

THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF YAJNA AND SACRIFICIAL FIRE: A CRITIQUE

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1. Introduction

Vedic sacrifices are an ancient religious institution. The Vedas and their allied works are intimately related to them. Hence, an understanding of the Vedic sacrificial system and the role of fire in the context of rituals will definitely help us to understand and esteem not only the Vedas, but also the Upanishads.

The word *yajna* is commonly used to indicate any work that involves great effort and needs the active co-operation of many. Derived from the verbal root 'yaj' (to worship, to sacrifice, to bestow), both the words *yajna* and *yaga* mean the same thing: worship in the form of offering oblations, a sacrifice unto the gods. *Yajna* is also defined as the *tyaga* (giving up, renunciation, offering) of a *dravya* (a specified material) unto a *devata* (a specific deity). Rituals are to be performed by the worshipper. In the context of ritual worship the worshipper uses gestures, recitations, movements, actions and postures. Like any action, it has certain meanings to convey.

Information about the rituals and sacrifices are spread out all through the Vedic literature. Brahmanas, a body of literature that enunciates precise rules and regulations for ritual worship, contain more details about *yajnas*, including minute instructions on the rubrics of their performance. These texts also emphasize the importance of fire, one of the five cosmic elements, which is personified as one of the important Vedic gods, in the conception and execution of Vedic rituals. Practically no sacrifice can be devised and completed without the presence and participation of fire. The Brahmanas are generally considered as commentaries on the *mantras*. They prescribe particular *yajnas* for specific objectives, set forth the manner of performance and indicate the *mantras* to be recited during those particular rituals. They substantiate the prescription of *mantras* on ritualistic acts with the help of symbols, interpretative texts, allegoric

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actions, etymology of words and expertise gained by experience. They often try to find the hidden meaning behind the external ritual actions. Though the Brahmanas give the ritualistic details, it is in the *Srauta Sutras* and the *Sulba Sutras* that a systematic treatment of the subject is found.

2. The Vedic Perception of Life

It is true, the Vedic reciters pray to the gods for victory in battle, for fame and riches; they pray for herds of cattle, for rain for their fields, for progeny and long life. This makes some of the empirical and materialist thinkers of our times to contend that the dominant trait of the Vedas is hedonistic. But they overlook the holistic vision of life of the Aryans as revealed by the texts. A superficial study of the Veda might not take us to the suggested instructions for a value system, and the under-currents of spiritual truths contained in it. But whoever takes the trouble of entering into the religious and moral thinking and acting of the Aryans can never fail to see them.

In Vedic literature *yajna* is presented as an Aryan pattern of interpretation of world and life. It is a worldview. It expresses the reality as experienced by the visionary consciousness of the Aryans. A rite, like any other form of expression, has its own internal message to convey. It indicates the sense in which human lives proceed. A rite is the practical external element; it complements the speculative aspect of the Vedic tradition. It plays as central a role in the representation of the divine as any pure speculative theology and philosophy do. The simple acts of sacrifice and nature worship embody a highly complicated and comprehensive system of spiritual endeavour. A close study of the *yajna* will reveal that it is a spiritual *sadhana* for the attainment of higher values.

2.1. The Symbolic Nature of Fire

To the Vedic mind *agni* or the consecrated fire in rituals is not merely one of the five natural elements which humans use for light, energy, warmth, for cooking, and into which they offer oblations. It is the deity presiding over the elemental fire. Fire is a god, a god most intimately connected with the sacrificial action. The sacrifice is intended to bridge the wide gulf between the divine and the human. In other words, for sacrifice to be valid and efficacious, it should lead to the union of the

mortal with the immortal. The task of the intermediary between the human and the divine is assigned to fire. Hence the name *havyavah*, one who carries the *havis*, the sacrificial offerings. However, as the basic source of light and energy, it is sometimes identified with Brahman, the supreme God, who is the ultimate source of all beings.

The term *jatavedas*, one, who knows everything as soon as he is manifested, is generally applied to it in this sense. Thus fire occupies an important place in the rite. In fact, fire is the instrument by which sacrifice is accomplished.¹

Fire can burn things and transform them into subtle forms of energy. This burning of fire can be interpreted as a process of transference of what is gross to subtler and higher realms of the reality. Fire carries the human offering to the divine world. In a more profound sense, this passage from gross to the subtle signifies the transmutation and refinement of the lower self of man. In other words, it is rather an act of sublimating or channeling the lower instincts of worldly attachments toward the higher region of immortality.

2.2. The Spiritual Significance of Heat

The ritual heat in the Vedic sacrifice is considered as the divine source of both the physical and the psychic powers. The function of sacred heat is so great that an inquiry into the symbolic value of heat in the sacrifice is essential. An imbalance in the ritual is supposed to occur whenever heat fails to attain its required intensity, or produces difficulties when the heat is excessive.

i. Ritual Cooking

The importance given to ritual cooking reveals the significance of heat in *yajna*. We find the sacrificial offering cooked with special care. Raw food is not considered as a proper and worthy offering to the gods². In fact, the poets of the *Atharva Veda* perceive the danger of using uncooked food for sacrificial purpose. They believe that such raw food materials are used in worship by sorcerers and black magicians, and not by

¹R.V. I. 1.1, I.145.3, etc.

²Sat. Br. I.1.1.9.

orthodox faithful. There is a separate and specific sacred fire to which the cooking of the sacrificial offerings is assigned. Of the three fires, the *Ahavaniya* fire is meant to receive the ordinary sacrificial offerings. *Daksina* fire (also known as *Anvaharya-pacana*) is meant for the offerings for the ancestors. Also the dead body of a person is cremated in this fire. But the *Garhapatya* fire is reserved for the ritual cooking of the offerings. Most of the offerings are cooked items: cereal cakes, roasted corn, cooked rice called *pakti*, etc are among the usual items. In *Agnihotra* boiled milk is offered to the *Asvins*. In *Somayaga*, for the preparation of Soma, the plant, is passed through an intensely hot filter before pressing it to extract the Soma juice. This passage through the filter is called *tapas*. The act of cooking transforms the sacrificial offering into its divine status. It is supposed to equip the offering with a special energy so that it may have the power to reach its destination.³

Since heat is a source of energy, it has the power to move. That which is cold remains inert. 'That which is cold, whose mass has not been heated, does not reach it; but that which is cooked, together with those who carry it, has reached it'⁴.

What is offered or sacrificed is heated or cooked. It then loses its gross nature and becomes very subtle and fine and thus with the help of heat it can ascend to the higher regions. Heat transforms it and endows it with a power to ascend to its goal. The offerings, therefore, can rise up to the gods, only when they are transformed and endowed with energy.

ii. The Funeral Rite

The hymns and *mantras* chanted during the funeral rite also lay emphasis more on the sacrificial transformation of the body than on the elimination of it. At the first kindling of the fire the priest begs the fire not to destroy the corpse, but to burn it gently and evenly on all sides⁵. In this preliminary heating the raw and profane element of the departed soul is transformed into a sacred and worthy offering pleasing to gods. In the second stage *jataveda*, the second fire is called upon to perform the task of

³A.V. VI. 17.4; V.31.1.

⁴R.V. IX. 83.1.

⁵RV. X.16.7.

energizing and carrying the body to its new dwelling place in heaven⁶. Here also *agni* is the carrier of the offering from one level of reality to another. *Agni* receives the offering, imparts to it the power to ascend to its proper destination.⁷

3. The Meaning of *Tapas*

The word *tapas* is derived from the root 'tap', meaning to 'to irradiate heat', 'to be consumed by heat', to 'suffer'. The last meaning of the word *tapas* has come to be connected with 'austerity'. *Tapas* or austerity produces heat in the body of the spiritual aspirant. The effect of the heat of austerity is psychologically felt by the person who undertakes the necessary *sadhanas* for purification of mind and spiritual perfection. It penetrates into the depth of the person endowed with psycho-physical energies, faculties and organs, and transforms them from within. The *tapasvin* is one who possesses *tapas*, the internal spiritual power through his ritual acts and ascetical practices that consist of self-inflicted hardships and undergoing bodily privations willingly.

The energy acquired through sacrifice is supposed to flow into the one who performs it. In fact, the priest who communicates with the divine by means of the offerings, invokes the light (*jyotis*) in himself, prays to the divine that he may become as brilliant as the fire of the sacrifice⁸. The Soma, which brings us light, can make us perfect, give us splendour and riches, heroism and treasures of all kinds and also remove from us all evils together with false friends. In that light the sacrificer reaches also the supreme good of immortality, the good *par excellence*, which is considered as the gift of Soma.⁹

4. Enlargement of Consciousness

Control of the mind and annihilation of the ego are the essence of all *yogic* disciplines. The barrier between the individual soul and the supreme soul is the ego. It manifests itself as a feeling of separateness. The aim of

⁶RV.X. 16.9.

⁷RV. X. 16.7.

⁸Cf.RV. VIII. 48.6.

⁹Cf.RV.VIII. 48.3.

all the various spiritual *sadhanas* is to do away with this feeling of separation. With the surrender of the ego, the consciousness of the individual self is lost and then only the cosmic consciousness expresses itself. In other words, when the lower self is sacrificed the higher self manifests itself.

Sacrifice is meant to transform the imperfect part into the perfect. It is essentially an act of sublimation and substantiation of the vital energies. The subtle and the divine, in fact, can not absorb the earthly and the gross. What is gross in us, in order to adapt itself to the divine, needs to be transformed so that the fusion of the two, the divine and the human, is made possible. The limited consciousness, in order to bridge the abyss, which separates it from the divine, sacrifices itself on the altar of fire. In man the large mass of latent energy is deposited in the body, which is gross and heavy. The gross and heavy, when heated in the internal fire of concentration, gets converted into energy which is subtle and light. Like *agni*, in the case of the external rite, *tapas*, the sacrificial power in man when ignited, liberates and transforms the lower mind into the higher mind. In other words, the *tamasic* aspect of the individual is transformed into the *savvic* nature. In psycho-analytical terms, we may say that the power of the unconscious gets converted to that of the conscious. Thus the whole process is an enlargement of consciousness. In terms of Patanjali Yoga, we may say that the modified form of consciousness (*citta vrtti*) gets liberated and this brings about an increase of psychic power.

The aim is to refine the mind, keep it clean by removing all that is peculiar to the individuals. Our ordinary consciousness turns its back on the eternal world and is lost in the perishing external world cast by the mind through sense impressions. The adherence to a narrow circle of experience is to be abandoned and transcended. We need to clean our hearts, which signifies the elimination of selfish impulses, namely, narrow love and hate, and a cleansed heart will eventually lead us to an enrichment of experience and personality. When the limitations of empirical existence are transcended, the universal Self of all beings will be revealed us. Thus the aim is spiritual perfection and final liberation. The awareness of our social responsibility, and the consequent commitment for the well-being of others, are the necessary consequence of such subjective purification.

5. Conclusion

To bring about a harmonious co-existence of the society it is not essential that we reject the past. In fact, it is easy to win peace if we adhere to the great spiritual and cultural heritage, which has come down to us. But it is essential that we understand this golden past in the right spirit. What the prophets and seers spoke to us in the past, has a higher relevance, greater urgency, and wider applicability today. We can advance into the future only if our minds and hearts become enlarged. The aim of true spiritual endeavour is this expansion of heart, and the illumination of our consciousness. People must have a sense of belonging to the one whole. They must feel that they have common purposes, whatever their differences may be.

Every nation has its own sets of beliefs. In fact, it is the beliefs of the people which sustain a nation. The Hindus have believed and still believe, that the ancient scriptures especially the Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Bhavadgita* and the Puranas are the final authority in the religious-spiritual fields, where the mind cannot enter into, or which the intellect cannot comprehend. It is intuitive mystical experience that really counts there and these scriptures are the records of such experience of the highly respected *rsis* or sages.

It is true that some of the sacrifices involved killing of animals and our contemporary society cannot accept it. This is one of the reasons why the Vedic sacrifices as such are extremely rare today. What I feel is that the actual killing of animals should be condemned, but the genuine spirit behind the *yajna*, that is, surrendering the lower impulse or the limitations in us in order to come to terms with the divine, should be kept up and fostered. It is a consolation to note that the tradition continues even today in the form of earnest prayer and appeal to God, temple rituals, *pujas* and *homas*, *japa* (repetition of *mantras* and divine names) and devotional singing. Thus the Vedic sacrifices not only extended a great influence on our ancient society but also survives in various forms even today.

It is a science of man that India investigated and developed over three thousand years in her immortal literature, the Vedas. The creators of this unique science were great sages whose only passion was truth and

human welfare. Their deep penetration into the depth of the spirit revealed the infinite possibilities that lie hidden in every human being, the possibilities that need to be unfolded and manifested in the course of man's life. It is this philosophy of man in depth, *adhyatma-vidya* the knowledge of the hidden dimension in man, that we find in the Vedas. While our scientists explored the outer world of physical nature, these ancient Indian sages explored the mysterious world of the inner nature of man. Their inquiry extended beyond the physical and psychic system into the infinite, immortal and universal aspect of man. Their line of investigation was rather turned to the discovery of the hidden infinite energies and the processing of these so as to achieve the maximum growth, development and fulfillment. In fact, all human development is based upon the discovery of more and more of these profound possibilities and the methods and techniques adopted to bring them out.