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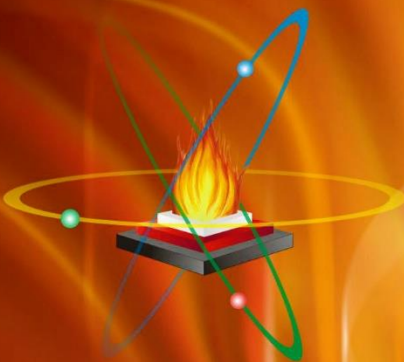
ISSN: 2581-4885



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF YAGYA RESEARCH

Peer Reviewed Research Journal

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 1



PUBLISHED BY:

DEV SANSKRITI VISHWAVIDYALAYA, Shantikunj, Haridwar - 249411 (UTTARAKHAND)

www.dsvv.ac.in

OPEN ACCESS ONLINE JOURNAL

Research Article

The Historical and Philosophical Exegesis on Yagya in Ancient India

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Abstract. Yagya or sacrifice has been an integral part of Indian history and culture. More particularly in ancient India, Yagya appears as the backbone of entire social and political structure. Thus, most of the Vedic literature revolves around the sacrificial ritual in different forms for numerous purposes. In contemporary world, when the scientific temperament dominates almost all spheres of life, masses seek to comprehend everything pertaining to human lives in a rational way. However, the recognized truth is that human society exists in a dilemmatic situation where on one hand they are not ready to discard their cultural heritage, customs and traditions and on the other hand they aspire to abide with scientific logic and reason. Therefore, it is essential to trace the philosophy and common logic of one of the most consistent sacrificial practice of Indian culture, i.e. Yagya. And since the Yagya tradition traces its antiquity from the ancient India, there is a requirement to illustrate the historical existence of Yagya in abundance. Thus, this paper attempts to comprehensively deal with historical and philosophical aspects of Yagya to understand its relevance in present scenario. For this study historical methodology has been used premised on the analysis of primary and secondary sources, and the content is descriptive. Since the time of oldest Indus valley civilization, we find archeological evidences of fire altars from sites such as Kalibagan(Rajasthan), Lothal(Gujrat) etc. which indicate the practice of sacrificial rituals. In entire

Vedic literature, plethora of textual references elaborate the philosophy, ritual practice, benefits, norms, the hosts of Yagyas, and the various types of sacrifices such as Shraut Yagya (public and royal sacrifices) and Pak Yagya (domestic sacrifices). Furthermore, both literary and archeological evidences enchant the practice and effects of distinct type of sacrifices in later Vedic age, pre-Mauryan period (6th century B.C.), age of empires (Mauryan, Shunga, Satavahana, Kanva, Kushana etc.) and Gupta period. This reveals the historical existence of our cultural tradition. Moreover the philosophical relevance of Yagya (to sacrifice) is exponent as an idea through which Vedic Rishis facilitated the harmony between ecological system and human life, the peaceful co-existence of all the creatures of the universe and their interdependence. Though it overtly seems that Yagya has been a part of religious life of Vedic Aryans, but after the philosophical and historical analysis, it appears that Yagya crucially contributed to social harmony, constructing political hegemony, and facilitating public welfare in its most intense as well as external procedures. Hence, for dwindling the cultural, environmental and social quos in today's times, Yagya needs to be practiced in a modified logical manner.

Keywords. Yagya, Shraut Yagya, Pak Yagya, sacrifice, peaceful coexistence.

Introduction

Yagya forms an integral component of Vedic philosophy which etymologically is derived from root *Yaj*, which has three meanings – divinity (refined persona), collectiveness and charity (social welfare) (1) which means to contribute in an organized manner for divine purposes of welfare. The Yajur Veda (3/63) describes *Yagya* as the greatest benefactor of the human race, bestowing life, wealth, food, energy, prosperity and happiness. In *Yagya*, there lies the secret of achieving excellence in life, it says.

In Sanskrit Hindi Kosh, *Yagya* has been defined as an act of purity related to *bhakti*. (2) In *Dhatukosh* as well, *Yagya* has been derived from *Yaj* root which means worshipping the deity, gathering and donation. Viz.- *yaj devpuja sangatikaran daneshu. Hu danadanayoha. Aadane chetyeke* (3). In this sense, *Yagya* intends to offer due respect to the divine values, unifying the pure and selfless energies for the protection of nation, religion and humanity and sacrificing a portion of our possession for divine purposes, for human and all the species of this universe.

Yaska in *Nirukta* (3/4/19) defines *Yagya* as – *yagyah kasmat! Prakhyatam yajati karmati nairuktah* which means that *Yagya* is that act in which famous deeds of offering oblations for deities, is found (4). Therefore *Yagya* can be comprehended as an act which expedites the contribution or sacrifice of our time, money, material and energy for nourishment of the universe through a collective effort of virtuous and capable men. Thus *Yagya* includes any such act which is conducted for the welfare of all with high objectives. That's the reason, *Shatpatha* Brahman, 1/7/1/5 states that *Yagyao vai shreshthatam karma*, which means *Yagya* is the greatest deed.

Primarily, it is significant to comprehend that *Yagya* is a part of *Karmayoga* as entailed in *Bhagavad Geeta*, as it involves the ritual sacrifices which were to be performed physically. Therefore, out of one lakh Vedic hymns, eighty thousands alone are dedicated to *Karmakanda* (5). This itself exposes that *Yagya* is an inseparable and essential part of Vedas. The physical form of *Yagya*, however is the one of *Agnihotra* where oblations are offered in the fire, which is considered as the mouth of the deities and a mediator between humans and divine powers, viz.- *mukham va Aitadyagyanam, yadagnihotram, yagyamukham va*

agnihotram. (6) *Yeti ijjate anen va atra va-* the act done for worship of deities (*dev puja*) is called *Yagya*.

Agnihotra has been defined as the process of kindling, maintenance and worship of the fire which is employed to attain manifold ends. Oblations offered into fire are supposed to reach the sun that sends rain which produces crops, for the sustenance of all beings (7). According to Acharya Sayan – *aganye hotram homo asmin karmani iti*, which complies with the earlier definition of *agnihotras*. So, in Vedic *Yagya*, fasting, emotional sacrifice and symbolic rituals need to be integrated together for the complete sacrificial procedure. The oblations were also submitted to the particular *Devta* in order to obtain the desired results (8).

Various types of *Yagyas* are thus prescribed in Vedic literature which varies in their procedure and results, according to their arena of conducting them and the essentialities of those sacrifices. A brief mention of those sacrifices can be made here for reference. Three types of Vedic *Yagyas* are well known which are – *Pak Yagya, Havi Yagya* and *Som Yagya*. *Pak Yagya* involved offering of cooked food as sacrifices. These were domestic sacrifices and can further be distributed in its types such as *Aupasan Hom, Vaishva Dev, Panch Mahayagya, Paarvan, Ashtaka, Shrivana, Shulgav. Panch Mahayagya* deserves an important mention. The Five great sacrifices included *Dev Yagya* or *Agnihotra, Pitri Yagya* (propitiating ancestors), *Nri Yagya* (paying homage to guests or fulfilling the needs of the needy), *Rishi Yagya or Brhama Yagya* (the regular study and practice of Vedic texts created by Rishis), *Bhoot yagya* (sacrificing a part of one's meal for other creatures of nature). Rajendra Pandey quotes Rajbali Pandey who asserts that the theoretical basis of these *Yagyas* postulated that human is not born alone and independent, rather he has some duties and obligations to the society which he ought to fulfil. (9).

In *Pak Yagya* and *Havi Yagya* which were mentioned in *Shraut sutras*, *purohita* played significant role. *Havi Yagya* can be further divided into several types which were – *Agniyadhaya* (establishing more than three fires in the household), *Agnihotra* (daily sacrifice in domestic fire), *Dashpaurnamas* (*Yagya* on first and last day of the month), *Agrahayan* (sacrificing the first part of the fresh cultivation), *Chaturmasya* (*Yagya* on the beginning of every *ritu* or season), *Niruddha pashubandh* (sacrifice of

animalistic behavioral instincts of human personality), and *Sautramani*. *Soma* (a personification of moon who controlled vegetation) *Yagya* were also of different kinds such as – *Agnishtom*, *Atyagnishtom*, *Ukthya*, *Shodashin*, *Vajapeya*, *Atiratra*, *Aptoryam*. The *Panch Mahayagyas* are distinguished from the *Shraut* sacrifices as in *Panch Mahayagyas* householder himself was the chief agent and did not need a mediator like priest whereas *Shraut* sacrifices could only be conducted by the priest. According to P.V. Kane, the central point in *Panch Mahayagyas* is the discharge of duties to the creator, to the ancient sages, to the Manes, and to the whole universe with myriads of creatures of various grades of intelligence. In the *Shraut* sacrifices, the main spring of action is the desire to secure heaven or some objective such as prosperity, a son etc. (10). Through *Panch Mahayagyas*, a normal human being could afford to pay reverence, study the great Vedic literature, propitiate his ancestors, maintain the spirit of give and take with all creatures of universe. Thus these *Yagyas* facilitated feelings of devotion, gratitude, reverence, loving memory, kindness and tolerance.

There are mentions of many more sacrifices for specific purposes. One of those was *Vratyastom Yagya* conducted for the purity purpose for including *Anarya* (uncultured) into *Arya* (cultured) society (Aryans were known to be cultured persons in society). So this had an inclusive purpose. Apart from this, there were royal public sacrifices which could be afforded by royal classes and officiated by special priestly class. These were *Rajasuya* (coronation of the king), *Vajapeya*, *Aswamedha*, *Purushamedha* etc. These *Yagyas* were for specific purpose of cultural unity and uplifting the mass-consciousness. Their practice has also been referred in Brahmana texts. However, under the imperialist influence these sacrifices have been translated as animal sacrifice but the actual philosophical connotation behind the Vedic terminology needs to be elucidated with extra-care and expertise.

Deciphering Vedic symbolism is essential to understand Yagya's philosophical and historical relevance

Sanskrit is very rich language, where each word has different root, and its meaning is contextual. A word - 'Mahishi' means a queen and it also means buffalo. vv(11). Similarly, the meaning of *Ashwamedha* is very deep in various references and cannot be taken as

sacrifice of horse in the fire of *Yagya*. Their deeper meaning and symbol mysteries are mentioned very well in detail commentary by Sri Aurobindo in the book 'Secret of Vedas'. The contextual meaning of *Ashwamedha* is well misinterpreted since alter vedic-time by many historians and modern authors.

Sri Aurobindo's commentary on Brihadaranyak Upanishad (1/1) indicated *Ashvamedha* as universal force. Another commentary on the same (Brihadaranyak Upanishad 1/1) by Pt. Shriram Sharma Acharya also indicated that the horse of *Ashvamedha* symbolized universal force or energy. It says – *Ashva* i.e. horse is a symbol of the energy that runs the universal activities, while *medha* is a synonym of *Yagya*. The word *Medha* connotes three different meanings i.e. *medha* (intellect), *hinsa* (violence) and *sangam* (unity). The meaning of violence is not contextual with universal force, and hence is not applicable. While, 'intellect' and 'unity' are applicable to the central force which is required to unite all for balancing the ecological system of the universe and which can be comprehended through intellect (12,13).

In addition, as per Shatpath brahman 13/1/6/3, *Ashvamedha* was referred to as the formation of a *Rashtra* (nation). According to it, the whole *Rashtra* is *Ashvamedha*. Here, nation does not mean the geographical territory of a kingdom, rather the cultural widespread. Hence, in Indian history when a king conquered nations, the victory was followed by the performance of *Ashvamedha Yagya* to ensure the cultural co-existence of entire territory. Here, the horse of *Yagya* was the symbol of the universal harmony and cultural unity (11).

Similarly, *narmedha* or *purushmedha* were misinterpreted for sacrifice of human body. Sacrifice meant the renunciation of material possessions and accumulated ego which were to be symbolically exhausted in the holy fire of the sacrifice. As part of the symbolic ritual, a *Yupa* (a thread) was knotted to a pole and with the participating men, who at the end will sacrifice their ego to the fire. After the performance of *Yagya* their *Yupa* was cut-down with the message that their attachment to previous life is broken and now onwards their remaining life will be for the universal welfare (11).

Historical Exploration of Yagya in Ancient India

Yagya as a philosophy and religious practice had emanated in ancient India. Although according to general understanding of the people, sacrificial practices were introduced in Vedic period, primarily mentioned in Rigvedic literature. That's why *Yagya* is known as the foundation of the Vedic culture. However, the archeological evidences discovered from the sites of the first Indian civilization, i.e. Indus Valley civilization, too reflect the similar sacrificial practices as of the Vedic age. At the site of Kalibangan (Rajasthan), the southern unit been found containing several mud brick platforms, possibly with structures on them which have disappeared now, but the platforms had seven fire altars (each about 75*55 cm) in a row (14). Dilip K. Chakrabarti says "These rectangular altars were sunk into the floor, plastered with clay and contained a cylindrical and faceted clay stump and terracotta 'cakes' associated with ash and charcoal" (18). The association of altars with ash and charcoal indicates some ritual practices. Moreover, the existences of a well with bath pavements on the south of fire altars convey the practice of sacrificial rituals even in the Harappan age. Chakrabarti indicates that to the east of the eastern mound of Kalibangan, an isolated structure with five fire altars suggest a religious place. In the same context, Upinder Singh quotes B.B. Lal and states that there was also a 1.25*1m brick-lined rectangular pit. The northern part of the citadel complex was found containing houses. B. B. Lal suggests this may have been where the priests who performed the rituals, used to live. (14) (p173) Apart from Kalibangan, such fire altars have also been discovered from Banawali, Lothal, Amri, Nageshwar and Vagad in Gujrat and Rakhigardhi in Haryana associated with some public and some domestic rituals.

In Vedic age, unanimously, the entire sacrificial culture is well propounded in the literary evidences. *Yagya* originated in form of *Dev Yagya* in view of Radha Kumud Mukherji, wherein the Creator sacrificed himself for assembling the energies for the creation of his proposed world and thus he distributed himself from one to many (19). To quote Radha Kumud Mukherji "In the Brahman texts, Prajapati stands for Purusha and the sacrifice is conceived as constantly recurring in order to maintain the universe." Rigveda mentions *Yagya* as the principal act of Vedic religion. He opines that Soma sacrifice has been detailed in the Rigveda where seven different

classes of priests such as *Adharvyu* (manual functions), *Hotri* (one who recited hymns), *Udgatri* (singing the *Saman* chants) with other assistants were employed for conducting the sacrifice. Of the grand Vedic sacrifices, the *soma* sacrifice relating to Indra was considered most important. Herein the *soma* juice was the main offering in the sacrifice. The identification of the *soma* plant has been long debated. A study indicated, "a plant called Ephedra, small twigs of which have been found in vessels used for drinking rituals on the premises of the temple of Togolok-21 in Margiana in south-eastern Turkmenistan, is considered to be *soma*." (17). Sri Aurobindo mentioned in the book 'secret of veda' that Soma represents inner joy. Bhagvad Geeta (15/13) says, the supreme power nourishes *soma* to all plants through moon indicating it may not be a specific plant.

Atharvaveda initially introduced *Yagya* as a system. If taken literally Atharva means 'The Purohita of *Agni*'. (8) (p88). Vedic reference for the meaning Purohit are not cast bound. The position of Purohit, Brahmin and Priest of *Yagya* are not endowed with birth or assigned by an individual or through any post. As per vedic references, it is most dignified position which person achieve with most pious character with evolved inner being through constant penance and practice of self-less life for universal welfare. This kind of class of preacher were considered as Purohit, Brahmin or priest of *Yagya* (Bhagvad Geeta 4/13). However, with the medieval era, the post of Purohit adopted cast-based system based on birth but not on karma. Brahman texts talk about the sacrificial rituals elaborately. Modern historians consider that *Brahmanas* were the compositions of priestly class who in post-vedic era developed a cult of their own and it paved way for an aristocratic religion. In the *Yagya* ritual an oblation called *havi* was offered to *Agni* in order to obtain certain benefits, prosperity, health, long life, abundance of cattle etc (18).

In Rigvedic period, the *Yagya* process was easier for every householder to perform. Even on the occasion of public sacrifices, a tribal chief himself used to act as a high priest. But in alter Vedic age, sacrificial ceremonies became more elaborate, complicated and expensive. Varieties of rituals were planned for several specific desires. "In fact, the life of an Aryan was a series of sacrifices performed under the supervision of the Brahmana priests. This firmly established the supremacy of the Brahmanas" (19).

Yagya was finely interwoven with the *varna* hierarchy. Aitereya Brahman (8.36.4) records that the *rajasuya* sacrifice endowed each of the four *varnas* with certain qualities- the Brahmana with *tejas* (lusture), the Kshatriya with *virya* (valour), the Vaishya with *prajati*(procreative powers), and the Shudra with *Pratishtha* (stability) (14) (p203). Atharvaveda also mentions specific sacrifices such as *Agnistom* (practiced by Brahmanas) and *Vajapeya* (by Kshatriyas). Thus the later Vedic period witnessed the rising priestly ambitions, says D. N. Jha, as evidently several new and lengthy royal sacrifices developed, which were to be performed meticulously and strictly. To discuss some, *Vajpeya yagya* was a sacrifice to be performed in 17 days to a year and it was supposed to strengthen the middle aged king, raised his position from *Raja* to *Samrat* who could control several kings. *Rajasuya* similarly was a complex sacrifice wherein the honorarium paid to the presiding priest in extreme cases was 240,000 cows (18) (p146).

Upinder Singh quotes Heesterman (1957), and maintains that at a larger symbolic level, in the *Rajasuya*, the king was presented as standing in the center of the cylindrical processes of regeneration of the universe (14) (p207) “*Ashwamedha* was the most famous of *Shraut Yagyas* which had been continued for three days, which was conducted in presence of four priests, four wives of the king with 400 attendants, and large no. of spectators. A specially consecrated horse was set free to roam on its will for a year, escorted by a chosen band of 400 warriors so that any king trying to capture the animal might be combated. The horse was brought back to the capital at the end of the year (20).

In Sutra period, Luniya and other historians opine that there was a growth of ritualistic religion. The domestic fire acquired important role in washing the sins, uplifting the character of the individual and to cure diseases. Thus it was the duty of a householder (*grihastha*) to constantly maintain the domestic fire. In this age, however the Brahman supremacy hiked, as without their initiative the sacrifices could not be performed.

During Valmiki the creator of Ramayana, there was no one in Ayodhya, who did not perform *Agnihotra*. In Lanka as well each person used to keep the domestic fire kindled. In the period of Ramayana, an

exclusive building named *Agnyaagar* was established where the sacrificial fire was consistently maintained (21). King Dashratha and Lord Rama of Ramayana, constructed their separate *yagyashalas* on the banks of Gomati river.

However, the same 6th century B.C. witnessed the rejection and retaliation against the increasing domination of Brahmanas, facilitated by sacrificial rituals. “The term Brahmanism connotes that socio-religious order which accepts the supremacy of Brahmins who officiate at sacrifices and receive payments for their services” (22). The ritualistic trend of Brahmanism faced a setback in the Mauryan period (400-200B.C.) was revived in Shunga period.

Panini’s *Ashtadhyayi* (600-300B.C.) reveals much relevant information regarding the theory and practice of the *Yagya* in his times. Besides the Brahmanas and the Anubrahmanas, a vast body of specialized *yajnika* literature in the form of explanatory texts (*vyakhyana*) of the *kratus* or Soma sacrifices and other *Yagyas* had come into existence; for example the treatise giving an exposition of *agnishtom* was called *agnishtomika*, similarly there were texts called *vajapeyika* and *rajasuyika* (23). The sacrificer was called *yajamana* for the period of *Yagya* after which on that basis he was called *yajva* or *agnishtom-yaji*, according to Panini. Panini records that *Yajurveda* deals with the sacrifices of three kinds *ishti*, *pashubandha* and *soma*. Regarding the priestly class of *Yagyas*, Panini uses a generic term *ritvij* used for all classes of priests employed at sacrifice. According to Vedic Index, the number of priests required for the rituals mentioned in Brahmana texts was 16, classified as *Hota*, *Prashasta*, *Gravastut*, *Prashasta* related to Rigveda, of Samaveda were *Udgata* assisted by *Pratiharta*, priests pertaining to Atharvaveda were *Brahma*, *Agnidh* and *Pota* (23) (p374-375).

In the period of empires, the Sunga empire which succeeded Mauryan empire, revived the Vedic sacrificial traditions and hence we find the evidence of Pushyamitra Shunga whose empire extended southwards, who was the master of the Madhya Desha and therefore he performed two *Aswamedha Yagya*. “One of them have been discussed in Patanjali’s *Ashtadhyayi* and probably he was the priest of this *Yagya*.” And according to the ancient drama *Malvikagnimitram* of Kalidasa, Pushyamitra’s son Agnimitra had to fight Greeks on the bank of Sindhu

in order to successfully complete the Yagya (24). An inscription from Ayodhya also confirms the performance of two *Ashwamedha yagyas* by a Shunga ruler. In this age, Shungas, Kanvas (a ruler named Gajayana Parasariputra Sarvatat whose inscription from Ghosundi mentions the celebration of *Aswamedha Yagya*, and Satavahanas (Gotami putra satakarni) performed various types of Yagya such as *Ashwamedha (twice)*, *Rajasuya (once)*, *Aptoryama*.

From 2nd B.C. to 3rd century A.D. we can trace the continuity of *Yagyas*. Jagatarama near kalsi in Uttarakhand revealed inscriptions mentioning the performance of several *Ashwamedha* sacrifices by the king named Shilavarman. (14) (p432) During Kushana period, Mathura *Yupa* inscription dated 24 year of ruler Vashiska mentions the performance of a sacrifice for 12 days in succession performed by Dronala, a Brahman of the Bharadvaja *gotra* (22) (p202-203). Several other *Yupas* which were established in pre-Gupta period suggest the sacrificial rituals have been discovered from Badwa (Kotah, M.P.) dated 237A.D. for Triratna sacrifice, Allahabad 2nd century A.D for *Saptasoma* sacrifice. Another *Yupas* with inscriptions have been discovered from Nandasa -225 A.D.(Udaipur), Bijyagadh and Nagari -3rd century A.D., which suggest the continuity of *Yagyas* in pre-Gupta period.

Regarding the religious sphere of Gupta age, Luniya presents the idea of Max Muller who called this era as Brahmanical revival or Hindu renaissance. Luniya critically scrutinized this idea and proposed that Hindu renaissance cannot be possible as, since the fall of Mauryas to the rise of Guptas, Hinduism was not moribund (19) (p187). For instance, Pravarasena, the founder of the Vakataka dynasty performed *Yagyas* like *Agnistom*, *Vajapeya*, *Brihaspatisava* and many more. In Gupta period particular, numerous *Yagyas* were conducted by the royal class. "Samudragupta fittingly celebrated his *digvijaya* by celebrating the *Ashwamegh Yagya* which had long fallen into desuetude. Therefore his successors hailed him as one who 'revived the *Ashwamegh Yagya* after such a long time' (*chirotsannasvamedhaharta*)" (25). This information has been derived from numismatic sources because Samudragupta's Allahabad *Prashasti* (inscription) is silent about it. The *Ashwamedha* type of coins of Samudra Gupta Parakramanka reveal symbol of a horse before *yupa* for the *Ashwamedha Yagya* and the reverse side portrays the queen who

must have been present in the Yagya, along with the legend for Samudragupta *Ashvamedha Parakramah*. In view of Mookerji, *Ashvamedha* had followed his conquests. The quote written over the coins also abides with the basic principle of *Yagya* and states that heaven can be conquered only by *dharma*, by the performance of a religious ceremony like *Ashvamedha*, by good deeds. The Poona plate inscription of Prabhavati Gupta (Samudragupta's granddaughter) also describes him as one who performed many *Ashwamedha Yagya (anekashvamedhayaji)*. Moreover the sculptural evidence of *asvamedha* also boast the same. The horse sculpture from Khairigarh in Uttar Pradesh, is believed to represent horse of *Ashwamedha Yagya* by Samudragupta (20) (p174). In the period of Kumar Gupta I Mahendraditya as well, the Damodar copper plate grant of A.D. 443 records the sale of land by government to a Brahman to assist him in the performance of his *Agnihotra* rites. Another Damodarpur grant dated 447A.D. records the sale of a land by government donated to a Brahmana for the maintenance of five daily sacrifices (*Panchmahayajnas*.) (25) (p77-78). The *ashvamedha* type coins of Kumargupta also portray the horse of *Yagya*.

Hitherto, this is quite apparent that ancient Indian history portrays enormous plausible literary and archeological evidences which succumb to the significance of *Yagya*, its theory and practice. Unanimously, we can observe that the sacrificial tradition emanated in a very simplistic manner in Vedic period sustained by great purpose of social, political and cultural harmony. However, with the course of time the procedural structure grew complex and elaborated. It in fact promoted the Varna-caste hierarchy in which Brahmana and Kshatriya gained extreme superiority and thus dominated the entire social and political framework. However, one cannot deny that the fundamental idea of sacrifice behind the system of *Yagya* did sustain and masses used to strictly practice their domestic *Yagyas* which lead to a balanced harmony between individual and society, man and nature, *atman* and *Brhama*.

The Philosophical Elucidation of Yagya

All philosophies of the world intend to idealize and theorize human thoughts. Their purpose is to uplift human conscience. The Sanskrit term for Philosophy is *darshan* which according to Panini is defined as

“*drishyate aneneti darshanam*”, which means whatever is perceived or visualized and through the medium something is perceived is called *Darshan*. In simple words to perceive, observe, analyze and theorize anything is philosophy. According to Pandit Shriram Sharma, the thoughts which influence the faith are called philosophy. Thus, it is relevant to understand the philosophy behind an age old ritual practice of *Yagya*. *Yagya* philosophy holds highest platform in Indian philosophy. Someone might not stand in favor of the ritual (*Karmakanda*) aspect of *Yagya* but its philosophy is rich enough to resolve the worldly upheavals today. Although the sacrificial ritual of *Yagya* has been proved in various recent researches as competent to strengthen the individual personality and character, maintain the health and cure the diseases, balance the ecological cycle along with its spiritual advantages. *Yagya* has immense psychological potential to lay down indirect but permanent effects on the practitioner.

The philosophical relevance of *Yagya* lies in its meaning itself, which means to sacrifice (Apte in Sanskrit to English dictionary). Chaandogya Upanishad postulates that human being himself is *Yagya* form and *Yagya* is the only way for individual and social development. Brihadaranyak Upanishad (3/1/3-6) says – *vagvai yagyasya hota, chakshurvai yagyasyaadhvaryuh, prano vai yagyaryodgata, mano vai yagyasya brahma*, which means the voice is the *Hota* of the *Yagya*, the eyes are *adharyu* of the *Yagya*, the breath is the *Udgata* of the *Yagya* and conscience is the *Brahma* of the *Yagya*. In Vedic philosophy, *Yagya* is the *Parmatma*, the ultimate being. In Brahman texts and Vedic Samhitas several *suktas* define *Yagya* as the appearance of Vedic deities, viz. *Yagya* is Indra as it facilitates rain and vegetation, *Yagya* is Agni as it provides heat and health. (1) (p1.3) In this manner Shatpatha Brahman (13/3/2/1) rightly observes that *Yagya* is the soul of all the deities, viz- *Sarvesham devanam aatma yad yagyah*. According to Bhagvad Geeta (4/24), the act of sacrifice or *havan* is Brahma, the oblation is Brahma, the fire is Brahma in which *Yagya* is performed, and the performer is also Brahma. That's why Atharvaveda says *Yagya* is the center of entire universe, viz- *Yagyo vishvasya bhuvnasya nabhih*.

In Aitereya Brahman (1/2/3), the objective of conducting *yagya* had been clearly stated viz- *Yagyopi tasyai jantayai kalpate* – *Yagya* is conducted

for public welfare (5) (p6). The sacrifices in ancient India, as has been discussed earlier, were also conducted for the fulfilment of worldly desires such as cattle wealth, grain, son, prosperity, health etc. and also in order to attain political supremacy. Accordingly, distinct types of sacrifices were thus prescribed. Kathopnishad (1/2/16) thus states- *Yo yadichchati tasya tat* (5) (p6). which means that through *yagya* one might gain whatever one desires either worldly desires or salvation. And thus, Atharvaveda (1/3/12), maintains *yagyoyam sarvakamdruk*.

Rigveda (10/77/2) gives reference to the transformation of human into *devta* or the divine being through example of Marudgan, a human who had become a deity. We need to understand the symbolic meaning of such stories which indicate the development of moral and selfless virtue in a man through understanding and practice of *yagya* which transform him into divine. According to Rigveda the fire of *Yagya* is the priest inspired by divine being itself, which silently motivates human beings to keep progressing for prosperity of all (1) (p2.2). One of the prominent drive of *Yagyas* was to regulate the ecological cycle. In the following mantra of Atharvaveda the celestial and spatial position of *yagyaagni* (the holy fire) has been established, viz- *agnimurdhah divah kakutpitah prithivyaayam apam retamsijivanti* –the great fire when dissolves in the earth, nourishes and conducts it, when mingles with space it transforms into rain water, and the same fire prevails in sky and transforms into sun. In Bhagvad Geeta as well, similar symbolic legend is presented which says that Brahmadeva created this world through *Yagya* (self-sacrifice) and provided the same *Yagya* to the human beings as the medium to further regulate and function their lives. Herein, *Yagya* facilitates rain which helps in cultivation and vegetation on earth and thus the food becomes the essentiality for human survival. The sacrificial fire becomes the source of the entire water cycle- from ocean to clouds, clouds to earth, from earth to rivers, rivers to ocean, and in this way maintains ecological balance.

The complete *Samskara* cycle (which has systematized individual development in coordination with social obligations) revolves around *Yagya*. Since the time when mother conceives the womb i.e. *Garbhadhan Samskar* to the *Antyeshthi* (cremation or

funeral rite) *Yagya* has been an integral part. In this context, Pundit ShriRam Sharma Acharya confers the reference of Shatpatha Brahmana, where the reproduction process has been symbolically presented as *Sautramani Yagya*, where *Yagya vedi* is female reproductive organ while fire or *Agni* is male reproductive organ. Thus reproduction becomes a process for contributing to social welfare with pure intentions.

The initial mantra of Rigveda, presents fire or *Agni*, as the divine light which helps in connecting us to the universal being or *Ishwar* through physical actions or *Karmakanda*. That's why when fire got involved into various forms of worshipping deities, it was named as *Agnihotra*. Fire always moves upwards and has the capacity of distributing, what it receives in the universe, to all in equal proportion. Vedic philosophy says that the presence of *Ishvar tatva* can only be felt on observing his creation in this universe itself, where it is omnipresent. This is the whole message of *Yagya* as well. The ash of *Yagya* which remains at the end reminds us about the impermanence and mortality of everything which seems to exist in the world in its physical form. Therefore, the possession of anything, be it a person or material is meaningless as nothing exists in real. It teaches us utilize everything with sense of non-possession and indifference.

The whole cycle of individual and society, nature and universe revolves around the periphery of *Yagya*. The values of generosity and cooperation were thus instilled in human psyche through the five great sacrifices in domestic arena. Manusmriti emphasizes on the regular practice of *panch mahayagyas* with a constant contemplation on *Idam Na mam* i.e. It is not mine (26). Pundit Shriram Sharma refers to N. C. Bandhopadhyaya (Development of Hindu polity and political theories) who asserted the Rig Vedic postulation that *Yagya* is the medium of self-development through acts of service of humanity. In fact the life has been considered as *Jivan Yagya* wherein human has the opportunity to enlighten their character and thoughts. This can be done through self-regulation which is also a *Yagya* in which one needs to sacrifice materialistic desires, avarice for position, wealth etc. These virtues were to be essentially inbuilt by a true Brahman, according to Manu.

Conclusion

Through this historical and philosophical exegesis on *Yagya* we can comprehend its significance in current world scenario when battles (field war, air fight, nuclear war, cold war, terrorist attacks) are incessantly happening and which are stimulated from the self-centered ideology. *Yagya* as a philosophy, is one of the best medium for experiencing peaceful coexistence. History has been a witness of the development of *Yagya* as a part of Indian culture. However, one can't deny the fact that in the course of time it evolved more complex, rigid and less inclusive and thus facilitated the Brahman hegemony in the Indian social structure and deprived the so called lower classes from practicing *Yagya* and gain its benefits. However, the difficulties have to be faced through required modification and improvements. Change is the universal law against the stagnant world. Thus, in modern India, various social reformers such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati (the founder of Arya Samaj) and more recently Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya, became the leaders of reformation of the society and thus the *Yagya Parampara* of Vedic culture was revived with intelligent manipulations so that they could be adopted by the scientific world of today. The scientific researches on *Yagya* thus began at Brahmavarchas Research Institute, Shantikunj, Haridwar which instigated the more popular understanding, acceptance and practice of *Yagya* at present. *Yagya* must be performed whole heartedly to attain its best profits. In lack of such Guru who teaches people to perform *Yagya* for the welfare, Atharvaveda prays that, *Ya imam yagyam mansa chiket pranovoch stami hehe vravah* which means that O Lord! Send us such a teacher who could teach us to perform *Yagya* wholeheartedly. We must contemplate on what Matsyapurana observes - *Nishkamah kurute yastu sa parbrahma gachchati* i.e. one who performs *Yagya* selflessly, attains *parabrahma* or salvation from worldly cycle. *Yagya* can also be performed by honestly observing our duties to society and by fulfilling the needs of a needy through our sacrifice. Then only the saying of Mahabharat, viz *Nasti Yagyam samam danam nasti yagya samovidih* –There is no donation like *Yagya* and no procedure like *Yagya*, assumes its true meaning.

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