

# The Politics of Yagna after Yagna

Mudrarakshas

This article first appeared in Lucknow in the Hindi newspaper Svatantra bhārat on 18 May 1993. This translation © 2020 Robert A. Hueckstedt.

In political circles nowadays everyone's talking about the Chandrasvamin Yagna. Everybody wants to have one performed. The Bharatiya Janata Party, however, is silently opposed to it. There's another yagna, the Ashvamedh Yagna.

Some of you may be reminded of the days when politicians, from Indira Gandhi to Hemati Nandan Bahuguna and Kamalapati Tripathi, were having yagnas performed in order to bring about each other's downfall and destruction. Recently, a number of factions, each calling itself The Hindu Union, have had numerous yagnas performed.

We must try to understand what these yagnas are that are being performed for the sake of obtaining power through a combination of politics and religion. While doing so, we must try to determine the meaning of these yagnas, and we must try to find out whether or not the sponsors of these yagnas get the benefits they wanted for their efforts.

First, throughout history it has almost always been kings who have been connected to the performance of yagnas. The grander and more important ones, especially, have almost always been performed at the command of kings or for the welfare of kings.

Such yagnas, however, were invariably not the activities that take place nowadays around a havan kund. The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* is based on five mahayagnas, but in the descriptions of those sacrifices there is nothing that remotely resembles the activities that are now being called a yagna.

I can only guess that the actions described in the first and third sections of that *Āraṇyaka*, in which the production and maintenance of fire are detailed, got all mixed up, and that confused ritual later took the place

of the real, original yagna. After all, that text comes from a time when neither matches nor gas lighters existed. In those days it wasn't easy to start a fire and control it in order to satisfy one's daily needs. In those days the production of fire and its use must have been an affair that involved the entire community.

In his commentary on verses in the Gita that mention yagnas Adi Shankar is not at all concerned with the activities that go on around the fire. For him a yagna is merely a means by which we may attain *brahmajñān*, knowledge of Brahma.

Perhaps because of that attitude and because he was opposed to the word *havan* being used as a synonym for *yajña*, in his comments on the ninth sutra of the fourth chapter of the *Brahmasūtra*, *tulyaṃ tu darśanam*, Adi Shankar mentions the Kāvasheya rishis. Students of Kavasha, they were opposed both to Vedic study and to the performance of yagnas, and in those days their numbers were not small.

It is also interesting that even Kautsa, son of Kutsa, one of the seers of Vedic hymns, did not accept the importance either of the Vedas or of yagnas. Later, the traditionalist Yāskācharya criticized that opinion of Kautsa, and since Kautsa is mentioned in the introduction to the *Nirukta*, it may be that Yāskācharya wrote that work in order to refute Kautsa.

This should also be kept in mind. In the form of Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas many rishis composed commentaries on the Vedas which maintained a general Vedic tradition. After them, however, the development of thought took two paths, each quite distinct from the other, despite their common roots.

On the one hand we have the older Upanishads, which are still within the old, common tradition. Classic texts and philosophies were also developed, such as the *Brahmasūtra*, *Yogasūtra*, Samkhya and Nyaya, which brimmed with scientific inquiry and rational thought. On the other hand, a whole canon and tradition of Smriti texts were developed on the basis of the activities described in the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas, on the *kar-makāṇḍ*, and on ideas in the area of social behaviour. The ideas in those texts are the ones that slowly destroyed our society's tradition of independent inquiry and spread a polluting web of evil customs over the land. Only one example of the development of such thought will be necessary to make the point clear.

In the Rig Veda a number of evil remarks are made against women. For example, it is said that women are incapable of controlling their

hearts and women are the army and the weapons of slaves. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* takes that idea further and says that friendship with women is impossible, they have the hearts of wolves. Later, Manu and the hundreds of others who composed texts in the Smṛiti tradition, such as Baudhāyan, Gautam, Vashishth, Harita, Kautilya, Cyavan, Brihaspati, etc., not only placed women at the level of shudras, but they also stripped women of all their traditional rights in society.

Many of the Smṛiti writers, however, adopt a relatively humane point of view. For example, when the *Viṣṇudharma Sūtra* or the *Yajñavalkya Smṛiti* quotes from the Vedas and on that basis maintains that a widow must burn herself alive along with her husband's body, Medhatithi, the major commentator on the *Manusmṛiti*, labels that suicide and is strongly opposed to it.

In the same manner composers of Smṛiti texts pulled the word *vikeśī* out of the Rig Veda, where it means a woman with her hair unbound, and declared that at the death of her husband a woman must have her head shaved, a practice which even Adi Shankar himself opposed.

So we see that based on the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas the pollution of superstition and evil customs gradually pervaded the land. Those who extol the greatness of performing godān to brahmans, i.e., of giving brahmans cows, have on the one hand made the cow a venerated animal, but on the other they've turned her into a useless stone that can be seen wandering in misery in every lane in India. And even now, half a century after independence, the miserable plight of women and shudras remains just as it was centuries ago.

Many authors of the shastras (as it happens, Manu did not write this) proclaimed that a son, even if he is totally devoid of virtues, is worthy of veneration. Furthermore, they came to the conclusion that a brahman was a brahman, regardless of his education, his ability to teach and his ethical values. Those two ideas dealt a mortal blow to India's vast intellectual tradition.

It came to be taught that if one visits a pilgrimage place, gives charity to brahmans or merely chants the name of Ram, all his sins would be destroyed, ideas which naturally resulted in the entire society believing that they could commit sin after sin and be saved from any retribution for their actions. Hooliganism, dishonesty, debauchery, one could do anything of that sort, and then just a trip to the temple would clear the slate with man and god.

It is a cause of no little sorrow that the land that produced the idea of unselfish action in the Gita, and the land in which Buddha increased the mind's intellectual powers with rational thought and scientific inquiry, this same land allowed itself to be pervaded by the mumbo-jumbo of the debit of sin being balanced by the credit of works of "religious merit". In fact, Christianity, which came to India in the first century, had a big part to play in this. It was the Christian tradition that allowed for a man to go to his priest and have his sins forgiven. Those who spread throughout society the evil notions from Vedic tradition were the same who popularized that idea from Christianity.

I said earlier that while Kavash, Kutsa, the Krishna of the Gita and Adi Shankar did not connect the idea of *havan* with that of *yajña*, another tradition, led by the authors of the Smritis, did make that connection and were totally opposed to rational thought and independent inquiry. Keep in mind, too, that the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas and the Upanishads never gave society one unified dharm which could be recognized today as a religion or a dīn. Furthermore, when the queen saw Kumarila Bhatta pass by her palace, she did not ask, "Who is going to restore dharm?" She said, "Who is going to restore the Vedas?" During Buddha's time, too, there was no such thing as a single, unified dharm, nor in the time of Adi Shankar.

In fact, it is the influence of Christianity and Islam that has brought us the idea of a unified dharm, in the form of a religion or a mazhab. Otherwise, throughout history this society never believed in one and the same god, one and only one divine book and only one saviour.

Those who later moulded our society into a form amenable to Muslim and Christian ideas of religion always confined their own knowledge to life's externalities, while the society that was based on the Upanishads and the six philosophical systems gave mankind a much deeper knowledge and took him on journeys into the world of the spirit beyond his previous imaginings. Therefore, our country's history was great because of Bādarāyaṇa, Kapila, Kaṇāda, Buddha, Nāgārjuna, Ādi Shankar and Krishna, not because of Parāshar, Kātyāyana or Baudhāyana.

In the past few decades a new class of wealthy people has arisen that has for its only goal the amassing of more wealth or the gaining of power. Those people are totally cut off from the wisdom of the Upanishads, Krishna, and Adi Shankar, they are always in a hurry to wash away their sins in the easiest manner possible, and they have taken on fraudulent

tantrikas as their advisors. To expurgate their sins they aren't satisfied with going to the temple and spending half an hour to make an offering to the deity. For them a yagna is a grander way of atoning for their sins because a yagna, like a wedding, can be done with extravagance and glitter.

An example of an ignorant enthusiasm for doing a yagna occurred recently when some people suddenly declared they were going to do an Ashwamedh Yagna, and they were really going to do it, too. They forgot, or were ignorant of the fact, that the horse that is to be sacrificed is first allowed to wander freely for a year, and the horse is accompanied by an army. Wherever the horse happens to go, that land is considered to belong to the owner of the horse. If someone captures the horse, then there's war.

A king about to perform a Horse Sacrifice would hardly let his horse go in his own territory. What would be gained by that? So, in this case, where were the sponsors of the yagna going to let the horse go—Pakistan, or Bangladesh? Or maybe Bhutan, China or Nepal? And along with the horse would tanks and artillery be sent, or if the Chinese were to seize the horse, were they going to fight them with bows and arrows? And if the horse were to wander into Pakistan, how would they be able to exercise any authority over it?

Clearly, those who are cut off from India's intellectual tradition can produce an Indian farce, but India's thinkers must stand opposed to these senseless rituals.