

Breaking the Shiv Dhanush: Rama's Redefinition of Pranava (OM) in the Light of Vedantic Evolution

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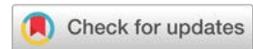
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Abstract

The episode of Rama breaking the Shiv Dhanush is widely interpreted as a demonstration of divine strength and destiny. However, when viewed through the lens of Advaita Vedanta and the Mandukya Upanishad, this event reveals a deeper, metaphysical meaning. This paper proposes that the Shiv Dhanush represents the Pranava (OM) as defined in the earlier Yugas by Shiva, emphasizing detachment and asceticism. Rama, embodying the dharma of his Yuga, redefined OM not through rejection but through transcendence and integration with action, dharma, and love. The encounter with Parashurama becomes a symbolic philosophical validation of this redefinition. The discussion is rooted in the Vedantic emphasis on the Mandukya Upanishad, which Adi Shankaracharya called the most essential among all 108.

Keywords: Shiv Dhanush, Pranav (OM), Vedantic, Mandukya Upnishad

1. Introduction

The *Ramayana*, apart from its narrative grandeur, serves as a vessel of layered spiritual wisdom. Among its most pivotal moments is Lord Rama's breaking of the *Shiv Dhanush* at Sita's swayamvar. While often read as an act of physical valor, a Vedantic perspective invites deeper



scrutiny. Could the bow be a symbolic construct? Could the event represent not brute strength but the **redefinition of a spiritual paradigm**?

This paper explores the hypothesis that the *Shiv Dhanush* is a **symbol of Pranava (OM)** as defined by Shiva in previous eras, and that Rama's act of breaking it signifies **transcending and reinterpreting** that definition in alignment with the evolving spiritual requirements of his time.

1.1 The Divine Bow: Pinaka and Its Legacy

Pinaka, the celestial bow of Shiva, symbolizes immense power, divine will, and spiritual focus.

It is not merely a weapon but an instrument of **cosmic alignment and destruction of illusion**.

Shiva used it to destroy **Tripura**, the three demonic cities representing ego, ignorance, and attachment — symbolizing the soul's entrapment in worldly delusion.

Later, this same bow became the centerpiece of **Sita's svayamvara**, where **Rama**, avatar of Vishnu, effortlessly lifted and broke it — an act that metaphorically echoes the **shattering of illusion**.

1.2 ॐ Om as the Bow (Dhanush)

In the **Mundaka Upanishad**, Om is described as the **bow**, the soul as the **arrow**, and **Brahman** as the target:

"Om is the bow, the self is the arrow, and Brahman is the target. One must be absorbed in Brahman just as an arrow becomes one with the target."

This imagery resonates deeply with the act of **Rama breaking the bow** — symbolizing a seeker's **transcendence beyond form, sound, and thought**.

1.3 Tripura and the Three States of Consciousness

The destruction of **Tripura** by Shiva and the structure of **Om (A-U-M)** are intimately connected.

They reflect the **three states of consciousness**:



State	Corresponds to	Metal (Tripura)	Symbolism
Jāgrat (Waking)	‘A’ in Om	Iron	Physical reality and action
Svapna (Dreaming)	‘U’ in Om	Silver	Subtle impressions and imagination
Suṣupti (Deep Sleep without dreams)	‘M’ in Om	Gold	Causal state of ignorance and rest

Together, these three states make up the **illusory layers of the mind**, still within the realm of **Māyā** (illusion).

1.4 Breaking of Pinaka = Transcendence of AUM

When **Rama breaks the Pinaka**, it isn't merely a test of strength — it is the **shattering of conditioned consciousness**:

- He transcends the **iron of waking**, the **silver of dreaming**, and the **gold of deep sleep**.
- He symbolically **destroys the three states encoded in AUM**, moving beyond them to **Turiya**, the **fourth state** — the silent, timeless awareness.

Thus, the act of breaking Pinaka becomes a **spiritual metaphor for piercing through illusion and redefining Om** — no longer just a sound, but a **gateway to absolute consciousness**.

1.5 Turiya: The Ultimate Silence

According to the **Mandukya Upanishad**, **Turiya** is:

"Neither inward nor outward consciousness... unseen, ungraspable, beyond senses, beyond inference, beyond thought... the end of duality — the Self."

Turiya is the silence **after** AUM — not the sound, but what remains **when all sounds cease**.

This is the **state of Rama**, the **embodiment of Dharma**, whose act of breaking the bow represents the soul's arrival at the **truth beyond name, form, and states**.



1.6 A Sacred Act Beyond Time

The **breaking of Pinaka** is not just the beginning of Rama and Sita's union — it is a **cosmic signal**, a turning point in spiritual symbolism. It tells us that:

- **Om must be meditated upon not merely as a sound, but as a doorway.**
- One must transcend the **iron of the body**, the **silver of the mind**, and the **gold of unconscious rest.**
- The **true Self lies beyond — in Turiya**, in the unstruck silence.

“Rama did not break a bow. He broke the illusion of duality, redefining Om not as a mantra to chant, but as a mirror to dissolve.”

This understanding bridges **mythology with metaphysics**, offering the modern seeker a deeper way to engage with **ancient wisdom** — not as story, but as **living truth**.

2. Janaka’s Court: A Realm of Brahma-Jnana, Not Physical Trial

King Janaka, ruler of Mithila and father of Sita, is revered in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* as a **Rajarshi** — a king who attained Brahma-jnana while living amidst royal duties. His court was a center of spiritual debates and philosophical inquiry, where even sages like Yajnavalkya were invited to discuss the nature of the Self.

In one event, Janaka offered **a thousand cows adorned with gold-tipped horns** as a prize to the Brahmin who could explain the highest truth. Given Janaka’s disposition, it is unlikely that he would set a mere test of physical strength to choose his daughter’s husband. The Shiv Dhanush, then, must represent something deeper — possibly a **symbol of inner mastery** rather than martial might.

3. Shiv Dhanush as Pranava (OM): The Metaphysical Interpretation

3.1 Traditional Symbolism of the Bow

In the *Valmiki Ramayana*, the bow is described as an ancient, divine weapon of Shiva — powerful beyond measure, unbendable by ordinary mortals. However, this description mirrors metaphysical symbolism found in the *Mandukya Upanishad*:



“Pranava (OM) is the bow, the Self is the arrow, and Brahman is the target. One must shoot the Self with steadiness into Brahman.”

— *Mandukya Upanishad, Verse 12*

This parallel reveals that the **Shiv Dhanush may represent OM itself**, a vehicle through which consciousness (Atman) aims toward union with Brahman.

3.2 Shankaracharya’s Endorsement of the Mandukya Upanishad

Adi Shankaracharya, the greatest exponent of Advaita Vedanta, emphasized the primacy of the *Mandukya Upanishad*. He is recorded to have said:

“If one cannot study all the 108 Upanishads, let them study the Mandukya alone; it alone is sufficient for liberation.”

This highlights the centrality of **OM as the essence of spiritual inquiry**, and further strengthens the thesis that breaking the bow equates to **liberating OM from form-bound interpretations**.

4. Rama as Redefiner of Pranava in a New Yuga

While Shiva’s orientation toward OM is linked to **detachment, renunciation, and destruction of ego through tapas**, Rama introduces a **new dharmic interpretation** of the same essence:

- OM as the **vibration of compassionate action**
- Realization not through renunciation, but through **righteous living (Maryada)**
- Brahma-jnana not in solitude, but in **duty, relationship, and service**

The breaking of the Dhanush is thus a **breaking of the old symbolic framework**, not its negation but **its evolution**.

5. Parashurama’s Confrontation: A Vedantic Validation

The immediate aftermath of the Dhanush-breaking is the arrival of **Parashurama**, the warrior sage and Shiva’s ardent disciple. Often seen as an angry ascetic, Parashurama’s role here may actually be that of a **philosophical gatekeeper**.

He demands justification: *“Who dares to break what was consecrated by Shiva?”* This is not a challenge of ego, but a call for **spiritual accountability**.



Rama's calm response, his humble bearing, and his silent assertion of realization lead to Parashurama's recognition. The sage withdraws, not in defeat, but in **acknowledgment of a higher truth**.

This encounter is a **passing of spiritual torch** — from one mode of OM (renunciation) to another (dharma through engagement).

6. Implications: Evolving Sanatana Dharma through Yugas

Sanatana Dharma is *eternal* but not *static*. Its truths adapt in form while retaining their core. The reinterpretation of OM by Rama:

- Affirms that **Self-realization can coexist with worldly life**
- Validates **integration over isolation** as a spiritual path
- Reinforces **Vedantic fluidity**, where **truth is context-sensitive**

By breaking the Shiv Dhanush, Rama demonstrated that spiritual wisdom must **break free from its containers**, however sacred, to remain **alive and applicable**.

7. Shiv Dhanush and Pranav Omkār: A Spiritual Correlation

ॐ Pranav (Om) – The Sound of the Universe

- **Om (AUM)** is the **Pranava**, the primordial sound from which all creation emanates.
- It is composed of three syllables:
 - **A (Jāgrat)** – Waking state
 - **U (Svapna)** – Dreaming state
 - **M (Suṣupti)** – Deep sleep
- The **silence** after M is **Turiya**, the transcendent, non-dual state of pure consciousness.

Shiv Dhanush (Pinaka) – The Bow of Shiva

- The **Pinaka** is the divine bow of **Lord Shiva**, the cosmic destroyer — the one who dissolves illusion (Māyā).
- It was used to destroy **Tripura**, symbolic of the **three states of bondage or illusion**.
- It represents:
 - **Control over ego, senses, and illusion**



- **The power to transcend the triad of experience**

Symbolic Equivalence: Shiv Dhanush \approx Pranav Omkār

Shiv Dhanush (Pinaka)	Pranav (Om)	Spiritual Meaning
Divine weapon of Shiva	Primordial sound of Brahman	Both are tools of transcendence
Destroyer of Tripura (three cities)	Composed of A-U-M (three states)	Represent the three states of experience — waking, dreaming, and deep sleep
Bow that Rama breaks	Sound that must be transcended	Breaking the bow = transcending the illusion encoded in AUM
Used by Shiva to restore cosmic order	Used by seeker to reach Brahman	Both lead to liberation (Moksha)
Bow = instrument of transformation	Om = sonic tool for Self-realization	Tools for shifting from individual ego to universal Self

Deeper Insight: Breaking the Bow = Dissolving the Ego

- **Rama breaking the Shiv Dhanush** is symbolically equivalent to a seeker **piercing through** the layers of AUM and entering **Turiya**.
- Just as **Shiva uses Pinaka** to destroy the three cities of ego/illusion, the **Yogi uses Om** to burn away ignorance.
- The **breaking of the bow** = the **collapse of identification** with the three avasthās (states).

Thus, **Pinaka is the form** and **Om is the sound**, but **both are vehicles for the same realization** — the destruction of tripartite illusion and attainment of non-dual truth.

Turiya: The Silence Beyond

In both symbols:

- The **end goal** is not the bow or the sound, but what **lies beyond** them.



- For Shiva, **Tripura's destruction** leads to **cosmic stillness**.
- For the Yogi, **Om leads to Turiya**, the **fourth**, unchanging state beyond time and space.

The **Shiv Dhanush (Pinaka)** and **Pranav Omkār** are two aspects of the **same metaphysical reality**:

- One is the **weapon of silence**,
- The other is the **sound of silence**.
- One is wielded by the **Lord of Destruction (Shiva)**,
- The other by the **seeker of liberation**.

Both aim to **pierce illusion**, dissolve the **threefold bondage**, and awaken us to the **pure light of the Self**.

"Om is the Dhanush. The soul is the arrow. Brahman is the target.

The bow of Shiva and the sound of Om — both are drawn to strike the illusion and awaken the infinite."

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