

So'ham and 'Haṃsa

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Hamsa (bird)

The **Hamsa** (from Sanskrit हंस *hamsa*) is an aquatic bird, often considered to be a goose or sometimes a swan. It is used in Indian and Southeast Asian culture as a symbol and a decorative element.

Identification

The word is cognate with Latin "(h)anser", Greek "χίην", German "Gans", English "goose" and Russian "гусь" (all meaning a goose). Standard translations of the term from Sanskrit are as a goose first, and swans, other aquatic birds, or mythical birds as an alternative.^[1] It is normally considered by ornithologists to be most likely to be the bar-headed goose (*Anser indicus*), a migratory bird that is commonly found in winter in the north of the subcontinent.

While the term has traditionally been translated into English as *swan*, it is considered unlikely to be the original meaning. In India swans are never found in feral populations and hardly ever in zoos, though they occur occasionally as vagrants.^[2]

Identification with Brahman

The Hamsa represents perfect union, balance and life. A constant repetition of the word "hamso" changes it to "Soaham", which means "That I am". Hence the hamsa is often identified with the Supreme Spirit or Brahman. The flight of the Hamsa also symbolizes the escape from the cycle of samsara. The bird also has special connotations in the monistic philosophy of Advaita Vedanta - just as the swan lives on water but its feathers are not wetted by water, similarly an Advaitin tries to live in this material world full of Maya, but is unsoiled by its illusionary nature.

Mythology

A large volume of corpus of folklore and literature has grown around it, and a distinct mythology has evolved around the Hamsa. During Vedic times it was considered to relationship with Surya. Then, it signified strength and virility. With the emergence and consolidation of the Hindu scriptures of Upanishads, hamsa acquired more attributes, including being treated as *symbol of purity, detachment, divine knowledge, cosmic breath (prana) and highest spiritual accomplishment*. Such a high level of symbolism was attached to hamsh as it transcends the limitations of the creation around it: it can walk on the earth (prithvi), fly in the sky, and swim in the water. The Hamsa was also used extensively in the art of Gandhara, in conjunction with images of the Shakyamuni Buddha. It is also deemed sacred in the Buddhadharmā.

Lake Manasarovar in Hindu mythology, is seen as the summer abode of the Hamsa. Poetical images are derived from the flight of the swans to that lake in the Himalayas.^[3]

It is said to eat pearls and separate milk from water from a mixture of both. In many texts it is extolled as the king of birds. In one of the Upanishads, a hamsa is also said to possess the sacred knowledge of the Brahman.^[citation needed] The hamsa is also the 'vehicle' (Skt: vahana) of the goddess Saraswati.



A Hamsa sacred goose reliquary, stupa 32 of the Gangu group, Babar Khana, Taxila, Gandhara, 1st century CE. This Hamsa was found inside a granite bowl, with an inscribed gold sheet stating "Shira deposited the relics of her departed parents in the Hamsa". It has a cavity in the middle for the insertion of the relics. British Museum.

Philosophy

A school of philosophy has endeavored to penetrate its name. *Ham-sa* when inverted reads as *sa-ham*, which in Sanskrit means *the oneness of human and the divine*. During pranayama, which is a yogic exercise of breath control, the inhalation is believed sound like *ham*, while the exhalation is believed to sound like *sa*. Thus, a hamsa came to epitomize the prana, the breath of life.

Paramhamsa

In view of the association of a hamsa with several attributes as indicated above, saints and other holy persons are given the title of *paramhamsa*, that is, the *supreme hamsa*. This title is affixed before the name and symbolizes that the particular person has reached a high level of spirituality and grace, though it may also be affixed as a postposition, for example, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

Contemporary usage

The name in other languages in which it is culturally important are Hindi: *hans*, Burmese: ဟံသာ, IPA: [hínθà], and commonly spelt *hintha* or *hinthar*; Mon: ဟံသာ, [hɔŋsa] or *hongsa*; Shan: ဟံသာ, [haŋ˧ sʰaː-] or *hong*; Thai: หงส์, [hǒŋ]. The hintha (hamsa) is widely depicted in Burmese art, and has been adopted as the symbol of the Mon people. It is also depicted on the subdivision flags of Bago Division and Mon State, both of which have been historic Mon strongholds.



Hamsa border
on the
Kanishka
casket, 2nd
century CE



Hamsa birds
between the
architectural spires
on the Bimaran
casket, 1st century
CE



Flag of Bago Division, Myanmar,
which depicts the hamsa



Flag of Mon State, Myanmar,
which depicts the hamsa

References

- [1] <http://webapps.uni-koeln.de/tamil/>
- [2] ANSERIFORMES - Birds of India - Ducks, Geese, Swans (<http://www.birding.in/orders/anseriformes.htm>)
- [3] Kalidasa's maha-kavya *Raghuvamśa*

- *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend* (ISBN 0-500-51088-1) by Anna Dallapiccola

Further reading

- *The Goose in Indian Literature and Art* (Leiden, 1962) by J. Ph. Vogel

Soham (Sanskrit)

Soham (so 'ham सो ऽहम्^[1]) is the Sanskrit for "I am He/That"(also look at Tat Tvam Asi).

When it applies to a person's name, according to Vedic philosophy it means identifying oneself with the universe or ultimate reality. Some say that when a child is born it cries *Koham-Koham* which means *Who am I?* That is when the universe replies back *Soham. You are the same as I am.* It also stems from the Sanskrit word which means, "self pride."

When used for meditation, "Soham" acts as a natural mantra to control one's breathing pattern, to help achieve deep breath, and to gain concentration.

- *Sooooo...* is the sound of inhalation, and is remembered in the mind along with that inhalation.
- *Hummmm...* is the sound of exhalation, and is remembered in the mind along with that exhalation.

Soham is also considered a mantra in Tantrism and Kriya Yoga, known also as *Ajapa mantra*, *Ajapa Gayatri*, *Hamsa Gayatri*, *Hamsa mantra*, *prana mantra*, *Shri Paraprasada mantra*, *paramatma-mantra*, and as such used notably on its own, in the meditation practice *ajapa japa* and in the *kriya* practice *shabda sanchalana*.

The mantra is also inverted from *so 'ham* (the sandhi of *saḥ + aham*) to *ham + sa*. The combination of *so 'haṃ haṃsaḥ* has also been interpreted as "I myself am the Swan", where the swan symbolizes the Atman. An etymology of *haṃsa* "swan, goose" (in fact cognate with English *goose*) as from *ahaṃ sa* "I am that" is found in the 14th century commentary on the Vedas by Sayana (14th century).^[2]

Soham

so 'ham is an emphatic form of *aham*, the first-person pronoun ("I"), translating to "I myself".^[3] Interpreted as a nominal sentence, it can also be read as "It/He is I". Its use as a mantra emerges in mystical Sanskrit literature of the medieval period. The mantra is sometimes claimed to originate with the Isha Upanishad (verse 16), which ends:

yat te rūpaṃ kalyāṇatamaṃ tat te paśyāmi yo 'sāv [asau puruṣaḥ] so 'haṃ asmi

"The light which is thy fairest form, I see it. I am [that] what He is (viz. the person in the sun)" (trans. Max Müller)^[4]

In several Advaita Vedanta Upanishads

- *Dhyana-Bindu Upanishad*
- *Hamsa Upanishad*
- *Maha Vakya Upanishad*
- *Suka Rahasya Upanishad*
- *Surya Upanishad*
- *Tripuratapini Upanishad*
- *Yoga Chudamani Upanishad*
- *Yoga Sikha Upanishad*

Tantras

- *Gandharva Tantra*
- *Kali Tantra*
- *Kularnava Tantra*
- *Mahanirvana Tantra*^[5]
- *Niruttara Tantra*
- *Shri Nathanavaratnamalika*

Stotras

- *Bhaja Gaureesam*

- *Gowresa Ashtakam*
- *Shakthi Mahimnah Stotram*
- *Tripurasundari Vijaya Sthava*

Adi Shankara's *Vakya Vritti* subsequent works in the Nath tradition foundational for Hatha yoga

- Matsyendranath's *Yogavishaya*
- Gorakshanath's *Siddha Siddhanta Paddhati*
- Gorakshanath's *Yoga Bija*
- Gorakshanath's *Goraksha Shataka*
- Jñāndev's *Lakhota*^[6]
- Jñāndev's *Yogapar Abhangamala*^[7]

and foundational for Swara yoga the original script *Shiva Svarodaya* as well as the classical yoga treatises *Gheranda Samhita* and *Shiva Samhita* all make mention of *soham* and *hamsa* describing its significance and when teaching uniformly teaches *So* on inhalation and *ham* on exhalation.

This traditional practice in its several forms and its background is described in numerous other books.

Hamsa

Swami Muktananda - although teaching the traditional *So* on inhalation and *ham* on exhalation as a letter from 1968 to Franklin Jones reveals - later published a book teaching *Ham* on inhalation and *sa* on exhalation. This practice is described in several later books all referring to Muktananda.

The teaching of *Ham* on inhalation and *sa* on exhalation is allegedly alluded to in a text of Kaśmir Śaivism, the *Vijnana Bhairava*:

Air is exhaled with the sound SA and inhaled with the sound HAM. Then reciting of the mantra HAMSA is continuous

—Vijnana Bhairava, 155a

However, this verse 155a is not found in the *Vijnana Bhairava* first published in 1918 in the Kashmir Series of Text and Studies but is quoted from a commentary by the Abhinavagupta disciple Kṣemarāja in his *Shiva Sutra Vimarshini* (commentary on the Shiva Sutras) in later editions of *Vijnana Bhairava*.^[8]

Notes

[1] In English language literature also printed as *So'ham*, *So Ham*, *So-aham*, *Sohum*, *So Hum*, *Saham*, *Sa'ham*, *Sau-ha*, *Sah-karena/Sahkara*=the sound of Sa

[2] Monier-Williams, s.v. "".

[3] Monier-Williams, s.v. "6.": "it is often for emphasis connected with another pron. as with ', ', '&c. (e.g. ', ', 'I (or thou) that very person"

[4] The Upanishads, Part 1 (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01243.htm>) 1879, p. 313. Müller gives the footnote: "Asau purushah should probably be omitted", taking these words as an explanatory gloss that was accidentally incorporated in the text.

[5] Mahanirvana Tantra is claimed to be a juridical fabrication in:

[6] Lakhota = sealed letter

[7] Yogapar Abhangamala = collection of songs on yoga

[8] reprinted and published as:

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