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, Kanya, 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 *Yagyo 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, yagyunukham va agnihotram.* (6) Yeti ijyate 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, Shrvana, 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 Brhma 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 – Agnyadhaya (establishing more than three fires in the household), Agnihotra (daily sacrifice in domestic fire), Dashpurnamas (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, Aptyoryam. 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, kindliness and tolerance.

There are mentions of many more sacrifices for specific purposes. One of those was Vrtyayastom 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 a 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 Brihadaranyaka Upnishad (1/1) indicated Ashvamedha as universal force. Another commentary on the same (Brihadaranyaka Upnishad 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 Rakhiyadi 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.

Athravaveda 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 Brahmans with tejas (lusture), the Kshatriya with virya (valour), the Vaishya with prajati (procreative powers), and the Shudra with Pratishthha (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 Shravag Yagas 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 Brahmans, facilitated by sacrificial rituals. “The term Brahmanism connotes that socio-religious order which accepts the supremacy of Brahmans 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 Brahmans and the Anubrahmanas, a vast body of specialized yajnika literature in the form of explanatory texts (vyakhya) of the kratus or Soma sacrifices and other Yagyas had come into existence; for example the treatise giving an exposition of agnisthom was called agnistromtika, 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 agnistromt-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, Prashesta, Gravastut, Prashasta related to Rigveda, of Samaveda were Udgata assisted by Prathartu, 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
Ashwamedha 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 237 A.D.
for Triratra sacrifice, Allahabad 2nd century A.D for
Saptasoma sacrifice. Another Yupa 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 Vishnukundina 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
Ashwamedh Yagya which had long fallen into
desuetud. Therefore his successors hailed him as one who
‘revived the Ashwamedh 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 Ashvamedha 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 Ashvamedhendra 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
(aneashvamedhayaj.) Moreover the sculptural
evidence of asvamedha also boast the same. The horse
sculpture from Khairigah in Uttar Pradesh, is
believed to represent horse of Ashvamedha 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 447 A.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 Brhma.

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

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“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. Brihadaranyap Upnishad (3/1/3-6) says – vagvai yagyasya hota, chakshurvai yagyasyaadhvaryuḥ, prano vai yagyaryodgata, mano vai yagyasya brahma, which means the voice is the Hota of the Yagya, the eyes are adharvyu 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 Bhagvd Geeta (4/24), the act of sacrifice or havan is Brahna, the oblation is Brahna, the fire is Brahna 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 kalpat – 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 yadichehati 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 sarvakamdhuk.

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- agnimirundhah 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 Bhagvd 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 Antyeshi (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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