REINTERPRETING YAJÑA AS VEDIC SACRIFICE

“An American scholar of India can hardly escape being a translator – not merely of words, but of the outlooks and ideas that shape all the manifestations of the culture, including its language.” – Philip Lutgendorf (1991: 231)

Vedic rituals, yajñas, were one of the most important socio-religious activities in Vedic India. In this article, I endeavor to problematize the term “sacrifice,” which is often used to translate the word yajña in Indological writings. Although Monier-Williams (MW) dictionary defines yajñas as - “worship, devotion, prayer, praise; act of worship or devotion, offering, oblation, sacrifice (the former meanings prevailing in Veda, the latter in post-Vedic literature)”, some of the primary meanings of the word yajña seem to have been sidelined with the scholarly emphasis on “sacrifice” as the chief interpretation. Several Vedicists have already expressed their disapprovals 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: agni.s.tomena devān yajati = He worships the gods with the Agni.s.toma 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-yajñas are distinguished as the most basic ritual formats, vs. the soma-yaj~nas.”

Following Lubin, in this article, I endeavor 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 \textit{yajña} suggested by its Sanskrit root verb are mostly ignored and \textit{yajña} has simply come to mean a sacrifice, perhaps based on animal sacrifices in rituals such as the \textit{Aśvamedhā}, “the horse sacrifice”. As noted by Lutgendorf in his quote above, this translation is not just a literal one but even the communal worship based idea of \textit{yajña} seems to be reduced just to mean “sacrifice”.

Some of the major interpretive exercises applied to Vedic texts have adopted a comparative approach, comparing Vedic “sacrifices” with those performed in other ancient Western cultures. But Heesterman clearly points out that the Sanskrit word “\textit{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 \textit{yajña} has been generally translated as sacrifice and as worship in some cases, \textit{yajña} has rarely been interpreted as a phenomenon to strengthen social and political conditions of Vedic people.

\textbf{ROOTS OF “YAJÑA” AND “SACRIFICE”}

Since \textit{yajña} is most often translated as sacrifice in English discourses, let us first see etymology of the term “sacrifice”. “Sacrifice” comes from a Latin word \textit{sacrificium} which in turn comes from two Latin words, \textit{sacer}, which means “sacred” and \textit{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, I would 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 yajñas, śrauta and grhya, for my purpose here, I want to 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 yajña 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 these days of communal worship, the participants would develop new social relationships. In essence, by performing a series of yajñas throughout the Indian subcontinent, brāhmaṇas “aryanized” or “vedicized” the non-Aryans, not just culturally but socio-politically as well. These yajñas became the greatest instrument to unite brāhmaṇical aryans 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), yajñas 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. While his this definition is already criticized by Brian Smith (1988), I agree with Heesterman (1985: 34) where he points out that originally the Vedic yajñas used to be performed by rival groups in order to unite them under a common leader, such as the “concord sacrifice” (samjñaneṣṭi yajña). Similarly, James Egge notes that Vedic yajñas 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 Brāhmaṇical texts themselves equate sacrifice with dakṣiṇa, the gift given to the officiating priests. A discussion of the agnihotra sacrifice in Yajur Veda illustrates well the interpretation of dakṣiṇa as sacrifice.”

YAJÑA AS SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITY

While Marx famously declared religion as a product of social and political conditions of a community. Contrariwise, in this article, my endeavor is to see how yajña helped Vedic society to improve their social and political conditions. David Gitomer (1994) has compared yajña with Natya, 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 yajñas. 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, Feb 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 at RV 2.30.7 (na mā tamat na śraman nota tandrat na vocāma mā sunoteti somam)), where wishes that none should express any anti-sacrifice desire merely because there is great labor and exhaustion involved in the performance thereof RV X.57.1 (mā pra gāma patho vayam mā yajñadindra sominah).”

Similarly, Jennings W. Theodore (1982) has identified three “moments” of noetic function of ritual. First, ritual action is a way of gaining knowledge. Ritual activity may serve as a mode of inquiry and discovery. Second, ritual serves to transmit knowledge. This may be termed the pedagogic mode of ritual 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. Third, 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 yajñas. Yajñas have been widely described as activities to maintain rtam, or cosmic order, thus as an inquiry and discovery of relationship of humans with the universal cosmic cycle. However, the third “moment” has rarely been used to interpret Vedic yajñas. I submit that the yajñas were utilized by Vedic Aryans to be performed in the forest and those areas which were not yet aryanized. In other words, yajñas served as an institution to propagate Vedic or “Aryan” culture into Anaryas.

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 Durkheim’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 communal aspect of rituals:

“[T]he 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

It is this “solidarity” feature of Vedic yajñas that I am trying to explore in this article.

Although creation and maintenance of order, ṛtam, is widely acknowledged as one of the chief functions of Vedic yaj纳斯, 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 yaj纳斯 as well. Why should yajña be restricted with only connotation of sacrifice?

Further Driver cites Victor Turner’s twin concepts of communitas and liminality 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 behavior, 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): Kṛnvanto viśvam āryam (9.63.5), literally, “Make the world noble.” Similarly, RV (3.30.6) says, Viśvam satyam kṛnuhi, literally, “Make the world truthful.” Various kinds of yajñas, sacrifices, were the main religious activity of Indian society in Vedic period. Some of these yajñas were performed

¹ Rappaport, Ecology, meaning and religion (1979), 49, cited by Driver
² Huxley, Introduction (1966), 264, cited by Driver
with political and social motivations such as Ašvamedha and Rājasūya. Both of these were performed by kings to expand their territories. Just within a few centuries after the advent of Aryans from the west, we see similar religious ideologies in eastern India. Yajñas 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 yajñas had a lokasamgraha element into them:

“A person who was either a brāhmaṇa or a kṣatriya or a vaiśya was entitled to perform the Agniṣṭoma. The sacrificer when consecrated (dikṣita), 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 (dakṣina) 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 brahmana could not afford to give even the prescribed quantity.”

In similar modern versions, Philip Lutgendorf (1991: 80-96) discusses various forms of “Mānas Sacrifices” performed in contemporary Northern India to propagate the message of the Rāmcaritmānas, a popular version of Rāmāyana 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-Aryan and indigenous (dāsa) elements
under the aegis of the cultural norms represented by the sacrifice and its language. Interestingly, *yajñas* not only played their role to incorporate *anāryas* into the Aryan fold but *yajñas* 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 (2005: pp 139-140) 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 Maghada and other principalities. What is more, the *grhya* “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.”

Similarly, W. Norman Brown (1919) interpreted RV 10.124 in a unique way. He noted that the hymn is about the conflict between the Devas and the Asuras and not between Indra and Vrtra. These two are leaders of two rival groups. The hymn describes how Indra lures Agni, Varuna, and Soma to leave the Asuras and join the Devas. Brown titles his article as “Proselytizing the Asuras”. In this interpretation, we can see how Vedic Indians incorporated “the other” into their social fold, possibly using the *yajñas* in the process.

Charles Malamoud (1996: 77-78) compares the concept of *dharma* in classical Hinduism with *yajña* in Vedic India. He considers *yajñas* to serve the purpose of maintaining the social and cosmic order, similar to the role played by *dharma*. Malamoud also describes *asvamedha*. 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 Prajapati, 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, a group of quasi-victims are also kept. These are

“Distinguished from the true victims on three counts: (1) these are animals that are ‘proper to the forest’ (aranya), (2) who are placed in the intervals (arakas) between the posts, and (3) who in the end, are not put to death, but set free. A ritual text states, by way of explanation, that they are released in order that they not be subjected to violence (ahimsayai). The list of quasi-victims, while it varies, also includes, of necessity, man.”

Above description, once again, can be interpreted as an attempt to encompass both the village and the forest in the Vedic fold. K. R. Potdar notes:

“Among the people referred to as undertaking sacrificial performances, there appear to be a number of non-Aryans as well. When it is remembered how strongly the Aryans were pitched against the Dasas and the Panis (yo dasam varnamadharam guha kah, panin kikiraknu, etc), it is significant that some of them have been converted to the Aryan cult of sacrifice successfully. This would indicate the assimilating attitude adopted by the Aryans on the one hand and the importance they were attaching to the cult of the sacrifice on the other.”

Furthermore, noting how different divinities among different groups were synthesized by yajñas, Potdar notes that:

“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’ (Vishwadevas) appears to have been introduced. It is this worship of Vishwadevas that is significantly said to have propagated the Aryan cult all round (X.65.11 Arya vrata visrjantah).”

Catherine Bell summarizes several theories about communicative and performative aspects of ritual:

“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 about the word *kathā* (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, *varna* 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 Mahabharata after untimely death of Van Buitenen; he rejected the words such as baron for *kṣatriya* and commoner for *vaiśya*.

It has been my argument in this article 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 *lokasamgraha*, activities for unifying Vedic society socially, religiously and politically. Let me end this article with an example of how sacrifice as the word for *yajnas* can create havoc. In spring 2006, a Western philosophy professor in University of Iowa was teaching this about Gita.

“Gita teaches one to perform work as a holy sacrifice (Chapters. 4, 9). 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 professor taught the students, Gita teaches one to forego one’s wisdom. Clearly, here the correct translation is simply that Gita accords the *jñāna-yajña* to be the highest, but since the *yajña* is translated as sacrifice, one can easily misinterpret Gita.
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