Sacred Sacrifices of the Second Veda
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Much of our daily prayers and pujas, our temple devotions and family rites of passage can be found and followed

The Yajur Veda is one of four supreme scriptures every Hindu looks to as ultimate authority and God's revealed Word. The uniqueness of this Veda lies in its function as a manual for hundreds of thousands of priests, guiding their performance and insights into several dozen rituals centered around offerings to the fire in the ceremony called yajna. These rites range from agnihotra, the morning and evening oblations of milk at the home fire altar, to the lavishly expensive ashwamedha, horse sacrifice, performed only rarely by a king.

Yajna, "worship or sacrifice," is the key to understanding the Yajur Veda. It is one of the most central Hindu concepts: sacrifice and surrender through acts of worship, inner and outer. The rishis described the nature of the universe as a perfect sacrifice. One form bows to another, surrendering itself to another form. Water is transformed into steam, rivers into oceans, seeds into birds, bugs into spiders, matter into energy, ignorance into intelligence and humans into God.

The Vedic yajna is a form of ritual worship in which oblations-ghee, grains, spices and fragrant woods-are offered into a fire following scriptural mandates as mantras are chanted. The element fire, Agni, is revered as the divine messenger who carries offerings and prayers to the Gods. Ancient scriptures describe the various yajna rites, some so elaborate as to require hundreds of priests, whose powerful chanting resounds for miles. Yajna requires four components, none of which may be omitted: dravya, sacrificial substances; tyaga, the spirit of sacrificing all to God; devata, the celestial beings who receive the sacrifice; and mantra, the empowering word or chant.

There are two major versions of the Yajur Veda: the Krishna ("black") and the Shukla ("white"). The Krishna Yajur Veda, common in South India, is the older and more widely used of the two. The Shukla, predominant in northern India, contains

nearly the same material, but in considerably different order. The Yajur Veda contains about 2,000 mantras, ritual chants, drawn almost entirely from the Rig Veda, with frequent minor adjustments of words or grammar to fit their specialized ritual use. In addition are thousand of lines of prose known as the Brahmanas. The difference in arrangement between the two versions is striking. For example, verses of Krishna Yajur Veda Book One, Section 5.3 are found spread through Books 2, 3, 12 and 17 of Shukla Yajur Veda. It is quite an amazing fact of history that these two versions are alomost identical, despite their very different orders and the fact they were transmitted orally through the millennia.

While Western scholarship places the Vedas around 1500bce, putting them among humankind's earliest sacred writings, their antiquity becomes remarkable when the Eastern historians speak out. B.G. Siddharth of the Birla Science Centre in Hyderabad states, "The Krishna Yajur Veda Brahmana 3.1.2 refers to Aja Ekapada or the nakshatra or lunar asterism Purva Bhadrapada rising exactly at the East, a phenomenon which occurred around 10,000 bce when this asterism was at the autumnal equinox."

The first rituals described in the Yajur Veda are the basic home observances: establishment of the household's sacred fires, the morning and evening offerings and the new and full-moon sacrifices. Then come the seasonal offerings connected with agriculture, such as offering of the first fruits of harvest and prayers for rain. The next, and longest, sections are devoted to the soma offering, the building of the fire altar and the ashvamedha, horse sacrifice. Much has been written about the soma sacrifice in which the juice of the soma plant was ceremoniously extracted, offered to the Gods and drunk by the sacrificer. The plant's identity is disputed. It was rare even in the time of the Shukla, since a half-dozen substitutes are listed if true soma can't be purchased. During the one-year Agnichayana or building of the great fire altar, 10,800 bricks are solemnly assembled in the shape of a large bird, probably a falcon or eagle. Additional rites are the sarvamedha, for universal success and the pitriyajna, homage to ancestors-a part of the funeral ceremonies. There are instructions for the giving of diksha," initiation," the sacred thread ceremony, beginning of studentship and many more sacraments-most of them still in practice today.

Exploring the Yajur Veda is a rewarding, albeit prodigious, chore. Two major impressions are left with the diligent reader. First, that the rituals and philosophy described are so completely and uniquely Hindu. There is dharma, karma, purnarjanma or reincarnation, respect for family, varna or caste, the divinity of nature, the omnipresence of God, the existence of higher and lower inner worlds,

moksha or liberation from rebirth, need to overcome desires, cow veneration and on and on. Especially prominent is the principle of tapas, austerity. Other practices, concepts and metaphors are so far removed in time, circumstance and perhaps even in consciousness from us today that it is difficult to grasp their meaning. The panditas explain these obscure references in terms of the yugas-the four vast eras in the Hindu calendar-and attendant changes in human nature, culture and understanding from one era to the next. Now we live in the Kali Yuga, the darkest era of them all.

Every readers' second impression is that the Yajur Veda is a thoroughly practical, step-by-step "how-to book," not unlike a computer software manual that assumes a certain technical familiarity with sophisticated terms, complete with the metaphysical or ritual import of each action. Here is an example from the construction of the great fire altar: "He puts down two ladles, one made of karsmarya wood and filled with butter, one of the udumbara tree, full of curds; that made of karsmarya is this earth, that of udumbara is yonder sky; verily he deposits these two, earth and sky." Recommendations are made to standardize the worship. Real-world predicaments are addressed, such as the ritual fire's going out, the cows' laying down, failing to find soma to buy, or the ashwamedha horse's getting lost, stolen, even drowned.

The timing of sacrifices and building of altars required knowledge of astronomy and geometry, sciences which developed early in Hindu history. Geometry's Pythagorean theorem (the sum of the squares of the lengths of the sides of a right triangle is equal to the square of the length of the hypotenuse) was described in the Shulba Sutras 1,000 years or more before Pythagoras. Its aphorisms contain the detailed rules of geometry needed to construct the fire altar. The value of the square root of two is given with an accuracy of one part in 100,000. Precise astronomical calculations were made to set the dates of seasonal rites and to adjust lunar months to the solar year.

Animals were sacrifices at early yajnas. The rules for causing their transition into inner worlds are given in detail. According to Pandita Ravichandran, these offerings were efficacious in earlier yugas, but do not work in the Kali Yuga and have been forbidden by sages. The Yajur Veda indicates that by being sacrificed the human soul within an animal body is released and ascends directly to heaven, and there are many chronicles of animals coming willingly to be sacrificed. It is clearly advised in this Veda that not eating the flesh of sacrificed animals is a condition for spiritual advancement of the human soul.

The traditional yajna fire rites have always been performed in India, and reinvigorated in the last century by the eminent Arya Samaj movement. But in recent years these Vedic rituals have grown greatly in popularity both in India and abroad. Organizations such as the Gayatri Pariwar have held Ashwamedha Yajnas for the well-being of the community which have attracted tens of thousands of participants. In these contemporary yajnas, tens or hundreds of fire altars are set up with groups or families of two to a dozen worshipers at each fire altar.

Yajur Veda rituals are a vital part of Hindu tradition which continue to empower the worshiper as they did inolden days, 10,000 years ago and more, providing a direct connection to the inner worlds of the ancestors devas and of the Gods and the showering down of their blessings.

Mantra Pushpam

Yopam pushpam veda. Pushpavan prajavan pasuman bhavati. Chandrama va apam pushpam. Pushpavan prajavan pasuman bhavati. Ya evam veda. Yopam ayatanam veda. Ayatanavan Bhavati. Krishna Yajur Veda, Taittiriya Aranyaka 1.78

Translation: Dr. Jayaraman, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, New York

The one who understands this universe as the product of Supreme Energy becomes energetic, has worthy progeny and many cattle. Even the moon is the creation of that Supreme Energy. The one who knows this becomes energetic, has worthy progeny and many cattle. The one who knows this becomes prosperous not only in wealth but also in knowledge.

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By yajna, "sacrifice," the Vedas declare, Prajapati created the three worlds, Gods, men and the animals. By yajna the Gods obtained immortality. The Yajur Veda speaks repeatedly of this cosmic sacrifice, and how men should emulate the homage of Prajapati and the Gods. Through this Veda's magical rites of gratitude, invocation, surrender and fulfillment, some have sought and obtained children, rain and cattle. Others obtained the inner worlds of their ancestors, the devas and the Gods. Still others have sought transcendent knowledge of Absolute Reality, ultimately attaining freedom from rebirth. Below are excerpts from the Krishna and Shukla Yajur Veda, translated from Sanskrit into English by Sri Raimundo Panikkar, except when otherwise noted.

The Nature of Brahman

That is the greatest Brahman, for there is nothing greater than this. He who knows this becomes greatest and best among his own people. Nothing is prior to this Brahman and nothing is beyond it. He who knows this Brahman as having nothing prior to it and nothing beyond it will be second to none among his own people. Shatapatha Brahmana 10.3.5.10-11

Creation of the Worlds

Brahma, the self-existent, was performing tapas, fervid concentration. "In fervid concentration," he reflected, "there is no infinity. Come, let me sacrifice myself in living things and all living things in myself." Then, having sacrificed himself in all living things and all living things in himself, he acquired greatness, self-radiance and sovereignty. Shatapatha Brahmana 13.7.1.1

Origin of the Fire Sacrifice

[Once upon a time] the Gods and the asuras, both of whom were offspring of Prajapati, were striving between themselves. Both sides were destitute of spirit because they were mortal and he who is mortal has no spirit. Among these two groups of mortal beings one, Agni, was immortal and it was through him, the immortal, that they both had their being. Now, whichever of the Gods was slain by the asuras was in truth slain irrevocably. And so the Gods became inferior. They continued worshiping and practicing fervent concentration, however, in the hope of overcoming their enemies who were likewise mortal. Their gaze then fell upon the immortal, sacred Agni. "Come," they said, "let us establish this immortality in our inmost self! When we have placed that immortality in our inmost self and have become immortal and unconquerable, we shall defeat our enemies who are neither immortal nor unconquerable." So the Gods established the Fire in their inmost self and, having established that immortality in their inmost self and become immortal and unconquerable, they defeated their mortal and conquerable enemies. And so he [the sacrificer] now establishes immortality in his inmost self, and though he has no hope of immortality, he attains a full lifetime. He becomes unconquerable, and when his enemy tries to overpower him, he is not overpowered. Shatapatha Brahmana 2.2.2.8-14

The Gods and the asuras, both having Prajapati as their origin, were rivals of

each other. So the asuras, swollen with pride, said, "In what, pray, should we place our oblation?" And they proceeded to place their oblations in their own mouths. The Gods then proceeded to place their oblations each in the mouth of one of his fellows. And Prajapati gave himself over to them. In this way they became owners of sacrifice, for sacrifice is really the food of the Gods. Shatapatha Brahmana 5.1.1.1-2

Creatures who are not allowed to take part in sacrifice are reduced to nothingness. Therefore the sacrificer admits those who are not annihilated to take part in sacrifice, both men and beasts, Gods and birds, plants, trees, and everything that exists. Thus the entire universe takes part in sacrifice. Gods and men on the one hand and the Fathers on the other were wont in days gone by to drink together from the sacrifice. Sacrifice is their shared feast. In olden days they were to be seen as they came to this feast. Nowadays they are still present but remain invisible. Shatapatha Brahmana 3.6.2.26

The Five Great Sacrifices

There are five great sacrifices, namely, the great ritual services: the sacrifices to all beings, sacrifice to men, sacrifice to the ancestors, sacrifice to the Gods, sacrifice to Brahman. Day by day a man offers sustenance to creatures; that is the sacrifice to beings. Day by day a man gives hospitality to guests, including a glass of water; that is the sacrifice to men. Day by day a man makes funerary offerings, including a glass of water; that is the sacrifice to the ancestors. Day by day a man makes offerings to the Gods, including wood for burning; that is the sacrifice to the Gods. And the sacrifice to Brahman? The sacrifice to Brahman consists of sacred study. Shatapatha Brahmana 11.5.6.1-3

The Fire Worship

Now attendance on that consecrated fire means speaking the truth. Whosoever speaks the truth, acts as if he sprinkled that lighted fire with ghee; for even so does he enkindle it: and ever the more increases his own vital energy, and day by day does he become better. And whosoever speaks the untruth, acts as if he sprinkled that lighted fire with water; for even so does he enfeeble it: and ever the less becomes his own vital energy, and day by day does he become more wicked. Let him, therefore, speak nothing but the truth. He who has established the fires must not speak an untruth. Let him rather not speak at all, but let him not speak an untruth. Worship, above all, is truthfulness. Shatapatha Brahmana 2.2.2.19-20 (translator: Julius Eggeling)

As to this they say, "For what object is this fire altar built?"-"Having become a bird, he (Agni) shall bear me to the sky!" so say some; but let him not think so; for by assuming that form, the vital airs became Prajapati; by assuming that form, the Gods became immortal: and what thereby the vitals airs, and Prajapati, and the Gods became, that indeed he (the sacrificer) thereby becomes. Shatapatha Brahmana 6.1.2.36 (translator: J. Eggeling)

These hymns are the immortal bricks; he lays them down last (highest) of all:-he thereby makes immortality the highest thing of all this universe, and hence immortality is the highest thing of all this universe. Shatapatha Brahmana 9.1.2.43 (translator: J. Eggeling)

And so they say: all other sacrifices have an end but the agnihotra does not come to an end. All that which lasts for twelve years is indeed limited; the agnihotra is nevertheless unlimited, for when a man has offered in the evening he looks forward with confidence to offering in the morning; and when he has offered in the morning he likewise looks forward with confidence to offering again in the evening. Thus the agnihotra is unlimited and, hence, from its unlimitedness, creatures also are born unlimited. Whosoever knows the unlimitedness of the agnihotra is himself unlimited in prosperity and offspring. Shatapatha Brahmana 2.3.1.13

This sacrifice has a razor edge, and swiftly he becomes holy or perishes. His vow is: he shall not speak untruth; he shall not eat meat; he shall not approach a woman. Krishna Yajur Veda Samhita 2.5.5 (translator: A. B. Keith)

Offering Prayers

Homage to the blue-necked, thousand-eyed one, the bountiful; and to those that are his warriors I have paid my homage. Homage to the deliverer. Homage to the source of health, and to the source of delight. Homage to the maker of health, and to the maker of delight. Homage to the auspicious, ["Namah Sivaya,"-the preeminent Saiva mantra, appearing here for the first time] and to the more auspicious. That auspicious form of thine, O Rudra, auspicious and ever healing, auspicious and healing (form of) Rudra, with that show mercy on us for life. With honor let us worship thee, destroyer of men; the health and wealth which father Manu won by sacrifice, may we attain that, O Rudra, under thy leadership. Krishna Yajur Veda Samhita 4.5.1, 8, 10 (translator: A.B. Keith)

Whatever defect I have in my sight, in my heart or mind, may God amend! May he, the Protector of the world, bless us! What succor will he bring us, our wonderful friend, whosoever prospers in his ventures? With what most powerful aid will he support us? You are the Protector of us who are your friends and sing your praises. Come to our help with a hundred aids. O Strong One, what help are you going to bring us? What do you give to those who sing your praise? May the wind fan us with blissful breezes! May the rain come to us with a pleasant roar! May days come and go for us with blessings! May light thrust far from us ill-fortune! May all beings regard me with friendly eyes! May I look upon all creatures with friendly eyes! With a friend's eye may we regard each other! May we see your bright Eye, fixed by God, rise again and again for a hundred autumns! A hundred autumns may we live. Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita 36.1-2, 4, 6-7, 10-13, 18, 24

I seek the Lord of the Waters of golden appearance. May he hear our entreaty and grant us a place of ablution! Whatever food I have taken in the house of the wicked, whatever gift I have received at the hands of the crafty, whatever sin of thought or word or deed I have committed, from this may Indra, Varuna, Brihaspati, and Surya cleanse me again and again! If I have eaten or drunk to excess, or consorted with people of violent ways, may King Varuna wipe it all away! Thus rid of impurity and evil and free from my sin, may I find liberation and pass to the world of the Lord of Creation! Taittiriya Aranyaka 10.1.12-13

Goal of the Fire Worship

Such are the difficulties and dangers of sacrifice which take hundreds upon hundreds of days to negotiate; and if any man venture upon them without knowledge, then he is stricken by hunger and thirst, by wicked men or fiends, just as fiends might harass foolish persons wandering in a wild forest. But if those who know do so they proceed one step after another and from one safe place to another, just as one might pass from one stream to another, and they thus obtain happiness in the world of heaven. Shatapatha Brahmana 12.2.3.12

You are Energy, give me energy; You are Courage, give me courage; You are Strength, give me strength; You are Vigor, give me vigor; You are Zeal, give me zeal; You are Victory, give me victory. Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita 19.9

To the heavens be peace, to the sky and the earth, To the waters be peace, to plants and all trees, To the Gods be peace, to Brahman be peace, To all men be peace, again and again-peace also to me! Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita 36.17

Thus have we now approached the All-Knower, the one who is the best procurer of good things. Endow us, O Majesty, with strength and glory. Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita 3.38

Let the sacrificer realize thus: "All the worlds have I placed within mine own self, and mine own self have I placed within all the worlds; all the Gods have I placed within mine own self, and mine own self have I placed within all the Gods; all the Vedas have I placed within mine own self, and mine own self have I placed within all the Vedas; all the vital airs have I placed within mine own self, and mine own self have I placed within the vital airs." For imperishable, indeed, are the worlds, imperishable the Gods, imperishable the Vedas, imperishable the vital airs, imperishable is the All: and, verily, whosoever thus knows this, passes from the imperishable unto the imperishable, conquers recurrent death, and attains the full measure of life. Shatapatha Brahmana 12.3.4.11 (translator: J. Eggeling)

For food thee, for strength thee! Ye are winds, ye are means. Let the sun make you fit for the most excellent duty. Yajur Veda 1.1.1