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THE SHRĪ HARI VANSH MANTRA-YANTRA:
SACRED SOUND, SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION,
AND VRINDAVAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

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This short piece documents one aspect of my involvement with the Vrindavan environment, a relationship which spans almost two decades. I have labeled the philosophy within which I have worked the Vrindavan Ecological Concept (VEC).¹ Here I explore the significance and meaning of a specific combined sound-symbol representation derived from this work and relate it to several aspects of Vrindavan environmentalism. I have previously referred to the *Shrī Hit Yantra* (Figure 1) as the 'Chintan Symbol'² and the 'Concentric Symbol'.³ These non-Sanskritic names were used to make the yantra (symbol) more applicable to discussions about *chintan* (meditative contemplation) and *concentricity* (the state of being balanced with inner personal and outer world functionings), respectively. Here I use the expression Shrī Hit Yantra as a more precise descriptor of the same symbol and couple it with the *Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra*. I call this Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra and Shrī Hit Yantra combination the *Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra* (Figure 2).



Figure 1 - The Shrī Hit Yantra

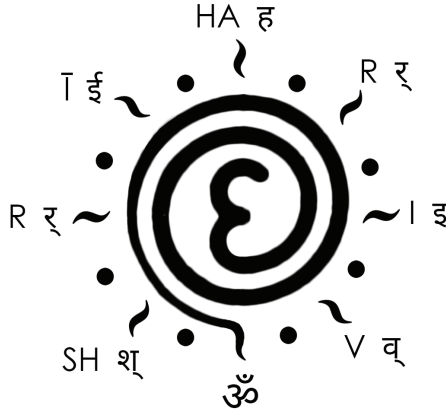


Figure 2 – The Shri Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra using Roman and Devanāgarī script

Vrindavan, the terrestrial stage, is one example of a podium or playing field where the divine sporting drama of the human interacting with nature takes place. The male-female metaphors and representations of the divine couple are Rādhā and Krishna. Among several other meditation tools the VEC proposes, Shri Hit Mantra-Yantra is one of the most congenial to an ecological stance toward Krishna philosophy. Where the VEC is principally focused on the *dhāma* (abode, nature) aspect of the *nāma, rūpa, līlā, dhāma* apparatus, my concern here focuses on *nāma* and its symbolized form.

This *nāma* and mantra position is an integral part of the *hit-sādhanā* (spiritual discipline associated with Vrindavan) and the *hit-upāsana, yugal-upāsana, and rās-upāsana* (devotion to nature, worship of conjugality, and prayer through divine aesthetics inspired by Vrindavan) of the VEC. I detail a symbolic representation of mantric-yantric duality, an interdependent dependency and a dependent interdependency between sound and symbol. This brief philosophical treatise relates the human, as a physical, mental, emotional, and pranic being and the natural world via a fusing of the yantric quality of the Shri Hit Yantra with the mantric aspect of Shri Hari Vansh.

Like other temple traditions or *sampradāyas*, the Rādhā-Vallabha Sampradāya (RVS), founded and based in Vrindavan, has its own mantra-yantra-tantra representation.⁴ This tripartite statement comprises an integral characteristic of the theology of the RVS. The most well-known RVS mantra and form of greeting is *Shri Hari Vansh*. These three Sanskrit lexemes—*Shri, Hari, and Vansh*—as

bīja atoms contain the mantric totality which can be explicated in terms of its meaning, its cyclic nature, and its humming and yogic effect. In addition, the mantra has an ecological explanation, which is intently connected to modern environmental concerns. These perspectives are derived from the philosophy of the RVS temple's founder Hit Hari Vansh Goswāmi.⁵ This mantra work comprises a larger study of the trinity of *mantra-yantra-tantra* associated with an environmental interpretation of Hit Hari Vansh Goswāmi's theology.

Explicating Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra

The symbolic syntax [of *mantra-yantra-tantra*] thus integrates all the dimensions of the tantric universe. It is based on the holistic view of life characteristic of Indian thought. In the ultimate sense, the separation of elements of whatever kind is illusory. The distinctions between psychic and cosmos, deities and mantras, are contingent. The fundamental aim of ritual and meditation on the yantra is to fuse all the dimensions into a state of oneness.⁶

In a recent article in *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*⁷, I put forward a concise yet plausible link between the RVS and a practical application of its philosophy, especially the *hit* element—selfless love, compassion—so integral to its theology and to modern environmental concerns in Vrindavan. Claiming that any mantric function is connected to universal, cosmic, and environmental bearing is not in any way new to mantra theory. Such transference from thought—equated to mantra—through symbol—equated to *yantra*—and put into practice—equated to *tantra*—is key to any basic and founding postulate of sound-symbol meaning and its contemporary reinterpretation.

In keeping with the eclectic history of the RVS and its less standard traditions, which, for example, are seen in Beck's position that “[e]ssentially rejecting most of the normative Sanskrit literature and ritual practice of Vaishnavism, Rādhā-Vallabha theology stood more in debt to local folk expressions found in the region of its origin, which it combined with its own unique religious perspective”⁸, this study of Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra is a contemporary analysis of earlier ideas. This repackaging is borne out of my personal interaction with Vrindavan ecologist and Rādhā-Vallabhī, Shrī Sevak Sharaṇ, a well-known Vrindavan environmentalist with whom I have worked since 1998.

There are a multitude of contemporary and classical definitions of the *mantra-yantra-tantra* trinity, a trilogy that can be a complete doctrinal proposal for human-in-world interaction. In this tripartite rubric I use the following definitions: mantra depicts the primary basics, the semantics of things, and that which

can potentially be signified and represented; *yantra* is the physical and aesthetic representation and manifestation, embodiment, representation, and dwelling place of the mantra: “Every *yantra* is a sacred enclosure (*temenos*), a ‘dwelling’ or receptacle of *Ishta-devatā* (the chosen, tutelary, deity)”⁹; *tantra* means application or practice.

Leaving aside the tantric element of this trilogy, Madhu Khanna gives an excellent definition of the *mantra-yantra* composite:

Inseparable from *yantras* are the subtle vibrations which help to intensify their power. These sound elements are often represented by letters inscribed on the *yantra*, and in principle are associated with mystic combinations of Sanskrit letters. The inner dynamics can never be understood in isolation from the system of sound dynamics, as the two combine to make up the complete ‘definition’ of the divine. The *yantra-mantra* complex is basically an equation that unites space (*ākāśa*), which in its gross form appears as shapes, and vibrations, which in their finite forms occur as the spoken or written word.¹⁰

In a similar fashion, my description of the *Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra* (Figure 2) necessarily implies and implicates a yantric depiction (Figure 1). The components of the *yantra* are the spiral (described below) and the eight ‘~’ symbols separated for aesthetic appeal by eight corresponding ‘•’ points. The ‘~’ symbols represent small scale dualities at the eight cardinal directions (*dishas*) of what is a micro diagram of centre meeting periphery.

With two undepicted ‘~’ and their concomitant directions, one forwards or skywards out of the symbol and one projecting backwards or downwards towards the earth, these 10 *dishas* of the *Shrī Hit Yantra* are strongly grounded in human centered interpretations of the Divine displayed in the world and nature. It is in the incorporation of the sounded with the symbolized that a humanistic and ecological comprehension of *Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra* and its relevance to the RVS is realized.

The *Shrī Hit Yantra* is dualistic in its symbolic depiction; the *Shrī Hari Vansh mantra* is triadic in its mantric manifestation. If we start from the center, and we move outwards, we can go in two directions. One direction goes one way and leads us back inside; the other goes outside into the world while still being connected to the center. If we think of our existence as consisting of life energy at the center, followed by our emotional, mental, physical and environmental-natural set up, this cyclic emblem takes shape.

The symbol represents what I term a concentric relationship, a situation where we aim to engage in balanced inner dealings with ourselves and others and in external dealings with the environment. The *Shrī Hit Yantra* was

developed by Shrī Sevak Sharaṇ in Vrindavan in the late 1970s as a means to understand the Human-Nature-Divine interaction.

Applying the Shrī Hari Vansh mantra to the figurative rendition of the Shrī Hit Yantra to create the Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra leads to three principal constitutive components: (1) the mantra's meaning and the semantics of its linguistic nuclei in relation to specific ecological and theological manifestations and principles in modern Vrindavan; (2) the cyclic effect that arises during the application of the chanting practice and which is indicative of a more involved ecological and *sādhana*-based representation of relations implicating the cyclic nature of human self with cosmos; and (3) the humming effect induced as a result of linguistic and vocalic normalization which can be produced through a rapid chanting of the mantra.

While the linguistic and formal basis of the Shrī Hari Vansh mantra is associated with the personage and theology of the RVS, its founder Hit Hari Vansh Goswāmi, and his principal theological work *Hit Chaurāsī Pad*, my presentation is based largely on the practice of the mantra and the research I have conducted on the philosophy of the mantra and its sound and environmental representation in cooperation with Shrī Sevak Sharaṇ.

Shrī Sevak Sharaṇ's family association with Hit Hari Vansh Goswāmi and the RVS was both formal and somewhat conservative, but his independent thinking and scientific approach to theological matters led him to extract elements, or what we in cooperation termed *basics*—the mantric or semantic principles—of what he believed to be essential to understanding Hit Hari Vansh Goswāmi's mysticism from a hyper ecological stance. These three theoretical components in order are:

1. **Meaning.** *Shrī* is everything: nature, time, all, the entire cosmic wealth. Everything which exists is contained in and is a part of *Shrī*. Whatever we need comes under *Shrī*, nothing we need is or can be outside of *Shrī*. *Shrī* can be translated as nature, the feminine, Lakshmi-made-world. The inspirer and igniter of *Shrī* is *Hari*, that being—he, she, or it—who takes away what we do not need and gives us what we do need. In the same way that the owner of something will give you whatever you require without worrying about your qualification, *Hari* can be translated as the Center, the Divine, inner *prāna*, spirituality, the unmanifest which becomes manifest as form in the natural world, and the essence and source of the Cosmic Contradiction—*yugal-bhāv*. *Hari* takes away all shortcomings and fulfills all requirements. If one needs *Shrī*, one should go to *Hari*. *Vansh* means the entire cosmic family. *Vansh* can be translated as society, the human community of which we as individuals are a

part. So together the meaning aspect of the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra combined points towards strengthening relationship between Nature, the Divine, and Humanity. The Shri Hari Vansh trinity can be equated to the soil, soul, society association.

2. **Cyclic nature.** The Shri Hari Vansh Mantra is a cyclic mantra. This is key because many mantras are linear in their make up. That is, they have a start and an end which do not necessarily flow into each other. Where the Aum mantra starts, stops, and continues, the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra is constant, consistent, cyclic, and actually contains Aum. In fact, the shape of Aum is similar to the Shri Hit Yantra. On the internal level, where the bifurcated and bidirectional nature of the mantra is apparent, and on a more external level and in the mantra's linguistic manifestation, where the consonants disappear, Aum remains. Shri Hit Yantra enables a cyclic approach to accessing the higher states of consciousness yogis access when chanting and visualizing Aum Yantra in its linear manifestation. The Aum symbol is seen in heights of meditation. As the lightning symbol is a symbol for electricity, the Aum symbol is a symbol for Brahman (spirit, the ultimate reality). The Vrindavan perspective submits that the Shri Hit Yantra's pictorial and linguistic representation is an alternative scientific explanation of Aum in the world and within human and natural environments.

3. **Humming effect.** Because the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra is flexible in its practice and activation, it can be chanted at any speed, at any pitch, and either by being sung or hummed. During fast humming the consonants of the mantra disappear and only the vowels remain. Because of the meaning of the mantra, its cyclic effect, and its humming nature, the mantra revolves and resounds around and in our entire existence. In a colloquial manner, Shri Sevak Sharan and I describe the mantra and its chanting as being like a cosmic accelerator with otherworldly implications; it takes off from the ground, revolves around the cosmos and then returns. The yogic and physiological effect of humming the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra can be compared to the practice of *bhrāmari prāṇāyama* (humming bee breath). The humming created during this breath control practice, where the practitioner focuses on the sound vibration itself and on ajña chakra (the third eye point). The Bihar School of Yoga proposes “Bhrāmari relieves stress and cerebral tension, alleviating anger, anxiety and insomnia, and reducing blood pressure. It speeds up the healing of body tissue and may be practiced after operations. It strengthens and improves the voice and eliminates throat ailments”.¹¹

Because these components converge from all sides, their compounded

effect can help to one focus on one's own center without any external aids. When sounds of the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra are combined with the graphic representation of the Shri Hit Yantra, the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra evolves. This mantra-yantra is both scientific in terms of its spatial and mathematical representation and aesthetic in terms of its beauty and ability to be coupled with Roman, Devanāgarī, Bengali, and Oriya scripts. Figure 2 presents the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra with both Roman and Hindi letters applied.

Through this pictorial representation, we see the connection between outer peripheral elements—the sounds, the signs, the linguistic elements—and the inner elements—meaning, semantic representation and manifestation. The center of this mantra, which at most is a theoretical representation of the Centre, Brahman, or *prāṇa*, represents what can be termed the Divine Contradiction. It can be depicted in terms of a spiral which has its beginning at the center and then spirals outwards towards the periphery and then back. While everything is the center and exists at the center, from this point all emanates towards the periphery, which according to the VEC can be equated to nature and the environment.

The chanting of Shri Hari Vansh Mantra and its meditative application to Shri Hit Yantra enables and encourages both movement centrifugally out into the world from center or centripetally from the world towards center. At any point, things are emanating outwards from the center in one direction. At the same time, things are emanating in an equal and opposite way in the opposing direction. The thought-symbol connection of the *mantra-yantra* polarity and the center-periphery rendering and nature of the actual chanting of Shri Hari Vansh Mantra in the context of Shri Hit Yantra is a well-founded signification of the apparent duality between human and world. It is this discernable division, which is intended to be relieved during the tantric (practice) application of the mantra-yantra.

Shri Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra as a Text of Nature

The critical component of the epistemology and theology of the VEC is that the world and nature are a manifestation of the incessant interaction between two equal and opposite forces. The Shri Hit Mantra-Yantra represents this deeper mandate in mantra-yantra form. This interaction, and the proposed theology of Rādhā—the feminine—and Krishna—the male—as the Divine Couple in Hit Hari Vansh Goswāmi's writings is represented exquisitely in the world and in nature. This *yugal-bhāv*, the realization of the conjugal affairs of the human in consonance with themselves—Krishna consciousness—in consonance with an

intimate other—Rādhā consciousness—in consonance with nature—Vrindavan consciousness—and in consonance with outer society—Vraj consciousness, can be sanctioned and even accelerated by the chanting practice of Shrī Hit Mantra incorporated with the meditative awareness of Shrī Hit Yantra.

The Shrī Hit Mantra-Yantra is a micro sound-symbolism that embodies duality, balanced environmental dealings and balanced human relationships. It embodies the human as an integral element of Shri—the cosmos, nature, everything—under the jurisdiction of Hari—the Divine, that being who steals and gives everything—in direction and interaction with Vansh—the cosmic family, people, persons, things and situations. In this sense the Shri Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra is a depiction of the divine trinity depicted in most religions, i.e. Nature (Shri), Hari (the Divine, spirituality) and Vansh (cosmic family, society, the other cast members on the stage of life). The *mantra-yantra* presents the possibility of reaching a balanced state whereby there is consonance between the human and the natural world.

A consideration of Shri Hit Mantra-Yantra infers that there are requisite cultural negotiations required for translating and (re)presenting environmental concerns beyond specific cultural borders and to wider audiences in broader fields. An understanding of this natural vision of life as espoused by mantric exemplifications in Vrindavan and documented by saints such as Hit Hari Vansh Goswāmi and more modern exponents of Vrindavan environmentalism like Shri Sevak Sharan is relevant beyond the geographical and philosophical confines of Vrindavan and to other environmental situations worldwide.

Endnotes

1. I thank Farzad Zarringhalam for help with the figures and Arvind Iyengar for editorial and proofreading assistance.

See Joshua Nash, 2012, 'Re-examining ecological approaches to Vrindavan pilgrimage', in Manderson, L., Smith, W. & Tomlinson, M. (eds), *Flows of Faith: Religious Reach and Community in Asia and the Pacific*. Springer: Dordrecht & New York, 109, for a description of the assumptions of the VEC. I give a detailed description of my Vrindavan environmental fieldwork in Joshua Nash, 2015, 'Vrindavan: The human sanctuary', *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 24(1): 55-66.

2. Nash, J. 2010, 'On Chintan', in *Proceedings of the 18th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Adelaide, 5-8 July 2010*: 9. This peer reviewed conference paper was previously available at <www.adelaide.edu.au/asaa2010/reviewed_papers/Nash-Joshua.pdf> and is now available at <www.researchgate.net/profile/Joshua_Nash/publication/ns?pubType=inProceedings>

3. Joshua Nash, 2010, "One and One Equals Eleven": Spiritual and Ecological Mathematics from Vrindavan, India', Paper presented at Biennial Conference in Philosophy,

Religion and Culture, 3 October 2010, Catholic Institute of Sydney, Strathfield (Sydney), New South Wales. Paper in possession of author.

4. The interested reader is referred to more detailed accounts of the ontological and scriptural foundations of the RVS and the aesthetic import of Hari Vansh's *Hit Chaurasi Pad* in the following works: F. S. Growse's (1882), *Mathura: A district memoir*, Allahabad: North-West Provinces & Oudh Government Press, pp. 199-200, gives background into Hari Vansh's birth and some of the reasoning behind his establishing the medieval Radha-Vallabh temple. There are two principal texts dedicated to the academic study of Hari Vansh's poetry: R. Snell. (1991), *The Eighty-Four Hymns of Hita Harivamsa: An edition of the Caurasi Pada*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; C. J. White. (1977), *The Caurasi Pad of Sri Hit Harivams: Introduction, translation, notes, and edited Braj Bhasa Text*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. Pratibha Goswami's (2010) translated and edited volume, *Hit Harivamsa Hit Chaurasi: The 84 hymns of Divine Love*, Bensheim, Germany: Tattva Viveka Edition, is a more popular and devotionally focused volume. L. Rosenstein's (1998), 'The Radhavallabha and the Haridasi Sampradayas: A Comparison' *Journal of Vaisnava Studies* 7(1): 5-18, provides background into the *rasika* approaches to the Vaishnavism practiced by Hit Hari Vansh Goswami and Swami Haridas. Guy Beck's chapter 'Krishna as Loving Husband of God: The Alternative Krishnology of the Radhavallabha Sampradaya' in G. L. Beck (ed.) *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and vernacular variations on a Hindu deity*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press: 63-90, gives an excellent interpretation of the RVS and Hari Vansh Goswami's theology.

5. The use of *Hit* (with capital H) is common in proper names associated with the RVS. It is used in a similar way to *Shrī* in other Indian names. *Hit* means selfless love.

6. Khanna, M. 2007[1979]. *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*. London: Thames and Hudson, 22.

7. Nash, J. 2015, 'Vrindavan: The human sanctuary', 60-61.

8. Beck, Guy L. *Alternative Krishnas: regional and vernacular variations on a Hindu deity*. SUNY Press, 2012, 12.

9. Khanna, op cit.: 12.

10. Khanna, op cit.: 34.

11. Saraswati, S.S. 2002[1969], *Asana Pranayama Banda Mudra*. Munger, Bihar: Yoga Publications Trust, 391.