that is concepts and concepts objectified, the whole Universe is composed”³⁴. During complete dissolution the names (*Nāma*) and forms (*Rūpa*)

³³“Paśyantī madhyamā vāci vaikhari śabda janmabhūḥ || icchājñānakriyātmā ’sau tejorūpa guṇātmikā || krameṇāneṇa sṛjati kuṇḍalī varṇamālikām.” (*Śāradā Tilaka Tantra*, 1.108–109, Delhi 2001). That is: “[Then Para] and then came *Paśyantī*, *Madhyamā* and *Vaikharī-Śabda*. In this order Kundalini who is Will (*icchā*), Knowledge (*jñāna*) and Action (*Kriyā*), who is both Light (*Tejorūpa*) and *Cidrūpa* (in Herself Consciousness and in the form of the *Guṇas* – *Guṇātmikā*, that is, *Prakṛti*), creates the Garland of Letters.”, as translated by J. Woodroffe (*The Garland Of Letters...*, Madras 2010, p. 216).

³⁴Idem, *Śakti And Śakta*, London 2010, p. 333.



that the letters signify, the dualism in consciousness, which is called creation, return to their causal root. At that stage there is neither 'I' (*Aham*) nor 'This' (*Idam*) but the one non-dual *Praṇava* or *Parā-Vāc* who is designated by the Primordial sound AUM.

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ABSTRACT, KEYWORDS, ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abstract

This paper explores the nature, ontological status, different spheres and symbolic representation of Vāc in the Vedic-Tantric tradition, and how it lends credibility to the theory of emancipation through prayer, worship and *mantra-sādhana*. Vedas, or the canons of Hindu philosophy, proclaim that in the beginning was *Brahman* and *Brahman* is Vāc. The word Vāc comes from the root *Vac* and in Sanskrit can mean



both the voice and the word it utters³⁵. According to Śākta Tantra, this word is created by letters and the letters are the products of sound Evolution. This is the result of self-movement (*Spanda*) on the part of the Absolute or *Śakti* who is also termed as *Parā-Vāc*. It is this movement that brings about the distinction among the so far unified Word (*Śabda*), Object (*Artha*) and Cognition (*Pratyaya*). All these three are, therefore, aspects of the primal energy. That is why according to Vedic-Tantric tradition, the meaning of a word is not conventionally determined as is usually held by the Western thinkers, but always has its corresponding Meaning and referent and neither can be dissociated from the other. According to Tantric tradition, written *Mantras* are devoid of any power. They become effective only when heard from the lips of one's spiritual master or an unattached *Yoginī*. Language therefore, is not something arbitrary or invented. In the words of Tantra *Vāc* there is *Prakāśa* or illuminating consciousness and the meaning of it is *Vimarśa* or the object of consciousness. Word is eternal in nature, by which it is meant that even after *Mahāpralaya* or complete annihilation of the universe, Word shall remain in its seminal form (*Bījarūpa*). Word, like material objects and individual existence can be either gross (*Sthūla*) or subtle (*Sukṣma*). A *Sthūla* or gross word is that form of the word which is spoken or written and known as *Vaikhari Vāc*. The other three stages of *Vāc* viz. *Parā*, *Paśyantī* and *Madhyamā* are subtle in nature. There are six *Cakras* or spiritual nerve centres in the human body and *Śabda* is present in those *Cakras* in its subtle form by Veda and Tantra. Śākta Tantra in particular proclaims that the Absolute is *Śakti* and She is *Vāc*, designating the primordial sound AUM.

Keywords: *Tantra, Śakti, Bīja, Sound, Word, Meaning.*

Aryya BHATTACHARYA is the Head of the Department of Philosophy at Vivekananda College for Women under the Calcutta University, India. She studied Hindu religion and philosophy under the guidance of Anantasri Sitaramdas Omkarnath.

E-MAIL: aryyab@gmail.com

³⁵J. Woodroffe, *The Garland of Letters...*, Madras 2010, p. 1.

