

[Traditions: The Reality of Animal Sacrifice](#)

Category : [April/May/June 2012](#)

Published by dharmalingam on Mar. 19, 2012

Traditions

The Reality of Animal Sacrifice

This controversial practice is widely accepted in Bali, Nepal and a handful of other places. Opinions on its basis and morality differ throughout the Hindu world.

By Rajiv Malik, Bali

Animal sacrifice, called bhuta yajna in Sanskrit and caru in Balinese, is widely accepted in Bali--much more than in India. No report on Balinese Hinduism would be complete without addressing the issue.

I did not witness this practice during my two-week stay, which included visits to many of the most prominent temples, but nearly everyone I spoke with supported it. However, priest Ida Rsi made it clear that this is not an everyday occurrence; rather, it is limited to certain occasions: "It is a special ceremony, performed only during special pujas, such as temple festivals and new year festivities. It is not a part of daily puja."

Strong Local Tradition

Indian-born Puneet Malhotra, a resident of Bali for seven years, owns the Queen's Tandoor restaurant in Kuta. He shares his experience: "Animal sacrifice is done in a big way here, close to the culture prevailing in Bengal. When we opened our restaurant, Balinese Hindu priests conducted the ceremony, which began with killing and burying a dog out in front. Then a pig was roasted, grilled, worshiped and buried. They killed fifty chickens, burying them in the various corners of the building. I had requested all of this not be done, but I was told it had to be done according to the local traditions, that animal sacrifice is an integral part of any big ceremony. We had to follow the customs; we were told that if we did not, and something untoward were to happen later on, we would be blamed for it."

In his book *Bali: Sekala and Niskala*, journalist Fred Eiseman, Jr., explains the basic philosophical premise: "In the Hindu faith, one must take the bad with the good, and while the Gods must be worshiped, the demons--in respect for their great power--must be placated. And the demons, the leering and fanged bhutas and kalas, have great and gross appetites." He describes the range in magnitude of sacrifices: "Caru range from a fairly simple offering requiring the sacrifice of a single chicken, to elaborate ceremonies involving the slaughter of dozens of animals."

While most Indian Hindus oppose animal sacrifice (and eating meat) based on the prevailing Hindu principle of ahimsa, nonviolence, only a few Balinese Hindus seem to share this view. From students to high priests, nearly everyone I interviewed endorsed animal sacrifice, believing it leads to the attainment of a human birth for the animal.

Ida Rsi disclosed, "I have a book by Romila Thapar. She is not liked in India, and people say she is wrong. But I find her to be correct. She mentions that in ancient times, Hindu kings and nobles ate beef, though only on special occasions. This practice continues in Bali until now, where beef is offered as part of our big ceremony every hundred years and smaller ceremonies every ten years."

I felt compelled to ask about the sacredness of the cow, an idea that is so strong in India. If cows are sacred, shouldn't they be protected instead of sacrificed? Prof. Phagunadi responded, "We are not as strict about the cow as you are in India. In Bali, the cow is treated as a holy animal, but not as a sacred animal. We consider holy and sacred to be different. Holy means something we respect. Sacred means something we cannot touch."

Phagunadi continued, "Hinduism in Bali is most ancient. Here we practice Tantric Saiva Siddhanta, as opposed to the Vedantic Saiva Siddhanta of India. Most of our temples are tantric, and that is the reason we carry out animal sacrifice." He elaborated on the local customs: "We follow Durga and Siva, who are two sides of the same coin. We worship Durga if we want something magical. She is extremely popular in Bali, and every home worships Her every fifteen days with animal sacrifice. Every hundred years we have to perform the Ekadasa Rudra festival in which more than 200 kinds of animals are offered."

Though most people I interviewed avoided this question, I gathered that a family may typically offer between five and two /dozen animals per year in various ceremonies, according to its means, to say nothing of the animals they eat without formally sacrificing them. With a population just under four million, any number must pale in comparison to the 59 billion animals killed in 2009 to feed the US's population of 312 million.

Vedic Controversy

Proponents of animal sacrifice usually cite the Rig Veda, the oldest of Hinduism's revealed scriptures. Certain of its verses could be interpreted to support the practice, but scholars differ: Should those words be taken literally, or do they have a deeper, mystical meaning?

Some Vedic commentators, such as Udgita, Ananda Tirtha, Atmananda and Sayana, refer to Rig Veda verse 10.86.14, in which Indra says, "They cook for me 15 plus 20 oxen," and verse 8.43.11, which describes Agni as one whose food is the ox and the barren cow. These verses, they say, mean that these animals should be offered in yajnas. Vedic-Agamic scholar and priest Dr. S.P. Sabharathnam Sivachariyar says these verses should not be interpreted literally. He asserts that the true meaning is symbolic: "The tenth mandala of the Rig Veda states that the words of the Veda mantras are concealed words, encapsulating deeper meanings. Therefore the reader should never take the meaning literally." Hinduism is full of symbolism, perhaps more than any other religion; and Dr. Sabharathnam explains that various animals mentioned in the context of sacrifices are actually representative of our inner faculties, qualities, emotions and external and internal organs. "Killing a horse refers to suppressing the human/animal side of our life-energy and transmuting it to the Divine. Similarly in all other contexts."

Pandit Vamadeva Shastri amplifies the mystical viewpoint: "The Vedic yajna has an inner side, with the offerings of speech, mind and prana, such as outlined in the fourth chapter of the Gita, and as reflected in many Vedic mantras. The practice of yoga itself arose from the inner sacrifice."

Along these lines, Sabharathnam offers an alternate translation for one of the above-mentioned verses: "Agni, who maintains the order of the universe and the inner faculties of the human body, makes the ox (pingala nadi, the human masculine-aggressive current) and the cow (ida nadi, the feminine passive-emotional current) his tools and bears the soma-delight (attainable in the

sahasrara chakra) on his back (to distribute it to the seekers)." As a whole, he maintains, the hymn is speaking to the aspirant about deeply mystical practices. "No doubt the literal translation starts 'Agni whose food is the ox and the barren cow...' but this is not correct according to the context of the hymn."

The Agamas do not prescribe animal sacrifice. Sabharathnam asks, "How is it that one set of revelations (Agamas) do not speak of animal sacrifice, while another set of revelations (Vedas) from the same Lord could? The Rig Veda itself states that the Veda mantras should be understood against the background of the Agamas. The two sets of scriptures complement each other."

Vamadeva adds, "It would be wrong to say that the Vedas do not allow any animal sacrifice. However, animal sacrifice was generally regarded as an inferior sacrifice for less-evolved souls, in whom the gunas [qualities] of rajas [agitation] and tamas [lethargy] are still powerful. For those of inner vision, more sattvic [pure] in nature, the animal was symbolic of certain states of mind to be offered to the Deity. So, it is also wrong to say that the Vedas had a high regard for animal sacrifice and thought it to be equal to the other types of sacrifice."

Sabharathnam remarks, "I am not saying that sacrifices were not conducted externally. The grains, vegetables, plants, sweets and other such items the Vedas enjoin us to sacrifice should be considered representative of the animals. It was never the actual animals that were intended to be sacrificed. It was in this way that the Vedic yajnas were conducted in the earlier periods, before the Brahmanas and Aranyakas were written. Certain Vedic pandits took the literal meaning and wrote treatises prescribing the sacrifice of actual animals. Unfortunately, their writings were widely read, and genuine yajnas came to be considered a lesser form of worship."

Vamadeva points out the rarity of references to animal sacrifice in the Vedas: "Of substance-based offerings, dairy products like ghee and milk are the most common, and Soma, which usually had a plant basis, is said to be the highest of all offerings. Actual references to animal sacrifices in Vedic texts do exist but are relatively rare. I have found no more than a handful of such potential references in the entire Rig Veda, whereas offerings of ghee, honey and Soma can be found in great abundance."

According to Sabharathnam, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad established that the Vedic sacrifices are intended to be spiritual, that they do not involve the killing of animals. "In fact, many Upanishads were the result of sages' efforts to expose the spiritual side of the Vedic yajnas, to be performed internally."

Historical Perspective

Phagunadi maintains, "Animal sacrifice is right as per the Vedas. It is discussed in the Mahabharata as well. Orthodox [ancient] Hinduism is completely different than what Hindus practice in India now."

Swami Harshananda's A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism offers this opinion: "Sacrificing an animal to please a supernatural Deity is a common feature found in many cultures, including that of Hinduism, during the early part of their development. Though formal animal sacrifices of the early Vedic period gradually lost their importance, due to the reformatory movements of the Upanishadic sages, Jainism and Buddhism, a new type of animal sacrifice got into the fabric of Hinduism during later ages as aboriginal cultures got integrated into the Hindu fold. The Deity was invariably an aspect of Durga or Kali and the rituals were very simple. Buffaloes, goats, sheep and cockerels were the usual sacrificial victims. It was believed that these victims would go to heaven."

Hinduism came to Bali 1,200-1,500 years ago. At that time, the practice of animal sacrifice may have been more prevalent in India than it is now. According to Vamadeva, animal sacrifice occurs today not only in Bali but in the Himalayas, Assam and the northeast of India, as well parts of Orissa and Bengal, Nepal and a few places in Panjab.

Dwi Rupini Andayani, Ida Rsi's daughter, concludes, "I visited India as a small child with my father in 1999 and have taken around twenty four groups there in recent years. The Indian way of worshiping is mainly different from ours in that they do not have such an elaborate system of offerings, including the rituals of animal sacrifice. In some ways, Bali's Hinduism is closer to that of Nepal than of India."