

OM AND THE GAYATRI.

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THE Gayatri is performed by pronouncing the mystic, incommunicable appellation OM, followed by a formula which, though the meaning of the words is plain, yet remains, like *Om*, in its essence incommunicable.

It has been thought that *Om* is derived from the word *Avam*, meaning "that," which may be used to signify "yes," as *oui* is a contraction of *hoc illud*. According to this theory, *Om* would mean something like the English words which have for most of us a solemnity of association possessed by no other phrase, the "*Even so saith the Spirit*" which figures in our burial service. It is usually supposed that the affirmation refers to the assent and permission of the deity—his acceptance of prayer and sacrifice—but some authorities see in it rather man's assent and submission. Is it not more probable that the assent proceeds from both sides—a common agreement embracing creator and created? We might approach nearer to understanding *Om* and the Gayatri also, if we could regard them less as prayers or confessions of faith than as sacraments. It is utterly impossible to put into language the ideas involved in any sacrament. So it is with *Om*: so it is with the Gayatri. They form the effluence of the Ineffable and effect a union in some unfathomable manner, between the transitory and the eternal, between the individual and the universal, between the book and its author.

The derivation from *Avam* is not now accepted without reserve. Prof. Max Müller appears to lean slightly to the opinion that *Om* merely imitates a deep out-breathing stopped by closing the lips. Still, even if not derived from *Avam*, it seems to be agreed that *Om* is used, as a matter of fact, to express consent, so that whatever be its etymology its affirmative character is not entirely excluded. But when we admit that it is used as an affirma-

tion, we have gone a very short way towards discerning what it means or what it is. The collector of a charming book of Southern India Folk-songs, Mr. C. E. Gover, writes of it as follows:

Om, or more properly *Aum*, is a mystic word of which no one knows the real meaning. It is used for a hundred different things: as each writer has a different idea of a something that pervades the world and yet is not God. It is supposed to typify a mysterious excellence which is for God and yet is not God . . . It is infinite wisdom and mysticism. It is the highest summit of everything that man should aspire to, yet is utterly beyond even the greatest of the rishis and they can be more than gods.

To which I may add the same writer's translation of a Tamil poem written in the tenth century:

How mad ye are who offer praise
 To carven stones. As if such things
 Could fitly image God Most High.
 Can he be but a dirty stone?
 And can such worship reach his ear?
 Be faithful to the glorious priest
 Who teaches truth. Receive from him
 The heavenly light that shall make clear
 What body is and what is soul.
 Let all thy mind be overwhelmed
 With that great blaze of light which beams
 From what is typified by *Om*.

From their iconoclastic tendency these lines suggest, like several other passages in Dravidian poetry, some exotic monotheistic influence, Jewish or Mohammedan, as having passed across the people's beliefs without altering them. Yet here, too, the definite statements with which the poem begins are lost at the end in the deep sea of mysticism.

Besides *Om* there is *Pranava* by which *Om* is described or rather named—for *Pranava* is no more intelligible than *Om*. Possibly the *Pranava* means "the glory" or "the breathing forth" but this is conjectural. Prof. Max Müller wrote despairingly:

However old the *Pranava* and the syllable *Om* may be, they must have had a beginning, but in spite of all the theories of the Brahmans, there is not one in the east satisfactory to the scholar.

It seems to me that the vagueness of *Om* may be best explained by supposing that it was intentional and that it arose from reluctance to refer to the Unknowable by an intelligible epithet. The Jews, in spite of claiming an intimacy of intercourse with the Supreme Being which the Indian mind could not conceive, still used all sorts of circumlocutions rather than pronounce the most holy name.

It has been said frequently that a word similar to *Om* figures in the higher branches of Freemasonry. At any rate it is a fact related on the most trustworthy testimony that a Brahman who thought he heard an English Freemason pronounce the word *Om*, at once greeted him as a fellow-Brahman and admitted him into the inner shrine of an ancient temple where none but high caste Hindus might enter. There are other recorded cases in which Masonic knowledge caused Englishmen to be shown secret places in India.

The Gayatri, which like all Brahmanical acts of worship must be preceded by pronouncing *Om*, is thus described in the Skanda Purana :—

Superior to all learning is the difficultly obtained invocation named Gayatri, preceded by the mystic syllable; nothing in the Vedas is more excellent than the Gayatri, as no city is equal to Kashi. The Gayatri is the mother of the Vedas and of Brahmins; from repeating it man is saved (*gayantam trayate*) and hence it is celebrated under the name of Gayatri. By the power of the Gayatri the Kshatriya Vishwamitra from being a Rajarshi became a Brahmarshi and even obtained such power as to be able to create a new world. What is there, indeed, that cannot be effected by the Gayatri? For the Gayatri is Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva and the three Vedas.

In the Rig Veda the Gayatri is spoken of in connexion with the primeval sacrifice: "First was produced the Gayatri joined with fire." I do not know whether this can be interpreted to mean that the Gayatri was the primal incense-cloud of recognition ascending from earth to heaven.

In the Surya-Narayan-Upanishad the Gayatri is incorporated in a hymn which resembles in many points the ancient Egyptian hymns to the sun as symbol of the all-pervading god :—

The sun is the soul of the world; from the sun proceed existence and non-existence . . . from the sun proceed life, the earth, the sky, space, and that sun which irradiates the universe is the heart, the mind, the understanding, the intellect, consciousness, the vital breath, the senses and their organs . . . Praise be to thee, O Illuminator and benefactor of this universe. Thy eye, O Sun, pervadeth all; may, therefore, thy all-provident eye protect us. We acknowledge thee, O Sun! to be the one God, and we mediate on thy countless rays; enlighten, therefore, O Sun, our understandings. The sun is in the West and the East, the North and the South: may that sun who is everywhere present bestow upon us length of days.¹ (Translated by Vans Kennedy.)

Homage to thee . . . thou risest, thou risest; thou shinest, thou shinest, O thou who art crowned king of the gods. Thou art lord of heaven, thou art lord of earth, thou art the creator of those who dwell in the heights and of those who dwell in the depths. Thou art the One God who came into being at the beginning of time. Thou hast knit together the mountains, thou hast made mankind and the beasts of

¹ Compare with this the hymn to Rā :—

the field to come into being, thou hast made the heavens and the earth . . . Hail, One, thou mighty being of myriad forms and aspects, . . . lord of eternity and ruler of everlastingness. (Translated by Dr. E. A. Wallis Budge.)

Certainly it can cause no surprise if the Brahmans guarded the Gayatri with infinite jealousy and withheld this sacred mystery even from those to whom they were willing to communicate their laws and their literature. Thus it happened that Sir William Jones who succeeded in winning the high regard of his Brahman teachers, failed for ten years in obtaining a copy of the formula of the existence of which he knew well, as it is alluded to with the greatest veneration in the ordinances of Manu. How and when it at last came into his possession has never been related in print; I think, therefore, that the following account from a manuscript left by the great Orientalist's friend, Sir C. E. Carrington, will be read with interest:—

May 10th, 1794.

About a fortnight before his death, Sir William Jones told me he had procured the Gayatri of a Sunnyasi, to whom in return he gave all the money he then had in the house and would have given, he said, ten times more, had more been within his reach at the moment. The Sunnyasi afterwards met one of Sir William's Pundits to whom he expressed himself amply satisfied, with much emphasis.

Shortly after his death I begged Mr. Harrington to request his executor Mr. Fairlie to be careful that no Pundits or Brahmans had access to his papers, as on stating to two Brahmans the question what they would do with the Gayatri if they saw it in writing, they immediately answered, "tear it, most certainly." Mr. Harrington thought Mr. Morris more able to interfere, to whom I related these circumstances and who in consequence of this information, on searching found the object of my concern and my fears, and on going myself Mr. Fairlie obligingly permitted me to take a copy.

THE GAYATRI: MOTHER OF THE VEDAS.

Om (i. e. A. U. M.)

(Savitri.)

1. Tat savitur vareṇiyam
2. Bhargo devasya dhīmahi
3. Dhiyo yo nah pracho dayāt.

Forming twenty-four syllables—ten words.¹

Literally: That sun's supremacy (or greater than that sun), God, let us adore which may well direct.

That Light far greater than the sun,
The light of God, let us adore.
Illud, sole præstantius
Lumen Dei meditemur
Intellectus qui nostros dirigit.

Then follows a paraphrase or tica thus.

¹ On the opposite side of the page it is written in Sanskrit characters.

Let us meditate with adoration on the supreme essence of the Divine Sun which illuminates all, recreates all, from which all proceed, to which all must return, and which we invoke to direct our understanding aright in our progress to his holy seats.

Another translation is afterwards added :

Than you bright sun more splendid far
The light of God let us adore
Which only can our minds direct.

The root of the mystic word *Om* is from *av*—"to preserve." *Bhargo* is a mystical word formed by the initial letters of *bha*, "to shine"; *ram*, "to delight"; *gam*, "to go"; and *sarva*, "all." The three verbs making a triad and the four letters a tetractys or tetragram.

The Gayatri of Vishnu was also on the same leaf in the following characters which are put into Sanskrit on the opposite side:—

Sadvishnoh paramam padam
Sada pasyanti surayah
Diviva chacshuratatam.

A translation word for word:—

That sun the supreme seat of the godhead, the wise perpetually see (or consider) as an Eye extended over the firmament.

A note is added to the MS.:—

On looking over some old collections of papers I again met with this memorandum which I attest to be true. C. E. Carrington. Jan. 3rd, 1830.¹

This small manuscript as it lies before me, written out in the beautiful handwriting of the eighteenth century, but the ink dim and the paper yellow with age (the few sheets enclosed in a little black silk case tied with ribands), brings up to mind vividly the days when Oriental research was a romance and a passion.

Colonel Vans Kennedy printed the Sanskrit text of the Gayatri in his "Nature and affinity of ancient and Hindu Mythology"

¹ In the "Voyages and Travels" of Viscount Valentia (London, 1809) the author writes: "at the head of the judicial department" (in Ceylon), "is Sir Edmund Carrington, a very able man and a pupil of the late Sir William Jones in Asiatic researches." But I think that my grandfather was not his friend's pupil in the technical sense which might be inferred from this paragraph. He was attached to him by common tastes and by the most sincere esteem which Sir William Jones returned. The only *souvenirs* of his residence in India which my grandfather preserved till his death, were the memorandum on the Gayatri, the proof sheets of the Ordinances of Manu with many notes in pencil, given to him by the translator, and a cinnamon cane decorated by a gold head, which Sir William cut when the two were walking together in a forest. After codifying the laws of Ceylon Sir C. E. Carrington returned to England, having been dissuaded by his doctor from accepting the chief-justiceship of Calcutta. He sat in parliament for a long time for the borough of St. Mawes. His portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence may be seen in the South Kensington Museum as well as that of his beautiful wife, Paulina, daughter of John Belli, a member of a noble Italian family, who went to India and became private Secretary to Warren Hastings.

(1831) and he stated his belief that it had never been published till then.¹ If so, what became of the copy found among Sir William Jones' papers? Vans Kennedy translated it thus:

"*Tat.* Let us meditate on the excellence of the sun, of the god Bharga; may he excite our understandings."

Here there seems to be a misconception about the word "Bharga." I will give one more translation, Prof. Max Müller's:

"We meditate on the adorable light of the divine Savitri, that he may rouse our thoughts."

The Professor goes on to say:

"This Savitri, the sun, is, of course, more than the fiery ball that rises from the sea or over the hills, but nevertheless, the real sun serves as a symbol and it was that symbol which suggested to the supplicant the divine power manifested in the sun."

The Buddhists of Thibet have a sort of Gayatri of their own, the formula of the Jewel in the Lotus, ("Om mani padmê hûm"), which though more obscurely expressed doubtless points to the same idea of supreme creative excellence.

In the development of Brahmanism, or rather in its degeneration, legends grew round the Gayatri which illustrate the frantic tendency to materialise everything which goes side by side in India with the tendency to spiritualise everything till it becomes incomprehensible. These two tendencies must appear where religion is divided between the initiated and the masses who are purposely kept in ignorance. The legends of the Gayatri are such as we could imagine as springing up among some wholly uninstructed Catholic community about the Angelus which for lack of information, grew to be regarded as the name of a Saint, to whom homage was paid. The Gayatri became not a Saint but a milkmaid, in which, perhaps, there was some sort of symbolism, as it is elsewhere said to have been "milked from the Vedas."

These childish fables cannot detract from the sublime character of the ancient words which are for the pious Brahman the most precious inheritance of his race, words which would serve equally well as an essential epitome of the faith of Egypt, or again, of that of Persia. Ahura Mazda, lord of uncreated light, might be addressed in the Gayatri; or Mithra, effulgent with the auroral splendour, who, towards the beginning of the Christian era, was confounded with the perfect God and so passed into the Roman Empire where his cult was on the high road to become paramount when it was checked by the advance of Christianity.

¹ Colebrooke's *Asiatic Researches* in which it was again printed, appeared in 1837.

The Gayatri is still the Brahman Angelus, the salutation ever renewed in the morning and evening sandhyavandana—the twilight worship which celebrates the parting and meeting of day and night. About this Mr. R. W. Frazer¹ writes with penetration and sympathy:—

. . . “ Underlying all is no uncertain sound of the sad wail that ever and again murmurs from the seer's soul, declaring that man's proud answers but mock at its yearning cry to know the invisible, the unbound. The true end of the struggle is found in the one verse handed down from Vedic times and murmured by all orthodox Hindus of to-day as they wake to find the reality of the world rise up around them and still know that beyond the reality is that which they still yearn to know. Like all the best of Vedic hymns this hymn known as the Gâyatrî has its form in its sound and therefore remains untranslatable in words even as does music which rouses, soothes and satisfies in its passing moods. It still holds its sway over the millions who daily repeat it, as it also held entranced the religious fervour of countless millions in the past. The birth-right of the twice-born was to hear whispered in their ear by their spiritual preceptors this sacred prayer of India :—

Om. Tat Savitur varenyam
Bhargo devasya dhîmahî
Dhiyo yo nah pracodayât.

Let us meditate on the to-be-longed-for light of the Inspirer ; may it incite all our efforts.

Once heard in the land of its own birth, once learned from the lips of those whose proudest boast is that they can trace back their descent from the poets who first caught the music which it holds in every syllable, it rings for ever after as India's noblest tribute to the Divine, as an acknowledgment of submissive resignation to the decrees which bid man keep his soul in patience until the day dawns when all things shall be revealed.”

¹A *Literary History of India*, p. 61.