REINTERPRETING *YAJÑA* AS VEDIC SACRIFICE

Vedic rituals, *yajña-s*, were one of the most important socio-religious activities in Vedic India. In this article, I endeavour to problematize the term 'sacrifice', which is often used to translate the word *yajña* in Indological writings. Although Monier-Williams (MW) *Dictionary* defines *yajña* as : 'worship, devotion, prayer, praise ; act of worship or devotion, offering, oblation, sacrifice (the former meanings prevail in Veda, the latter in post-Vedic literature)', some of the primary meanings of the word *yajña* seem to have been side-lined with the scholarly emphasis on 'sacrifice' as the chief inter-pretation. Several Vedic scholars have already expressed their disapproval with equating *yajña* with sacrifice, for instance, according to Timothy Lubin from his April 5, 2007 message on a scholarly discussion group RISA-L :

> *Yajña* and *yāga* are synonyms = 'worship' in the specifically Vedic sense of a worship, service of offerings placed in Agni, the sacred fire. The common translation 'sacrifice' is a bit misleading, since it implies a theory of sacrifice based on Judaic and Greco-Roman practices and ideas. Moreover, the verb *yaj* is used with an accusative of the god worshiped and the particular offering/

rite expressed by the instrumental of means : *agniṣṭomena devān yajati* = He worships the gods with the Agniṣṭoma rite. Homa designates a libation in the fire, i.e. the pouring or strewing of an offering material, usually *ājya* (ghee) but also milk, rice or barley, etc. as the main offerings, also called *āhuti*. The offering material is accordingly called *havis*. In the Śrauta system, the *havir-yajña-s* are distinguished as the most basic ritual formats, vs. the *soma-yajña-s*.

Following Lubin, in this article, I endeavour to perform a hermeneutic exercise by offering an interpretation of Vedic rituals as a form of 'worship, devotion, prayer, praise', thus applying its primary dictionary meaning. As is well known, *yajña* is derived etymologically from *yaj* which means 'to worship, adore, honor, consecrate, hallow, offer, present, grant, yield, bestow.' I want to argue that the some of the meanings of the word *yajña* suggested by its Sanskrit root verb are mostly ignored and *yajña* has simply come to mean a sacrifice, perhaps based on animal sacrifices in rituals such as the Aśvamedhā, 'the horse sacrifice'. As noted above, this translation is not just a literal one but even the communal worship based idea of *yajña* seems to be reduced just to mean 'sacrifice'.

Some of the major interpretive exercises applied to Vedic texts is comparative approach, i.e. comparing Vedic 'sacrifices' with those performed in other ancient Western cultures. But Heesterman clearly points out

that the Sanskrit word *yajña* does not have any word in other European languages that is etymologically similar to it. Unfortunately, this does not stop him or other scholars to apply similar non-Indic hermeneutic categories to interpret Vedic 'sacrifices'. Interpreting Vedic 'sacrifice' is a speculative and hermeneutic exercise. Although *yajña* has been generally translated as sacrifice and as worship in some cases, it has rarely been interpreted as a phenomenon to strengthen social and political conditions of Vedic people.

Roots of Yajña and Sacrifice

Since *yajña* is most often translated as sacrifice in English discourses, let us first see the etymology of the term 'sacrifice'. 'Sacrifice' comes from a Latin word *sacrificium* which in turn comes from two Latin words, *sacer*, which means 'sacred' and *facere* which means 'to make'. Thus sacrifice literally means to make sacred or holy. The Western notion of sacrifice, as hinted by Lubin above, is summarized in the words of Michael Gelven (1994: 63) :

> For it is that elusive, antimodern notion of 'holiness' that really supports my understanding of the word 'sacrifice'. We know what we mean when we speak of sacrifice in the normal way. We mean surrendering what is precious, giving up something that is dear to us. We also know the etymology, and so we say that to make something holy requires this sense of deprivation.

Following Gelven, one can argue that the only Sanskrit words resembling 'sacrifice' are *bali* and *tyāga*, which inherently signify surrendering or offering something 'dear' to oneself. Of course, *yajña* also has *bali* as an important component but *bali* is just a subset of *yajña*. Thus, sacrifice is a reductionistic translation of *yajña*.

As mentioned above, the Sanskrit root of the word *yajña* is '*yaj*', meaning to perform worship. From the two kinds of *yajña-s*, Śrauta and Gṛhya, in the paper we will focus on the former. We know that Śrauta rituals used to be performed as a communal affair where an entire group would participate in a public place. To this already established conclusion, let me juxtapose the Sanskrit meaning of *yaj* and propose that *yajña* was not *only* meant to perform sacrifices to maintain the cosmic order, although that was one of the main underlying purposes, but the literal meaning of *yajña* suggests that it was a religious worship in which a community which may have been disjointed before, comes together as a united group. It is also known that Śrauta rituals were performed for many days. I would suggest that at the end of the communal worship, the participants would develop new social relationships. In essence, by performing a series of *yajña-s* throughout the Indian subcontinent, the Vedic and non-Āryan entries got amalgameted just culturally but socio-politically as well. These *yajña-s* became the greatest instrument to unite brāhmaṇical Āryans and

native people because they all performed worship (*yaj*) for several days together. Thus, sacrifice of any form in *yajña*, such as vegetables, fruits, soma, or animal was just one of the motives of *yajña*, not the *chief* activity as suggested by its translation of *yajña*. Somehow, *yajña* translated as sacrifice does not seem to justify its wider socio-political implications.

According to Romila Thapar (1994), *yajña* means 'to consecrate, to worship, to convert the profane into the holy'. However, Heesterman (1993) defines three main components of Vedic 'sacrifice' as killing, destruction, and food distribution, thus ignoring the most primary meaning of the word *yajña*. He seems to have followed these three elements from other ancient cultures.This definition is already criticized by Brian Smith (1988). Heesterman (1985:34) points out that originally the Vedic *yajña-s* used to be performed by rival groups in order to unite them under a common leader, such as the concord 'sacrifice' (*samjñanerti yajña*). But only certain *yajña-s* were performed for unity and concord. Similarly, James Egge notes that Vedic *yajña-s* also involved donation as a prime motive and activity (2002:18-19) :

> The most important aspect of Vedic sacrificial theory and practice to be appropriated by Buddhists was the interpretation of giving to clergy as meritorious sacrifice. To understand how Buddhists could view almsgiving as sacrifice, we must see that the brāhmanical texts themselves

equate sacrifice with *dakṣiṇā*, the gift given to the officiating priests. A discussion of the Agnihotra sacrifice in *Yajurveda* illustrates well the interpretation of *dakṣiṇā* as sacrifice.

Yajña as Socio-Political Activity

Religion sometimes is regarded as a product of social and political conditions of a community, contrariwise, in this article, we shall see how *yajña* helped Vedic society to improve their social and political conditions. David Gitomer (1994) has compared *yajña* with *nāṭya* (drama performance) in the sense that both are repetitive performances to recreate a phenomenon. I would like to draw upon this further by imagining the effect it must have had on the people observing these *yajña-s*. According to Lutgendorf, 'Vedic performance presumably was its own advertisement and validation in ancient times, especially in the case of the larger "public" sacrifices.' (Personal communication, February 16th, 2006). This remark matches with K.R. Potdar's observations (1953):

> . . . systematic effort was made to popularize the cult of sacrifice by various means of broadening the nature of the sacrificial worship. The enthusiasm with which the cult of the sacrifice was followed can be seen illustrated in the expression of a poet in *RV* II.30.7 : *na mā taman na śraman nota tandran na vocāma mā sunoteti somam*, where wishes that none should express any anti-sacrifice desire merely because there is great

labour and exhaustion involved in the performance thereof *RV* X.57.1 : *mā pra gāma patho vayaṃ mā yajñād indra sominaḥ.*

Similarly, Jennings W. Theodore (1982) has identified three 'moments' of noetic function of ritual. 1. Ritual action is a way of gaining knowledge. Ritual activity may serve as a mode of inquiry and discovery. 2. Ritual serves to transmit knowledge. Here the decisive importance of ritual in forming a way of being and acting in the world comes especially into focus. Ritual is not primarily the illustration of theoretical knowledge nor the dramatization of mythic knowledge. Instead ritual action transmits the 'knowing' gained through ritual action itself. 3. Ritual performance is a display of the ritual and of the participants in the ritual to an observer who is invited to see, approve, understand, or recognize the ritual action. This aspect of ritual knowledge serves as the point of contact between the ritual action and the attempt to gain a theoretical, critical understanding of ritual.

Out of these three 'moments' of a ritual, most of the scholarly work on Vedic rituals seems to have limited itself to the first and second 'moments' of Vedic *yajña-s. Yajña-s* have been widely described as activities to maintain *ṛtam*, or cosmic order, thus as an inquiry and discovery of relationship of humans with the cosmic cycle. However, the third 'moment' has rarely been used to interpret Vedic *yajña-s*. It is possible that the *yajña-s* were utilized by Vedic

people to be performed in the forest and remote areas. In other words, *yajña-s* served as an institution to propagate Vedic culture.

Tom Driver (1998) draws upon the ritual theory of Theodore and writes that there are three key social gifts of rituals : order, community and transformation. While writing about community building by rituals, Driver cites Rappaport :

> Anthropology has known since Durkhiem's time that rituals establish or enhance solidarity among those joining in their performance . . . an awareness of this has no doubt been part of general common sense since time immemorial.[1]

Similarly Driver cites Huxley emphasizing the social aspect of rituals :

> The rituals, like collective worship or tribal dancing, have a social function . . . to ensure individual participation in a group activity . . . to channel and intensify the group's mood.[2]

This 'solidarity' feature of Vedic *yajña-s* can be further explored. Although creation and maintenance of order (*ṛtam*), is widely acknowledged as one of the chief functions of Vedic *yajña-s*, the second aspect of building the community needs more scholarly attention. Fortunately, scholars of Western traditions, such as Huxley, Rappaport and Driver, have already noted it at least for rituals of Western religions. I don't see any reason why this aspect cannot be applied to Vedic

yajña-s as well. Why should *yajña* be restricted with only connotation of sacrifice ?

Further Driver cites Victor Turner's twin concepts of communitas and liminaliry as applied to rituals :

> When people engage in ritual activity, they separate themselves, partially if not totally, from the roles and statuses they have in the workaday world. There is a threshold in time or space or both, and certainly a demarcation of behaviour, over which people pass when entering into ritual. Ritual activity, existing as if outside the structures of society, existing in a subjunctive mode of play and pretend, is neither here nor there. It is *liminal*.

It is clear that if we apply these concepts of Turner to Vedic rituals, we can surmise that the people engaged in grand Śrauta rituals may have enjoyed their liminal state during the performance by intermixing of different social groups for several days (and weeks in longer version). This intermixing beyond any social barriers may have, in turn, resulted in socio-political coherence in Vedic society.

Notice these verses from the *RV* (Witzel 1997): *kṛṇvanto viśvam āryam* (IX.63.5), literally, 'Make the world noble'. Similarly, *RV* (III.30.6) says, *viśvaṃ satyaṃ kṛṇuhi*, literally, 'Make the world truthful.' Various kinds of *yajña-s*, were the main religious activity of Indian society in Vedic period. Some of these *yajña-s* were performed with political and social

motivations such as Aśvamedha and Rājasūya. Both of these were performed by kings to expand their territories. *Yajña-s* thus must have played a crucial role in this spread of religious ideologies across such a large geographical area.

C.G. Kashikar (1987: 16-28) also believes that *yajña-s* have *lokasaṃgraha* element :

> A person who was either a Brāhmaṇa or a Kṣattriya or a Vaiśya was entitled to perform the Agniṣṭoma. The sacrificer when consecrated (*dīkṣita*), was pronounced to be a Brāhmaṇa irrespective of his caste. This practice led to a sort of equal status for the different castes on the religious plane. The performance was an individual religious worship, in the sense that the sacrificer pronounced his desire to perform the sacrifice and the credit of the performance ultimately went to him. It was also a collective worship because sixteen priests, assisted by many others, officiated on behalf of the sacrificer. The performance assumed the character of a social function which involved the active cooperation of the entire village community. The agricultural and industrial products of the village were required for the performance. This circumstance contributed to a large extent to the maintenance of social solidarity and economic growth of the village and the adjoining area. The distribution of sacrificial fees (*dakṣiṇā*) in the performance led to economic

redistribution to a certain extent. The number of cows to be given away as fees to the various priests is fixed in the scriptures. There are other objects also which are to be given away from time to time. In practice the quantity of fees probably depended upon the economic condition of the sacrificer. A princely sacrificer could give more while a poor Brāhmaṇa could not afford to give even the prescribed fee.

In similar modern versions, Philip Lutgendorf (1991: 80-96) discusses various forms of *mānasa* sacrifices performed in contemporary Northern India to propagate the message of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, a popular version of *Rāmāyaṇa* written by Tulsidās in local dialect of Hindi. These are mass-readings of the text performed over nine or more days by a group of people.

David Carpenter (1994) drawing from Romila Thapar and Asko Parpola writes that the Śrauta ritual system evolved to include both Indo-Āryan and indigenous (*dāsa*) elements under the aegis of the cultural norms represented by the sacrifice and its language. Interestingly, *yajña-s* not only played their role to incorporate *anārya-s* into the Āryan fold but *yajña-s* themselves got transformed in the process by incorporating *anāryan* practices. Drawing from J. Gonda, Israel Selvanayagam (1996) agrees with this proposition.

Laurie Patton speculates in her recent book

Bringing the Gods to Mind : *Mantra and Ritual in Early Indian Sacrifice* about the Vedic 'other':

> One might want to speculate, for instance, that the Śrauta 'other' is so constructed when the performance of public sacrifices was still a viable and persuasive means of asserting political and territorial power, such as in the early period of kingdom formation of Magadā and other princi-palities. What is more, the Gṛhya 'other' describes a world in which such public boundaries are not so threatened, and more attention could be paid to the development of a religious elite, whose achievements, symbolizing their status as elites, were also their highest moments of visibility and, thereby, danger (pp 139-40).

Similarly, W. Norman Brown (1919) interpreted *RV* X.124 in a unique way. He noted that the hymn is about the conflict between the *deva-s* and the *asura-s* and not between Indra and Vṛtra. These two are leaders of two rival groups. The hymn describes how Indra lures Agni, Varuṇa, and Soma to leave the *asura-s* and join the *deva-s*. In this interpretation, we can see how Vedic Indians incorporated 'the other' into their social fold, possibly using the *yajña-s* in the process.

Charles Malamoud (1996: 77-8) compares the concept of *dharma* in classical Hinduism with *yajña* in Vedic India. He considers *yajña-s* to serve the purpose of maintaining the social and cosmic order, similar to the role played by *dharma*. Malamoud also describes

Aśvamedha. This 'horse-sacrifice' is performed by the victorious king who wishes to confirm and proclaim his sovereignty. This highly complex rite lasts an entire year. Horse represents Prajāpati, the creator, the king sacrificer himself, and the Sun, and wanders freely over the land before being put to death. The horse is followed by hundreds of soldiers who are ready to challenge anybody who tries to capture the horse. While the horse wanders, many preliminary ceremonies are performed. Finally, at the time of sacrifice, in addition to the other village animals, there are also quasi-victims.

Furthermore, noting how different divinities among different groups were synthesized by *yajña-s*, Potdar notes :

> This enthusiasm in worship must have led to a clash among the protagonists of the one or the other divinity and brought to the forefront the activities of the non-sacrificers as well. As this was a potential danger to the cause of sacrifice, the idea of joint divinities appears to have been introduced. It is at this stage that the combined worship of some divinities seems to have been introduced. But as this too must have led to the formations of different groups, the idea of 'all-divinities' (Viśvadeva-s) appears to have been introduced. It is this worship of Viśvadeva-s that is significantly said to have propagated the Āryan (Vedic) cult all round.

The communicative and performative aspects of ritual are clearly exposed by Catherine Bell :

> Mary Douglas, for example, states that 'ritual is preeminently a form of communication' composed of culturally normal acts that have been distinctive by being diverted to special functions where they are given magical efficacy. Leach also argues that 'we engage in ritual in order to transmit collective messages to ourselves.' Tambiah's performative approach also represents an example of this perspective.

Conclusion

Lutgendorf writes (1991:115), 'Although the noun *kathā* is often understood to mean simply "story", this English translation tends to overly nominalize a word that retains a strong sense of its verb root.' Similarly, Jack Hawley writes (2000), '. . . even after many years of study and interaction, when I open my mouth to say something about Hinduism, I often feel I am translating'. Agreeing with Lutgendorf and Hawley, I can think of several Sanskrit words which have been reduced to troublesome translated versions in English, such as *dharma* as religion or duty, *varṇa* as caste, *ātman* as soul, and in the context of this article, *yajña* as sacrifice. This must be the reason when James Fitzgerald resumed the translation of *Mahābhārata* after untimely death of Van Buitenen ; he rejected the words such as baron for Kṣattriya and commoner for Vaiśya.

The point highlighted in this article is that the

sense of communal worship in *yajña* seems to have been ignored due to the reductionist translation of *yajña* as sacrifice. *Yajña* can be seen as the major religious phenomena of Vedic India for *lokasaṃgraha*, activities for unifying Vedic society socially, religiously and politically. Let me end this article with an example of how sacrifice as the word for *yajña-s* can create havoc. In spring 2006, a Western philosophy professor in University of Iowa was lecturing on *Gītā*.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches one to perform work as a holy sacrifice (chapters. IV, IX). One should expect nothing ; rely on nothing (verse 24). One may sacrifice many things. All of these are holy work (verse 25). The greatest sacrifice is that of wisdom (verse 33).

In the lecture he taught the students, that the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches one to forgo one's wisdom. Clearly, here the correct translation is simply that *Gītā* accords the *jñāna-yajña* to be the highest, but since the *yajña* is translated as sacrifice, one can easily mis-interpret *Gītā*.

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Notes

1. Rappaport, *Ecology, meaning and religion* (1979), 49, cited by Driver.
2. Huxley, *Introduction* (1966), 264, cited bv Driver.