



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FIRE OFFERING IN HINDU SOCIETY

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Introduction

Vedas demonstrate three domains of living for betterment of process and they include *karma* (action), *dhyana* (meditation) and *jnana* (knowledge). As long as individuality continues as human being, actions will follow and it will eventually lead to knowledge. According to the Dhatupatha the word *yajna* derives from *yaj** in Sanskrit language that broadly means, [a] worship of GODs (natural forces), [b] synchronisation between various domains of creation and [c] charity.¹

The concept of God differs from religion to religion. The ancient Hindu scriptures conceptualises Natural forces as GOD or *Devas* (*deva* that which enlightens [*div* = light]). Commonly in all ancient civilizations the worship of Natural forces as GODs was prevalent. Therefore any form of manifested (Sun, fire and so on) and or unmanifested (*Prana*, *Manas* and so on) form of energy is considered as GOD even in Hindu tradition.

Worship conceives the idea of requite to the sources of energy forms from where the energy is drawn for the use of all



life forms. Worshiping the Gods (*Upasana*) can be in the form of worship of manifest forms, prostration, collection of ingredients or devotees for worship, invocation, study and discourse and meditation.

Sacrifice is also a ritualistic mode of connecting between various domains of creation and their respective deities through the eternal messenger AGNI (fire) (*Sangatikaranam*); the degree of freedom to think and act rests with the individual especially with human beings depending on how one connects to these realms spiritually through the mode of *Yajna*. That is considered as *Loka* where the *Karmaphala* (result of action either merit or demerit) is being materialised. One enjoys *Svargaloka* (heaven) on account of *Punya*, suffers in *Narakaloka* (hell) on account of *Papa*, and takes birth as human to pile up the *Karmaphala* up for the next cycle. Thus, a new cycle of birth and death continues for ever without an end until one realizes about false eternity of deplorable repetition. In this regard, ritualistic sacrifice plays a major role by which beings in this world please the GODs for fulfilment of cherished desires. *Raghuvamsha* of *Kalidasa*, specifically gives the reference as to how the various realms were sustained just as King *Dilipa*, a great king who “performed great sacrifices by utilising the treasures of earth to please the GODs and they drained the heavenly treasures in the form of rains. Thus by a mutual exchange between beings of various realms harmoniously, the sustenance of these worlds by sacrifice was ensured”. [Bhagavad Gita 3.11 – 12] also upholds the similar view in mutual exchange for sustenance. “Cherish the *Devas* with *Yajna* and may the *Devas* cherish you, thus cherishing



one another you shall gain the intended wealth and maintain the cosmic harmony factually natural forces are purified and energised by this system of Yajna."

Apposite Charity (*Daanam*): every living being is a custodian of limited resources of vast Cosmos for a while to experience the results of action done in the previous birth. Depending upon the quantity of merits and demerits longevity and quality of life will be decided to spend some time here on earth. In this span of time one has to look after the family, society and other living beings by default because of the support that one gets to sustain. As an obligatory action one should take care of others by sharing and caring. This is also *Yajna*.

Sacrificial fire

Fire is regarded as the primordial divine element that aids creation, sustenance and destruction of the universe. Fire was regarded as a messenger of GODs and was summoned in all sacrifices to carry special offerings to them. Several customs were associated with sacrifices such as the ignition (*Janana*-birth), protection and extinguishing the fires. Since Vedic times several sacrifices like those involving consecrating cooked items (*Paka-Yajnas*), involving usage of Soma (an extraction of a chosen creeper known as *Somayajnas*) and those involving the offering of oblations (*Havir-Yajnas*) collectively known as *Shrauta-Yajnas* (*Yajnas* originated directly from Vedas) have been performed. These gradually declined in course of time giving rise to *Smarta-Yajnas* (*Yajnas* prescribed in *Smritis*) which are performed during several ceremonies associated with an individual from one's birth to death.



Fire was believed to be a living person invoked in sacrifices and it was customary to perform sixteen rites (*Samskaras*) such as conception (*Garbhadhana*), birth (*Jatakarma*), first feeding (*Annaprashana*) and so on. These rights have been elaborately dealt in several ancient texts beginning from the Vedas, *Shrauta* Sutras, *Agama* texts, and post Vedic texts specially dealing on sacrifices.²

Apart from these Hindu scriptures highlight the significance of 5 great Yajnas that have to be performed by every householder. Taittiriya Aranyaka³ mentions these as (i) *Deva Yajna (offerings to GODs)*: worship of GODs in different ways which are suitable for one's level (ii) *Pitr Yajna (Offerings to forefathers)*: reverential bonding with parents, respecting and adoring the forefathers who were the cause for one's existence, by practicing the family tradition etc. One's welfare depends upon welfare of many members in the family. So this kind of *Yajna* tries to please all the family members in past. (iii) *Bhuta Yajna (offerings to animals, birds and so on)*: compassion towards the nature, animals, birds and any creature in the world. To look after the living beings is *Bhuta Yajna*. Almost all the deities have vehicles in the form of animals. While worshiping the particular deity, invariably their vehicles are also worshipped. This way revering animals taking care of all the animals is *Bhuta Yajna*. (iv) *Manushya Yajna (offerings to humanity)*: it is an expansion of emotions to encompass the entire humanity as a family. "Consideration of mine and thine weigh only with those little minded; to the large-hearted, on the other hand, the whole world is like a single household" – is the standpoint of the narrow-



minded, for the magnanimous-hearts however, the entire earth is but a family.⁴ Stretching helping hands in need is real *Manushya Yajna*. (v) *Brahma Yajna* (offerings in the form of wisdom): showing the reverence to the scriptures by studying under the real master who is traditionally oriented.

Various Hindu Traditions also speak of several other *Yajnas* as enunciated in the Bhagavad Gita as follows: (i) *Dravya Yajna*: offering selected and sacred plants into the fire chanting specified Mantras related to particular Gods and Goddesses for welfare of one. This includes sharing one's belonging with others and charity to needy and eligible. (ii) *Tapo Yajna*: following strict conduct in order to purify and master oneself by the process of varieties of practices, such as, sacrificing physical comforts, sitting for longer duration at one place, breath control, reducing sensory pleasures, study of scripture into deeper levels, contentment with limited and minimal resources and so on. It may vary from mild to very severe levels also. People depending upon intensity to reach the intended goal follow the same. Tapa is followed in three levels - emotional, vocal and physical. Being calm, happy, voluntary control over speech, pure emotions – tapas at emotional level; non-provoking words, speaking truth, study of the scriptures – tapas at vocal level; finally - respecting elders, cleanliness, and non-violence – Tapas at physical level. (iii) *Yoga Yajna*: constant practice of methods to control the *Manas* (Mind) through vigour practice in the path of Yoga lay down by Patanjali and other Gurus. Nature of mind is to wander, to have control over mind through multifarious activities. *Patanjali Yoga Sastra* states that total mastery over mind through practice and



mastery over desires is Yoga. (iv) *Svadhyaya Yajna*: study of scriptures that really can make one to reach *Moksha* (complete liberation) or repetition of selected and initiated *Mantra* for longer duration, until one gets total mastery over on the same, especially *OM-kara*. OM based *Dhyanas* (meditations) are many in number, explained in almost all the major literature of India. Self-analysis also considered as *Svadhyaya* in this context which actually show that what is the rate of inner growth in life. (v) *Jnana Yajna*: to seek true knowledge through strict austerity. The only goal in one's life in this path is self-realisation by every means.⁵

The classification and description of *Yajnas* as outlined above significantly highlights the purpose of performing any *Yajna*. In the modern context there are certain sections of the society who oppose the performance of *Yajnas* on similar lines as those of the *Charvaka (atheist)* philosophers of ancient Indian traditions. The *Charavakas* outrightly rejected the attainment of heaven obtained by sacrifice of an animal (*Pashu*) in *Yajna* supporting the view that in that case one could offer ones' own father so that he may attain heaven.⁶

Performance of sacrificial rituals

From Vedic times fire was ignited by rubbing sacrificial twigs (called *Arani*) together. The churning of fire involves the use of both palms and the ten fingers that are considered to be the sisters of fire. From this rubbing there is symbolic act of conception (*Garbhadhana*) of fire. *Rgveda* ¹RV (5.2.1-2) says *the Arani* which gives birth to *Agni* is called *Yuvati* (young mother) and *Mahishi*. This mother clasps her child to the bosom, does not



give it to the father. Sometimes the text speaks that *Agni* has two mothers such as the lower *Arani* and upper vertical stick [RV 1.141.3]. RV [3.29.1-3] compares this kindling of fire by friction to procreation⁷. The ancient sages even prescribed all the rituals associated from birth to death (as for humans) to the sacrificial fire. These include the various rituals of *Garbhadhana* (Conception), *Pumsavana* (Rite of engendering a male child), *Simantonayana*, (rite of parting the hair ceremoniously), *Jatakarma* (Birth), *Namakarana* (Naming), *Annaprashana* (First feeding), *Caula* (First cutting), *Upanayana* (Thread ceremony), *Vrata* (with gifts of cows given symbolically to preceptor), *Samavartana* (returning home after studies), Vivaha (marriage) with respective mantras for *Agni*. The performance of sacrificial rituals also involves the worship of several deities seeking their grace to remove several obstacles, the symbolical union of the ladles – *Sruk* (being personification of *Shakti*) and *Sruva* (Personification of *Purusha*), expiatory ceremonies to ward off evils originating in the course of performance of Yajna.⁷

“*Yajna* is an offering to higher divine beings” from where humans and other living beings on earth are drawing energy for their existence. “Let the offering be more than what I receive” (Narasimhan, et al. 2011). Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, gave a clear idea about the mechanism of nourishment of both Humans and Gods. “All beings are evolved from food, the production of food is dependent on Rain, the Rain has its origin from *Yajna* and *Yajna* is rooted in rooted in prescribed action (Karma). Karma has its origin in the Vedas and the Vedas proceed from the indestructible (GOD), hence all-pervading infinite is always



present in *Yajna*". [Bhagavad Gita 3.14-15]. This is also upheld by the Mahabharata [Anushasanika Parva Vishnusahasranama. 971 – 980].

Harmonious way of living in the creation itself finally becomes *Yajna*. If the bestowed boon by gods is not returned back, one is considered as thief, returning nothing. *Yajna* is simply a way of expressing our deep sense of appreciation and gratitude to them for the parts that they play in this creation. This is the only way to retort GODs. The righteous one who eats the remnants of the sacrifice are freed from all sins; but those sinful ones who cook food only for their own sake, verily eat sin. [Bhagavad Gita - 3.16].

Individual's attitude while performing *Yajna*

"The ladle with which an oblation is offered, the fire into which offering is given and the act of offering oblation is Brahma. Oblation poured into fire called *Iswara* (the lord), by God, is regarded as sacrifice. One who performs such sacrifices is merged in Him and attains Him". [Bhagavad Gita 4. 25-28] helping a Practitioner (*Sadhaka*) to realize oneself spiritually. The man who does not offer, for him neither this world nor those beyond are happy [Bhagavad Gita - 4.31]. In order to comprehend reality different types of *Yajnas* are included facilitating every *Sadhaka*.

Man is bound by his own action except when it is performed for the sake of *Yajna* [Bhagavad Gita - 3.9]. One of the important properties of the offering is that one can be free from the bondage of getting tied up by doing. It is an ideal action which results in making one free from bondages. The idea behind the performance



of *Yajna* is for social welfare and wellbeing of nature. The process of *Yajna* starts from the intention (*Sankalpa*). One intends to achieve some goal based on one's desires and *Yajna* serves as the means to achieve the goal.

Offerings in *Yajna*

Beginning from Vedic times the sages ordain the offering of various items (*Sambhara*) in performance of *Yajnas*. Some of these include pure ghee of cow, various types of sacrificial twigs (*Samits*), grains, parched rice, rice recipes (*Charu*, *Payasa* and so on), honey, *Darbha* grass, herbal plants (*Soma* and several Ayurvedic formulations). These offerings were made at certain auspicious times of the year for specific purposes.⁸. Material offerings that were made were supposed to be of good quality collected at auspicious times and apt places for the sake of its fullest results according to the ancient scriptural prescriptions. Such prescriptions are found in several *Shrauta* text and appendices of four Vedas, and also in post Vedic texts and manuals dealing with sacrifices.

These performances were broadly divided into four categories such as *Nitya*, *Naimittika*, *Kamya* and *Prayashcitta*. *Nitya* performances are done twice a day in dawn and dusk (*Sandhyavandanam* and *Agnihotram*) which includes salutations to Sun and fire offering with minimal materials; *Naimittika* includes all festivals and occasional performances (*Darshapurna*, *Pradosha*, *Vratas* and so on) in accordance with seasonal changes; *Kamya* Karmas are performances to fulfil the desires such as (*Putrakameshthi* – *Yajna* done for begetting children; *Pashuyaga* – *Yajna* for increasing the animals; *Rajasuya* – consecration of a



king and so on); *Prayashcitta* actions are nothing but expiatory to pacify the negative effects for unintended mistakes.⁹

Apart from these the main motive of a sacrifice is to shed one's ego and offer whatever GOD has given to others without expecting any returns. Although several texts mention sacrifices involving slaughter of animals, there is a misinterpretation of the practices. What the texts actually prescribe is the sacrifice of the evil qualities within the individual self that resembles animals' in behaviour (*Pashuttva*). This assumes significance in the view of offerings made blindly by the sacrifice without having prior knowledge of each action performed during *Yajna*. In modern contexts it is quite natural to observe the performance of several sacrificial rituals blindly and merely for the attainment of one's desires. Such individuals differ no less than the Atheist (*Charvakas*) who maintain that when a sacrificial animal is bound to attain heaven why not sacrifice one's own father so that he may also attain the same bliss!¹⁰ However Vedic and Post-Vedic texts also prescribe special offerings to fulfil certain desires that were made during auspicious and inauspicious periods. Auspicious offerings include those made during *Rajasuya*, *Ashwamedha*, *Darshapurnamasa* and so on. Inauspicious offerings include those made during drought conditions, portents, natural-calamities and so on for appeasing the deities governing those natural forces. As an example one may consider the *Karirshti Homa* prescribed in *Taittiriya Samhita* wherein *Karira* [Capparis aphylla] fruits are offered in the sacrificial fire resulting in auspicious smoke that pervades the atmosphere and inducing rain so as to remove the inauspiciousness of drought.¹¹



Experimental observations of *Yajna* and effects

As mentioned above the offerings that were made by the sacrificer in different occasions gave specific results at the appropriate times with the grace of divine interventions.

Research studies in India and abroad indicates the efficacy of several *Yajnas* that benefitted society with enhanced improvements in physiological and psychological well-being of individuals, Good agricultural outputs, Harmonious balance between man and nature and so on. As an example the *Agnihotra* Fire rituals are believed to bring about equilibrium of nature, holistic growth and enhancement of human life. *Agnihotra* basically involves offerings such as cow-dung cakes, cow's ghee, sacrificial twigs such as *Vata* (*Ficus Bengalensis*), *Audumbara* (*Ficus Glometra*), *Palasha* (*Butea Frondosa*), *Bale* (*Aegle Marmelos*) and so on.¹² Of these experimentally found that the offerings of ghee produces acetylene and sucks the pollutants in the air thus purifying it. Cow dung contains plenty of Menthol, Ammonia, Phenol, Formalin and so on, thus acting as disinfectant to eradicate pathogens in the atmosphere. The offerings of sacrificial twigs have medicinal and beneficial effects such as reduction of excessive heat in atmosphere. EEG tests of the sacrificers have been found to be showing increased Alpha waves indicating the brain being in complete relaxation. The *Mantras* chanted during the offering of oblations also charm them with energy that connects the sacrificer to the spiritual deities to whom the offerings are made.¹³ Similar effects of *Agnihotra* performance on plant growth, seed germination,



curing of skin diseases, water purification have been investigated based on different experiments performed by scientists.¹⁴

Similar experimental Observations of *Atiratrm Yajna*, *Somayajnas*, *Karirshti Homa* and others to bring about rain as well as to induce Moisture content (*Somamsha*) in the present Global Warming scenario have been reported from several places at which the Yagas were performed.¹⁵ *Somayaga* is a sacrificial ritual in which Soma juice oblations to the deities thus energising the five elements in the universe (Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Ether) in order to bestow prosperity and restore natural equilibrium. These Yajnas show enhanced monsoon rain fall that was timely and sufficient so as to bring about agricultural prosperity. The Natural cycle of six seasons is accelerated and regulated by the performance of *Somayagas*. In an average about 70% accuracy of rainfall has been recorded in the places where *Somayagas* were performed.¹⁶

Conclusion

Indian traditional practices such as *Yajna* and Yoga have their relevance even in the present scenario. Among all the performances Fire ceremony plays major role in refining the human thoughts and life process in accordance with the Nature. Eco-friendly method of leading life can answer the individual and social challenges to uplift Humanity with apt method. This can happen only by clear understanding of every action one performs. However fire ceremony helps human to understand the nature around and systematizes oneself in tune with nature. From the above discussion on offerings made, one needs to equip with this knowledge of the kind of offerings so that fire offering ceremony



enhances the positive effects to bring about a traditional, harmonious, prosperous society for the future generations.

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