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Vedic Sacrifices and Indian Culture

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Abstract:

Vedic sacrifices are said to have been the backbone of the Vedic society. In the development of life and culture of the Aryan people, sacrifices played a vital role. It was the sacrificial ceremonial performances which developed all sorts of traditional knowledge of ritual practices. It is true that those are not only of religious importance but also represent the scientific knowledge. Remembering the great contribution of the sacrifices through Vedic descriptions, it is observed that we have a close connection with our rich heritage and culture. This has been handed down to us since a long time which is still continuing in India and not a borrowed one.

Key Words – Sacrificers, Rituals, Culture, *Yajñas*, *Puruṣa*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Rtam*, *karmakāṇḍa*, *śraddhā*, *Satya*, *Purāṇas*, *Smṛtis*, *phalaśruti*,

Introduction:

India is great for the Vedas and its culture. The sacrifices had a multiple purpose. The *yajñas* were the open air observatories, academic laboratories from which knowledge emanated from time to time. The sciences developed in this context were phonetics, grammar, linguistics, geometry, astronomy, cosmology, biology, medicine, surgery and anatomy besides agriculture and dietetics.¹ Moreover, the rituals or sacrifices were regarded by Vedic seers as the sources of both spiritual and material achievement. Sacrifice was the medium by which different deities embodying natural phenomena were propitiated and through their propitiation, the sacrificers were granted wealth and long life in this world and heavenly bliss in the other world.

I. Sacrifice was also regarded as the source of creation. By His self-immolation in the first cosmic sacrifice, the One Supreme God, the Primordial *puruṣa* manifested Himself into this diversified world. That cosmic sacrifice has been described in detail in the Hymns of creation known as *puruṣa sūkta* and in the first verse of *Sukla Yajurveda*.² thus, the sacrifice is the source of creation. The whole Universe sprang from the sacrifice. Primal *puruṣa* who

was one and undivided before sacrifice, became many afterwards. This fact underwent re-orientation in the *Upaniṣadic* Age and became one of the fundamental doctrine of *Upaniṣadic* philosophy which upholds that the diversified world is nothing but the manifestation of one Absolute Reality.³

Not only was the world originated but also sustained by the sacrifice. The *Yajurvedic* as well as *Brāhmaṇa* texts consider the Vedic rituals or sacrifices to be the sustainer of the Universe. As the upkeep of the Universe depends on sacrifice, it is called in the S'yv, 'the navel of the universe'.⁴ The same idea is maintained in the T.B.⁵ S.B. regards the sacrifice as the source of *Ṛtam* or cosmic principle⁶ and the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* as the 'fountain of all good deeds, acts of piety'.⁷ A well- performed sacrifice as the source of cosmic principle extends its influence over natural forces and regulating them favorably generates sufficient rainfall. Thus good cultivation and abundant food production are ensured. Creatures living on earth absolutely depend on food for their livelihood and procreation. Sacrifice is, therefore, at the root of the sustenance of the whole creation. This fact is well reflected in the *Manu-Saṃhitā* and in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Thus declares the *Manu-Saṃhitā* : 'Offerings reverentially offered in fire in a right *śāstric* way, rightly goes up to the solar region, thence due to a regular taking of mundane moisture, timely rain comes down, crops grow then and people are born and grown up'.⁸ Almost in the same tone the *Bhagavad gītā* declares :- 'From food creatures come into being, from rain crops grow, from sacrifice rain comes into being and sacrifice is born of the performance of the priests.' ⁹

II. In order to achieve worldly and other-worldly bliss, the performance of sacrifice is believed to be indispensable. Hence sacrifice is regarded as the highest of all rites and rituals. The word 'greatest deed' is ascribed as an appellation to sacrifice in the Ś'yv.¹⁰ Sacrifice is the greatest of all deeds – declare the S.B. and the T.B.¹¹ Sacrifice is again considered to be the sure means to lead sacrificers to heaven. It is often compared to as strong and defectless vessel with hundred oars which will definitely carry the sacrificer to the heavenly abode.¹² The sacrifice is according to the A.B. 'The vessel by which one can easily cross'.¹³ Ramendra sundar Trivedi has brought out a book entitled "*yajñakathā*". Therein he rightly holds that the duties of a householder may be equaled with "*Yajña*" and the inner significance of *yajña* lies in renunciation.¹⁴

The sacrifice invokes different deities in the sacrifice with a view to achieve manifold results of the sacrifice. The life, the life-breath, the eyes, the ears are desired to have strength through the practice of sacrifice. This view is expressed in the following verse of Ś'yv.

‘May life prosper through the sacrifice. May breath prosper through the sacrifice. May the eye prosper through the sacrifice. May the ear prosper through the practice of sacrifice. May the ear prosper through the practice of sacrifice. May the back prosper through the sacrifice. May the sacrifice prosper through the sacrifice’.¹⁶

The multifarious results of the sacrifice are alluded to the XVIIIth Ch. of the Śyṅ. The Vedic poet hopes that each and every desirable object will flourish through the practice of sacrifice. Through the grace of sacrifice, all the bodily organs such as breath, voice, ears, eyes and mind etc. will be stimulated.¹⁷ Through the grace of sacrifice, one desires to attain long life, immortality, happiness and vivacity.¹⁸ Moreover, all sorts of agricultural products, flowers and trees, rain etc. will flourish through sacrifice. As a result of sacrifice various minerals such as iron, tin, copper etc. will be abundant. Along with the growth of material prosperity, the spiritual attainment of the sacrificer will earn him total happiness.¹⁹

Reverence for and faith in the sacrifice also counts a great deal. No sacrifice can be well accomplished without *śraddhā* or faith. ‘By giving sacrificial fee one gains faith and of faith comes the knowledge of Truth’.²⁰ – declares the Śyṅ. According to *Uvaṭa* and *Mahīdhara*, the word Truth or *Satya*, here refers to the Infinite knowledge – the knowledge of Brahman, the Absolute. As the attainment of Truth or Absolute Reality is possible by means of *Śraddhā* or faith, its importance in the sacrificial ceremonial (*karmakāṇḍa*) is well established.

III. Basically Hindu religious customs are routed through the concept ‘*vedo*’ *khilo dharmamūlam*’ - that the Vedic literature is the source of the Hindu religion. But in course of time, as the society is governed by the socio-political and economical conditions, slowly but surely, it goes on changing. At the same time it maintains its roots in the Vedic texts. At the same time of *Smṛti* period itself, social customs started changing and the sage *Yājñavalkya* gave sanction to this mode of change saying:

vedaḥ smṛtiḥ sadācārah
svasya ca priyam ātmanah /
samyak saṅkalpajah kāmah
dharmamūlam idam smṛtam //

The source of religion is not only Veda, *Smṛti* but also the good behavior and the welfare of the self. These are treated as the source of religion. There again the desire we thought out is also considered to be the source of religious custom. The Vedas are regarded as the foremost path finder for sacrifices which are taken off by the later *smṛti* texts.

In *ācāra dharma*, *phalaśruti* plays an important role. In all *Karmakāṇḍas*, '*śrutismṛtipurāṇoktaphalaprāpti*' (to obtain the fruit which is sanctioned by the scriptural texts such as *Vedas*, *Smṛtis* and *Purāṇas*, when the particular karma is to be observed) is to be specified in the beginning of the religious ritual. In other words religious rituals are observed keeping an eye on the achievement of the ideals for which they are prescribed-in the period when the sacrificial culture (*Yajña saṁskṛti*) was prevalent. The *phalaśruti* was prescribed such as, *jyotiṣtomena juhuyāt svargakāmaḥ* 'one who desires *svarga* (heaven) should perform *Jyotiṣtoma yāga* (sacrifice)'. Especially the vows promised in *Purāṇas* give stress on the *phalaśruti* and side by side the story (*kathā*) which tells the effect of the vow prescribed. The story part of it impresses upon the observer that if the vow is observed as per prescribed rites provides the results, the effect is fully known as the outcome of the perception. In this way the entire *paurāṇic vratas* are reflected through various descriptions in the Indian Culture.

IV. Tradition implies 'handing over' and with relevance to culture, it may be said to be transmission of statements, ceremonies, myths, dogmas or ethics, beliefs and customs especially by word of mouth or by practice. It is what is handed down from generation to generation a long established and generally accepted in and acceptable to society. Understood in this connotation, living tradition comes to mean those practices which are in vogue even today, having had their origin and continuous practice from time immemorial. Many practices and rites may not have any significance or even might have lost old features but still may be in practice on account of authoritative approach or merely for social sanction.

It is the religion of any particular group that defines and institutionalizes the significance of death, theoretically as well as practically, by assigning specific rules to its various members and functionaries, by prescribing certain rights and practices. Sociologists underline the psycho-social objective behind the rites. Malinowski considers death customs as a social mechanism for re-adjustment and release of tension. The rituals, which their underlying religious notions, counteract the centrifugal forces of fear, dismay and demoralization and provide the most powerful means of re-integration of the group's shaken solidarity and of the re-establishment of its morale. But the structuralism emphasize that the rituals tend to build up tension and merely provide relief. The attendant rites are regarded as passage rites, consisting of the rites of separation, rites of transition and finally rites of incorporation of the deceased in the next new world.

Generally, one should offer the oblations made of new grains on a *parvan* day, i.e. in the New-moon and the Full-moon sacrifice. For him, who wants to offer the fruits only through the *Agnihotra* sacrifice should feed the *Agnihotra*-cow with the new grains and offer the evening and he morning oblations of *Agnihotra* with her milk or, as a third alternative, he should offer the oblations in the evening and the morning *Agnihotra* with

the gruel of new grains. Or the sacrifice, having prepared a mess of cooked food with fresh corn in the Gārhapatya fire, can offer oblations in the *Āhavanīya* fire to the three deities of the *Āgrayanna* viz. *Indrāgnī*, *Viśvedevāḥ* and *Dyāvāprthivī*, the *Sviṣṭakṛt* being the fourth or the sacrifice should feed the four *Brāhmaṇas* with the four pots full of food prepared with new grains. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* enjoins that if the sacrificer is a *Soma*-sacrificer or he performs the *Darśapūrṇamāsa* sacrifice, should first perform that sacrifice and then perform the *Āgrayana*. If the sacrifice has not yet performed the *Darśapūrṇamāsa* sacrifice, he should cook a *cātusprāśya* pap on the *Dakṣiṇa* fire and the priests should be fed. The same view is corroborated by the *Kātyāyanaśrautasūtra* also. Thus, the offering of the first fruit is consecrated by the feeding of the priests. The *Brāhmaṇas* occupied a unique position in the society of the Vedic age. The Vedic texts are full of reference^{4s} to the civilities to be paid to the priestly class. They are often declared to be the gods on earth, i.e. they are gods in person. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* also categorically states that there are two types of gods indeed. The gods are the gods and the *Brāhmaṇas* who have studied the Vedas and teach sacred lores are the human gods. It is also remarked that the *Brāhmaṇa* descending from a *ṛṣi* represents all the deities. Of course, the exalted position that the priestly class availed is only due to their pre-eminence in the sacred knowledge. A *Brāhmaṇa*, who is well-versed in the Vedic studies, is entitled to perform the sacrifice and to receive the sacrificial fee. He, who is not learned but officiates as a priest and enjoys the fee is liable to be expiated for the breach of duty, the *Sāmavidhānabrāhmaṇa* enjoins.

It is enjoined in the Vedic texts that the sacrificer should give as much as in his power to the priests because no offering is done without a sacrificial fee, i.e. *dakṣiṇā*. A sacrifice without a *dakṣiṇā* is futile. The Sacrificer is enjoined to pay the sacrificial fee in kinds or coins according to his capacity. If a sacrifice is not financially sound, he should pay according to his means. The four usual *dakṣiṇās*, according to the *Śatapatha brāhmaṇa* are gold, a cow, clothes and a horse. To these principal gifts, the sacrifice offers many other objects to regale the priests which include nothing but the articles of personal property. The enumeration of such gifts includes animal's chariots, clothes, food, utensils and agricultural equipments and so on.

V. Though it is not stated distinctly that the institution of offering the first fruits of the soil is intended to offer thanks to the presiding deities of the produce of the earth, yet, an inner feeling of showing gratitude to them is easily conceivable in the whole procedure. While taking the remnants of the meal offered to the gods prepared of new fruits, the sacrifice cites the Vedic hymn *bhadrānnah śreyah samanaīṣṭa devāstvayā'vaśena samaśīmahi tvā / san a mayo' bhūḥ pitavāviśava śam tokāya tanuve syona*, which states that by the grace of the god presiding over the produce of the earth, the sacrifice is able to partake of the oblation prepared of the first fruits. Jayarāma, while explaining the relevant verse in the *Pāraskaragṛhyasūtra*, expounds the idea very well.

Thus, the sacrificer expresses his gratitude to the presiding deities for the prosperous of enjoyment of what is produced. The institution, therefore, serves the purpose of a thanks-giving sacrifice.

In this case, “the sacrifice” of the first fruits of the soil does not obviously express thanks for the blessings of gods received already, but seeks blessings for the future. This view does not correspond with the fact supported by the materials furnished herewith where it is implied that the sacrifice performs the rite intending to express his gratitude for the blessings of the gods that bestow on them the prosperous enjoyment of the food produced. It is not so much for the hope of the future harvest only.

Conclusion-

The Vedas glorifies the nature of religious practices which were the foundation of a sacrificial culture. Many *Brāhmaṇa* texts have described the formulae in a more scientific manner which is materialized in a cultural background. The systematic presentation is a necessary condition for the rituals which took a definite shape at the time of *Brāhmaṇa* literature. This are a definite relationship with that of *ṛta* which latter on became the source material for Indian culture. These became a living tradition in our society hence; the Vedas were not borrowed from outside India. Even now the rituals are being performed in our day today life in order to remain connected with the age old Vedic practices. Hence, Vedic rituals were never originated outside India neither the *ṛsis* of thee then time. One has to look into the huge bulk of Vedic literature and read carefully before giving any remarks of outside origin of the rituals.

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10. Śyv. 1.1.
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