

GOD AS SOUND-CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

This paper describes the concept of sacred sound in Hinduism as a way for the Hindu to approach and to know the Christian God. Different from Christians who are known as the people of the book, Hindu people are known as the people of the sound. The vocalic syllable *Om* or *Aum* and the repeating/chanting of the sacred sound in Hindu worship give a unique room to a new and different way of knowing God. God is no longer perceivable as the powerful figure in the book but as consciousness. The word “consciousness” in this paper refers to the ability of believers to be mindful and responsive to God. This paper will also describe the concept of sonic theology as a different way to perceive God in Hinduism and relate it to the practice of Yoga that is widely practiced in the modern world today.

Keywords: Christianity, Hindu, nada, sacred sound, sonic theology, yoga.

Abstrak

Paper ini menggambarkan konsep suara sakral (*sacred sound*) dalam Hinduisme sebagai cara Hindu mendekati dan mengenal Allah Kristen. Berbeda dari orang-orang Kristen yang dikenal sebagai umat yang berorientasi pada buku, kaum Hindu adalah orang-orang yang berorientasi pada suara. Suku kata vokalik *Om* atau *Aum* dan pengulangan/pendarasan dari suara dalam ibadah Hindu memberi ruangan kepada sebuah pengenalan yang baru dan berbeda terhadap Allah. Allah tidak lagi dilihat sebagai figur yang berkuasa dalam buku, tapi sebagai kesadaran. Kata “kesadaran” dalam paper ini merujuk kepada kemampuan orang-orang percaya untuk sadar dan responsif kepada Allah. Paper ini juga akan menggambarkan konsep teologi suara (*sonic theology*) sebagai cara yang lain untuk memahami Allah dalam Hinduisme dan menghubungkannya dengan praktek Yoga yang sudah dipraktikkan secara luas dalam dunia modern saat ini.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Kekristenan, Hinduisme, nada, suara sakral, teologi suara, yoga.

“The invasion of the verbal realm by images results in role reversal and domination, leading us to another characteristic of our modern reality; the humiliation of the word.”¹

Jacques Ellul claimed that the West has become an extremely visually oriented culture, with the consequent devaluation of the sonic or verbal dimension. Different from comparatively Western religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all having been known as “the people of the book”²—as one of the Eastern religions Hinduism has *sacred sounds* as its center. From the *Vedic* and *Upanisad* period, structures and nomenclature persist which allow us to assemble a firm case for a *sacred sound* as a common thread in Hinduism.³ It includes the vocalic syllable *Om* or *Aum* and other sonic cosmogonies. The act of ‘intoning’ sacred sound is to inaugurate and sustain the soteriological quest toward whichever Hindu god, goddess, or heaven is targeted.⁴ The way Hindu people think about sacred sound may further illuminate our understanding of religious tradition, especially in the use of language and words in describing God in a Christian context.

The concept of God as sound-consciousness refers to the ability of believers to be mindfulness in approaching God. The word mindfulness derived from the word *sati* in *Pali*; “mindfulness is presymbolic.”⁵ Mindfulness is an activity that cannot be precisely described by words because “words are devised by the symbolic levels of mind, and they describe those realities with which symbolic thinking deals.”⁶ Mindfulness is a “nonjudgemental observation,” “a present-moment awareness,” “nonegoistic alertness,” and “awareness

¹ Ellul, Jacques. 1985. *The Humiliation of the Word*. 155. Quoted in Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

² Johanna W H Van Wijk-Bos, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice* (Cambridge: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 62.

³ Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵ Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness: In Plain English* (Boston: Wisdoms Publications, 2002), 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*

of change.”⁷ In Hinduism, the ability to perceive God as sound-consciousness is experienced through the act of toning the sacred sound and the practice of yoga.

The People of the Book and the Sacred Sound

In his letter to the people of Rome, Saint Paul stated that “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). In Christian teaching, faith is understood as both the act of believing and its contents. *Fides qua creditor* (act of believing) and *fides quae creditor* (what is believed) are two important parts of faith.⁸ Martin Luther in his defense of *sola fide* (justification by faith) emphasizes that “the only proper object of faith is God.”⁹ In relation to Paul’s statement, it is clear that the act of believing in God developed through the processes of listening to the word of God. In the church, the people listen to the word of God through the reading of the Bible. The Bible reading is a crucial part of the church liturgy because it is through the reading of the Word that the people become mindful and aware of God. It can be stated that God, in Christianity, is God who is recognized through the word in the Bible.

Building faith in God through the word of God—found in the Bible, clearly rooted in Christian tradition—may cause Christians to miss out upon the essence of one’s relationship with God. This Divine encounter and engagement with the Bible are two related but different things. The first one will lead to *fides quae creditor*, while the second will create *fides qua creditor*; both are crucial dimensions of faith. In this context, it is important for Christians to seek out different ways of reaching *fides quae creditor* outside the Bible. One great tradition that provides an alternative for this quest is Hinduism.

Hinduism is generally known as *sanatana dharma*, which means the eternal tradition or religion.¹⁰ Hinduism is viewed as the eternal tradition or religion in term of how it emerges and develops. “Its origins lie beyond human history, and its truths have been divinely revealed and passed down through the ages to the most present day

⁷ Ibid., 139-142.

⁸ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2005), 61.

⁹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

in the most ancient of the world's Scripture, the *Veda*.”¹¹ Distinctively, what is written in the Hindus' Scripture persistently allows devotees to intone the sacred sound in search for knowledge about God.

In making comparisons between conceptions of 'the word of God' for Christians and Hindus, a few points of distinction can be made. In Hinduism, language and sacred sound are intimately bound up with the divine; in Christianity any special kind of sacred language or sacred sound is ultimately subject to Jesus Christ who is defined as the 'word of God.' Jesus' words are one of several expressions of His being, which was the teaching to the world.

In Hinduism the word *Nadanta* means the way to reach the Truth that cannot be named in words. *Nadanta* also means the end of the sacred sounds. Reaching the Truth is compatible with reaching the sacred sounds. Recent comparative studies in relating the concept of sacred sounds in Hinduism and other religions have suggested the following:

The nearest thing in Christian experience to the use of sacred sound is perhaps the invocation of the name of Jesus. There is also the prayer in tongues or prayers of jubilation, in which phrases, syllables, even a single vowel sound, without concrete signification for the one who utters them, lifts prayer upward beyond the limits of language and conceptual thought.¹²

In Christianity mentioning the name of Jesus in prayers can be understood in at least two ways. First is as a part of the prayer rituals. Some Christians believe that a prayer is not perfect if it does not open and close with the invocation of the name Jesus. Second is as a way to honor Jesus. Jesus is the savior in Christian faith and therefore the invocation of Jesus' name is sacred in prayers in order to seal the prayer. The action itself of invoking Jesus' name is sacred because the name itself is sacred.

Sonic Theology

The word *theology* can be understood in the simplest way as the Divine that reveals itself beyond the horizon of intelligible representations. Theology—formed by two words, *Theos* and *Logos*, in

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Beck, *Sonic Theology*, 15.

Greek—means 'knowledge about God.' Generally, *Theos* in Christianity is interpreted through words and writings. Different from the Christians, Hindu people understand *Theos* beyond words. *Theos* itself may be expanded to include sounds or resonances from behind or above, as this is closer to the overall Hindu concept of God, found to contain the element of sacred sound both as a structural part and as a hermeneutic that may uncover or disclose the divinity.¹³ This is what sonic theology means; it is a theology on sounds that reveal Godself. According to Hindu theism language itself is exposed as divine, whereas in Christianity what is sonic or non-linguistic mostly emerges as not sacred.

As the people of the book, the words of God in Christianity can be found in the Christian Scripture. Scripture comes from the word *scriber* in Latin, which means 'to write.' The equivalent Sanskrit term in Hindu for scripture is *Sabda*, which comes from *Sabd*, which means to make a sound or to call. For Hindus, scripture in its most authoritative form is what has been heard and transmitted orally, not what has been written down.¹⁴ In India, where Hinduism was born, scripture was only written down for incidental purposes, such as to be preserving Hindu thought in libraries, to disperse knowledge, and to engage in polemics. In practice sound that becomes writing loses its vitality. The sacred sound affects the life of Hindus when it is spoken and heard. In Christianity the Scripture was written for specific reasons, such as to be used as a tool to empower a political movement (especially in the first First Testament), to strengthen social identity, and to introduce a new leader for the people of God. The Scripture for Christians is not an incidental writing. It was written for the purpose of strengthening the identity of a nation called Israel in the First Testament, as well as to spread the teaching of Jesus Christ in the Second Testament. The dichotomy between Hinduism's sacred sound and Christianity's word of God demonstrates the importance of how we understand the term *Scripture*. Scripture defines the relationship between believers and their ultimate concern, which can be God, "god," "goddess," etc. The notion of Scripture can be dynamic, not necessarily limited to written language.

In Hinduism sonic theology plays an important role because language is thought to be true and most fully experienced only in its oral/aural form. Different from other Indian traditions that put the ideal on silence and quietism (for example, Buddhism and Jainism),

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 27.

Hinduism focuses on the sacred sound as its way to reach God. Traditional Hindu practice is consistently enriched with an astounding variety of different sounds, such as from drums, bells, gongs, cymbals, conch shells, flutes, lutes, and a wide assortment of vocalizations. These resources of sound are often heard simultaneously, blending together to create a vibrant sonic atmosphere within the Hindu temple, home, or sacred space. For an outsider (non-Hindu) the sound can be misunderstood as cacophony, an irrational ensemble of noise without arrangement, rhyme, or explanation.¹⁵ It is only when we look closely that we will understand the sacred sounds as unique sets of prescribed sound supported by an oral and written sacred in Hindu tradition. The way Hindu people use sound can illuminate, or at least provide an alternative within, a Christian understanding of the Divine through a different way to approach God; it is a unique way of getting to know God, especially for those who were taught to focus only on books and words. The sonic theology of Hinduism only received attention from the West due to its significant difference. Lipner, a Western Hindu expert, states that the verbal dimension of language has been the focus of Western scholars of Hinduism and that while “holy words have been operative in human history ... the way that they have found their way into human lives is not through the eye, but through the ear.”¹⁶ In Hinduism the sacredness of the word comes from within, and those who believe join in it by listening to it and reciting it. In the field of religious studies, the focus of Indian scholars on sacred sound has remained largely within specialized disciplines such as Sanskrit linguistics and Hindu philosophy, aesthetics, and musicology.¹⁷ In these areas of religious studies, sacred sound is seen as the hermeneutic tool to discover, or “unsound,” the Transcendent, i.e., God. The Transcendent cannot be seen or heard with our human eyes and ears, but it can be experienced in a radical context. The Transcendent is the Truth that cannot be found in the product of intellectual agreement. The Transcendent is to be understood in terms of the Greek notion of *aletheia*—an unveiling or unconcealing; an occurrence.¹⁸ *Aletheia* can only be known through experiences. *Aletheia* is something found in the human reality in relation to God and also God itself.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ Beck, *Sonic Theology*, 216.

Sacred Sound

Looking at the textual sources in Sanskrit, the traditional language of Hinduism's writings, there is an underlying religious foundation for the element of sound in general, along with discussions of the type of sounds that are considered important in Hindu worship. Specific texts show the importance of the divine origin of sound, including speech, language, and music. Beck in *Sonic Theology* explains,

Among the many varieties of sonic discourse some describe the universe as an emanation from cosmic sound, others describe methods of individual salvation through the use of sonic techniques. The subject of the interrelationship between the Hindu theories of sound, language, and oral word, on the one hand, and their practical application is, indeed, a fascinating one.¹⁹

It is clear that the sacred sound is not only a part of chanting rituals but it itself is actually the act of teaching and the content of meaning. The world is understood as the universe of sound. Salvation can only take place through sonic techniques. Furthermore, we understand that the present concern is not simply with the oral versus written dimensions of texts but with the entire sacred sonic realm in the Hindu tradition including linguistic and non-linguistic²⁰ sounds. In Hinduism, the textual sources provide the words, but the sounding of the words indeed lies at the core of the teaching. Words without sound have no meaning.

In order to evaluate the sacred sound in Hindu religious tradition, we must investigate the *Vedic* sound. The word *Veda* in Sanskrit means *to know*.²¹ In relation to the *Vedic* sound, Beck explains,

The concepts and structures of language as sacred speech or sound are already present in the *Vedic* revelation itself, consisting of the four *Vedas* (*Yajur*, *Sama*, and *Atharva*), *Brahmanas* (texts of ritual elaboration and speculation). From the *Vedic* and *Upanisadic* period up to the present certain

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰ The term non-linguistic sound refers here mainly to the sounds of objects employed in worship, interior sounds heard in meditation, and especially to musical sounds in both categories.

²¹ Beck, *Sonic Theology*, 23.

issues, structures, and nomenclature persists which allow us to assemble a firm case for sacred sound as a common thread in Hinduism.²² These include the following: speculation on a primal vocalic syllable such as *Om*; sonic cosmogonies involving *Vak*, *Sabda-Brahman*, or *Nada-Brahman*; sacred sound—mostly *Vak* or *Nada Brahman*—as the feminine energy of either a neuter *Brahman* or a specific male deity; the division of language into three levels corresponding to levels of consciousness or awareness; positing physiological centers or arteries in the human body which correspond to either letters of the Sanskrit alphabet or musical notes; the importance given to mantra utterance and the vocal repetition of divinely bestowed names, syllables, and phrases.²³

The beauty of sacred sound in Hinduism—exemplified by the chanting of *Om*, *Vak*, and *Nada Brahman*—lies in the sacred sound's ability to enter the phase of human consciousness and awareness. Language found in the sacred texts can only influence one's life when it reaches the conscious and awareness of that person. This is exactly what the sacred sound is able to do; it is able to touch awareness through vocal repetition of the Divine name, phrases, and mantras. *Vak*, the goddess of speech, is intrinsically pronounced in mantras where the goddess became less powerful than the sacred sound itself; unlike the sacred sound, the goddess relies on the rituals of sacrificial offerings. In the practice of sounding the sacred sound, the sacred sound transposes human experience to the divine realm.

The role of sacred sound has a long history of concern in Hindu theological speculation, because language in Hinduism is nearly always identified with both human consciousness and the divine. The transformative aspect of sacred sound is found in the ancient *Vedic* tradition of ritual recitation. The earliest attempts in India to understand the mysteries of words and language took place within the circle of *Vedic* poets and ritualism. Textual sources in Hinduism can be divided into two groups, namely, *Sruti* and *Smriti*. *Sruti* means 'that which is heard.' *Sruti* as a concept includes both audio characteristics of the *Vedic* truth and its transcendent dimension. The *Veda* sounds, as eternal truth. *Smriti* means 'that which is remembered' and consists of law books, histories, and commentaries.²⁴ An example is found in the *Brahmanas* texts that “succeeded in impressing upon the minds of every subsequent

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 24.

generation a need to study the influence of sound phenomena on human consciousness and physiology by orienting the perceptual centers toward the inner acoustic space of the unseen."²⁵ Being the major texts in Hindu tradition, the *Brahmanas* elaborate the sonic effects of words in the human consciousness as introduced in the Vedas. This practice continues to inform the theories and practices of Hinduism even today. The followers of Hinduism believe that repeating the sound with precision in the same intervals will lead to change in personality, transformation of thoughts and emotion, and even renewal of character.

The sacred sound functions to introduce and strengthen the Hindu's journey toward Hindu God, the god or goddess (i.e., *Moksa*). As the final destination in Hindu teaching, *Moksa* can be attained in a sonic world by receiving the sound seed from the *guru or teacher*. This sonic world is supported and developed by the practices of worship where the chanting of sacred sound was pronounced. When a Hindu person dies, the accumulation of sonic 'savings' will lead the individual to be released from material suffering, to rebirth, and to eternal life in the kingdom of one's chosen god/goddess, wherein the interaction with sacred sound continues.²⁶ The persistence of chanting the sacred sound will result in the growing of one's self and, ultimately, the growing into the eternal *Moksa*. We see that the concept of salvation in Hinduism relies on sonic act, based on sonic theology. Language should never be separated from the sound dimension of it, as stated before—language with no sound loses its meaning. The oral world is important because it provides room to develop one's consciousness and awareness of the words.

Yoga and the Sacred Sound

In Hinduism the sounding of sacred words can be found in one of the most accepted of Hindu practices, called Yoga. In the modern world, non-Hindus practice Yoga as a part of their daily life, some without sufficient understanding of what Yoga is. The practice of Yoga is a part of the six systems in Hindu philosophy. Yoga in Hinduism is a way to get closer to the Transcendent. Yoga is mostly important in the discussion of sacred sound and sonic theology because of *Nada Yoga*. *Nada Yoga* is the sonic aspect in Yoga. "The term *Nada* means a loud sound, roaring, bellowing, crying; any sound or tone; in the yoga: nasal sound represented by a semicircle and used

²⁵ Ibid., 23.

²⁶ Ibid., 213.

as an abbreviation in mystical words.”²⁷ The use of sound in Yoga strengthens the function of sacred sound that is able to touch human awareness. *Nada* is the sound of the word that brings deep meaning in the practice of Yoga with the purpose to be conscious of the divine reality.

The traditional Indian music and dance known as *Sangita* is also fundamental for understanding the sonic and musical dimensions of the *Vedas*. The chanting of sacred verses in a specific rhyme, accompanied with musical instruments, has been a vital part of Indian religion from the earliest times. The connection between musical sound and *śabda Brahman* or *nada Brahman* is very close and long-standing, especially since the principal and medieval texts and traditions of Indian classical music view music as a manifestation of *Nada Brahman* (the sound of God).²⁸

The importance of sound (*Nada*) can also be traced in the *Vedic* texts and in the chanting of the *Sama Veda*. Beck explains *Nada*, stating,

It is generally agreed that Indian music indeed owes its beginnings to the chanting of the *Sama Veda*, the vast collection of verses (*Sama*), many from the *Rg Veda* itself, set to melody and sung by singer-priests known as *Udgata*. The fact that *Sama* chanting is the basis for Indian music has been mentioned by all musicologists dealing with the history of Indian music.²⁹

The use of sound and the role of sacred sound is rooted in the Hindu tradition, especially in the chanting of *Sama Veda*, one of the *śruti* writings. Besides chanting of the *Sama Veda*, instrumental music also plays an important role in the *Vedic* sacrifices. The most important instrument is the *Vina*, or lute, which was often played by the wife of the sacrificer.³⁰ Other instruments mentioned in *Vedic* literature include various types of flutes, drums, and cymbals. The rules for singing and playing instruments were collected in *Gandharva Veda*, part of *Sama Veda*.³¹ Explicitly, the exercise of sound in Hinduism is crucial in knowing God and is transmitted in the whole of religious practice and life. Sound is vital in reading and understanding the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

textual sources, being both significant in the daily life of the believers and fundamental to the repeated wish of arriving at *Moksa*.

Conclusion

As we have seen, sacred sound is serious and impactful in Hinduism. What we have seen of its role may further enlighten our understanding of other religious traditions, particularly ones that claim to have an orally revealed canon. Indeed, concerning those Western religions known as the people of the book, the importance of the oral dimension of scripture can now be recalled. Even in the traditions of the book, sound has played and continues to play an important role in the transmission and assimilation of Holy words in the lived reality of human beings. We should take with seriousness the oral (and aural) qualities of scripture. Thus it is important to remember that the verbal tradition is fundamental.

In the history of Christianity, the dominant tool of communicating truth and value has been the written word; the elders of the community have exercised authority by official writings. In this sense, Hinduism is markedly different. Being no 'religion of the book,' Hinduism has traditionally had no councils or synods at which religious leaders from different denominations have gathered in order to determine authoritative versions of beliefs and scripture for the faithful at large for generations to come. In Hinduism sound participates at every level of the Hindu universe. Sound and language not only shape our understanding of Hindu worship but also invite a fresh approach to a theology called sonic theology.

On a comparative note, the verbal dimension in the Hindu tradition has an upshot in both Judaism and Christianity. On the one hand, besides the written Torah, Judaism recognizes an oral Torah that is equally authentic. Beck writes, "According to the rabbis the oral Torah is both the authoritative interpretation of the written Torah and a separate Mosaic tradition. This oral tradition, though originally in fixed form, continues to evolve up to the present day: in this oral transmission, the oral Torah is understood as both fixed and evolving from generation to generation."³² We recognize that both oral Torah and written Torah are considered to be equally important in the practice of Jewish life. On the other hand, Christians—those who utilize the Hebrew Bible, i.e., the Scripture of the Jewish faith, as the First Testament in the Bible—follow in this tradition by

³² Ibid., 24.

acknowledging this role of oral tradition, as performed especially by its religious leaders. In the First Testament the prophets and the rulers delivered the oral voice or the prophetic voice. In the Second Testament Jesus and His disciples play a vital role in oral teaching. In the life of the church preachers in every local church practice the oral tradition by leading worship and delivering sermons.

Thus we see, as explicated above, the sacred sound in Hinduism is unique in two specific ways. First, the sacred sound gives different perspective on what it means to live as religious followers. Second, the sacred sound provides room for diversity in the way humans connect with God. God's sound can be heard everywhere, in this earth, in human experiences, in human languages, and even in silent meditation.

*I will now describe the practice of Anahata-Nada ...
The Yogi should hear the sound inside his right ear, with collected
mind.
The ears, the nose, and the mouth should be closed,
And then the clear sound is heard ...
(N. N. Bhattacharya, History of the Tantric Religion)*

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