

Contesting the Contemporary Vedic Sacrifice in a Transcultural Public Square

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Silke Bechler

University of Heidelberg, Germany

Abstract. The Vedic sacrifice, a traditional Indian ritual involving sacrificial offerings into fire, has been reshaped in times of globalization. Traditionally, this form of sacrifice, which can be traced back for more than three thousand years, focused on individual needs such as good health, prosperity, the removal of obstacles, etc. In times of globalization, when the importance of religion was rising, this ritual practice shifted from a traditionally mainly private into a public sphere. Being now often related to a “global well-being,” focusing on a new religious environmentalism, this religious practice is used on the Indian subcontinent for promoting one’s own cultural identity towards “others.” Stimulated by various migration flows and technological change, the Vedic sacrifice is now further practiced by Hindus living in the Diaspora as well as by Westerners seeking new religious paths and has been modified in novel ways. Whereas in former times it was mainly restricted to socially limited groups, it is now performed as a public spectacle for various ends, including those of transnational and transcultural philanthropy. This shift turns the contemporary Vedic sacrifice into an indispensable means for people in different parts of the world, while imparting the ritual itself with a new global importance.

1. Introduction

In times of flux, such as our current era of globalization, culture and cultural identity become more meaningful for individuals and groups who may feel alienated or even threatened by forces beyond their control. The present paper investigates globalization’s impact on religious practices through an analysis of the contemporary Vedic sacrifice. At first sight, it might seem strange to focus on this traditionally Indian ritual to understand globalization’s significance, but this rite currently occurs not just on the Indian subcontinent. Rather it is practiced in several places all over the world, whereat this paper will especially focus on its European occurrence, where the ritual is conducted by people from any cultural background and whose ideas and intentions associated with the rite are differing accordingly. It is this transnational and transcultural presence of the contemporary Vedic sacrifice that make it a useful subject

by which to analyze the effects of globalization on world religions coming along with the creation of a new cultural identity. As will be shown, the contemporary Vedic sacrifice has broken out of its former socially limited context into new transnational and transcultural public spheres, transforming itself in the process into a global phenomenon.

2. The Contemporary Vedic Sacrifice

Generally understood as a divine act, the Vedic sacrifice dates back to the Vedic period in South Asian history. Until today, the practice of the ritual itself has undergone many changes and modifications, most of which cannot be investigated here but which make it necessary to define this rite in terms of its contemporary forms and variations.

2.1 Definition

The contemporary Vedic sacrifice defines a traditional act of worship or devotion, in the course of which various oblations (*huti*) are offered unconditionally into one or more sacrificial fires (*agni*) to be transferred with the help of the fire-god Agni to specific gods or goddesses (*deva*), who are invoked through the chanting of sacred formulas (*mantra*) and approached by a person or group for an individual or a common benefit. Initiated by a host (*yajamana*), usually bearing all expenses, and carried out either by the *yajamana* himself, or by one or more selected priests (*tviṣṭi*), the contemporary Vedic sacrifice is performed on an auspicious day either in a private home, a local temple, or a specially erected public sacrificial venue (*yajñaśala*), usually culminating in a common meal (*prasada*), which is provided for all participants and which is generally understood as given by the gods.

Generally, the Vedic sacrifice is performed to drive away evil forces (*duṣṭa*) and is therefore usually considered to be a means of self-protection (*rakṣana*). More directly, the divine power is approached with a special intention mostly linked to a specific predominantly worldly wish (*sakṃma*), which can be manifested as outlined in Taittirīyasaṃhitā IV.7.3.1-2 and which is in one form or another still desired today:

“May for me prosperity, comfort, desire, wish, longing, kindness, good, better, superior, fame, good luck, riches, restrainer, supporter, peace, firmness, all, greatness, discovery, knowledge, begetting, procreation, plough, harrow, holy order, immortality, freedom from disease, freedom from illness, life, longevity, freedom from foes, fearlessness, ease of going,

lying, fair, dawning, and fair day (prosper through the sacrifice) (Keith 1914: 211).”

The highest aim, however, emphasizes the pleasing of the divine power in an unselfish way without any desire (*niḥkṃma*).

2.2 Various Forms of the Contemporary Vedic Sacrifice

In the course of time, various forms of Vedic sacrifices developed resulting in an elaborate system. Today, the four main forms *homa*, *havana*, *yajña*, and *yāga* can be distinguished, each form showing its specific technical characteristics, reaching from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

2.2.1 Homa

According to Monier Monier-Williams the term *homa*, which derives from the Sanskrit root *hu* “to sacrifice,” defines “the act of making an oblation to the devas or gods by casting clarified butter into the fire (Monier-Williams 1999: 1306).”

Due to its simplicity *homa* became a crucial element of the domestic rites (*gṃhya*-rites) (Sen 1978: 168), which can be performed by just a single person, generally the head of the household (*gṃhastha*). A priest (*purohita*) is not mandatory.

Regarding the sacrificial material being offered here clarified butter (*ghṃta*) is of crucial importance, but by far not the only sacrificial substance being used. Rather a variety of natural oblations (*havirdravya*) or even valuables are nowadays offered.

2.2.2 Havana

The term *havana* simply defines “the act of offering an oblation with fire (Monier-Williams 1999: 1293).” According to H. G. Ranade the term is restricted to the offering of the *atarudriya homa* (Ranade 2006: 327), an oblation consisting of wild sesame (*tila*) mixed with flour made of wild grain (*gavṃdhuka*) and offered with a leaf and a sized stick of the *palṃa*-tree (*butea frondosa*) (Ranade 2006: 293). In contemporary practice a mixture of various grains is commonly used.

The practice of *havana* is quite similar to *homa*. But it differs just with regard to the audience. Thus, *havana* is performed by a small group of people, who are mostly staying in a family or at least very close relation. A priest (*purohita*) can be consulted, but his attendance is not compulsory.

2.2.3 Yajña

Whereas the term *yajña* in the Vedic period defined any “act of worship or devotion,” or any procedure of “offering,” or “oblation” (Monier-Williams 1999: 839), it nowadays refers to a specific form of sacrifice.

One of the outstanding factors characterizing the contemporary performance of *yajña* concerns the material being offered into the sacrificial fire (*agni*). These are various regarding quality as well as quantity. In the present day, natural oblations (*havis*) can be purchased in local “*p*□*j*□-stores” in ready-made packages, which usually contain 108 different kinds of materials – primarily dried herbs, roots, fruits, or pieces of wood – but which differ depending on the supplier. These packages are usually brought along to the sacrificial venues by the devotees, who are joining the ritual procedure, whereas a greater quantity of natural oblations is generally provided by the ritual’s initiator (*yajam*□*na*). In addition to these raw materials, cooked oblations (*p*□*kayajña*) are placed into the fire as well, which are commonly prepared in cooperation by a small number of volunteers.

For performing the more complicated ritual sequences priestly support is absolutely required. At least three priests are needed (Gyanshruti and Srividyananda 2006: 126): (1) the *adhvaryu*, the acting priest generally performing all physical ritual actions, (2) the *hot*□, the priest invoking the gods or goddesses by reciting specific mantras mostly related to the □*gveda*, and (3) the *udg*□*t*□, the priest praising the *devas* by singing the metrical hymns (*s*□*mans*). But in contrast to former times, when each priest had a fixed position and role during the ritual procedure, in contemporary practice their tasks are often overlapping, making the *yajña* a joint venture focusing more on the final result than on a prescribed tradition. Since a great amount of effort is needed to perform *yajña*, it is usually performed for the benefit of a larger community, going further than one’s own family and kin.

2.2.4 Y□ga

The term *yajña* is characterizing “any ceremony in which offerings or oblations are presented (Monier-Williams 1999: 850).” According to Swami Harshananda *yajña* and *yajña* are identical (Harshananda 2008: 673), both defining “a worship in the form of offering oblations” or “a sacrifice unto the gods” (Harshananda 2008: 673), in the course of which huge amounts of oblations are usually offered to several sacrificial fires (*agni*).

But as *yajña* is thus a relatively costly form of sacrifice, it can just be performed by an affluent part of the society, in former times often the king. Today, *yajña* usually is initiated and supported by religious or spiritual leaders, politicians, or wealthy businessmen. Generally, it is performed involving a large audience from an entire region or even the whole country, to which the initiator (*yajamāna*) dedicates the overall ritual’s proposition.

2.2.5 Differentiating the Private and the Public

The present paper classifies the contemporary Vedic sacrifice with regard to its private and public appearance. Whereas *homa* and *havana* are usually performed in a private context related either to the individual himself or to a joint family, *yajña* and *yajña* are generally initiated in order to attract a broad public.

It becomes obvious, that the various forms of the contemporary Vedic sacrifice – *homa*, *havana*, *yajña*, *yajña* – are closely related to the status of the initiator (*yajamāna*) and accordingly to his capability. The more he invests, on a material as well as on a financial level, the broader the attracted audience will be. Or briefly speaking, higher investments bring the contemporary Vedic sacrifice out from a private into a public sphere.

Form	Oblation	Initiator	Priest	Sacrificial sphere
<i>homa</i>	clarified butter (<i>ghṛta</i>)	householder	-	private
<i>havana</i>	natural oblations (<i>havis</i>)	joint family	family priest	private
<i>yajña</i>	natural oblations (<i>havis</i>) cooked oblations (<i>pṛkayajña</i>)	community	3 priests and more	public
<i>yajña</i>	large number of natural oblations (<i>havis</i>) and cooked oblations (<i>pṛkayajña</i>)	several institutions	up to 16 priests	public

3. The Contemporary Vedic Sacrifice on the Indian Subcontinent

Homa and *havana* are, as outlined above, performed within a merely private context, why I don't want to go into detail here. I simply want to point out that these forms of the contemporary Vedic sacrifice are mainly focusing on personal interests and needs. In contrast, *yajña* and *yāga* are nowadays mainly performed as major public events. Initiated by religious organizations, wealthy business people or even political parties, these forms of the contemporary Vedic sacrifice are practiced with differing intentions. Commonly performed for reasons such as to protect a cultural heritage, benefit the environment, combat disease, or encourage happiness and world peace, Vedic sacrifices of this kind are at the same time often used to promote organizers' personal interests, mainly the increase of social prestige. Merchandized with the help of the media and often accompanied by media coverage, *yajña* and *yāga* attract large audiences at sacrificial venues (*yāgaśāla*). Nowadays, *yajña* and *yāga* as such have evolved into highly stage-managed public spectacles or even festivals.

Example:

From October 25th to November 2nd 2009 a nine-day *mahāvīramahāyajña*, initiated by Shri Koshalendra Brahmachariji Maharaj, was performed in Pushkar, a small town in the state of Rajasthan, in course of the annually celebrated Pushkar Mela. Main intention of this *yajña* was the creation of world peace, well grounded on the idea that only Viśnu as the maintainer of the universe can ensure this harmony. Further, emphasize was laid on the purification of the air, which is supposed to come along with the ritual procedure itself. Especially this last aspect, which seems to result out of a new religious environmentalism, is – although not proved yet – contemporary a highly discussed issue related to most of the *yajñas* performed in the public sphere. While emphasizing the aspects of peace and pollution control Shri Koshalendra Brahmachariji Maharaj related the *yajña* to contemporary global issues, touching the spirit of the age, and bringing himself into a beneficent status.

4. The Contemporary Vedic Sacrifice in the European Hindu Diaspora

In the early 20th century, especially in Europe, Hinduism was propagated in the Diaspora by modern Indian religious movements reinterpreting Hinduism according to Western values. This propagation was accentuated through lectures and pamphlets broadcast in private homes and rented halls. In postcolonial times migrants began to establish Hindu religious institutions. With the foundation of numerous cultural

associations, several local leaders gained a lofty reputation by organizing religious, cultural, and charitable functions to benefit their communities.

Taking a closer look at ritual procedures performed by these diasporic communities, it becomes obvious that many rituals were shortened, refashioned, or eclectically performed. Although local groups prefer that ritual acts be performed according to their regional traditions, such events very often become standardized to attract a larger community.

Example:

At first glance, there seem to be few differences between contemporary Vedic sacrifices performed on the Indian subcontinent and in the Diaspora. Even outside of India, the four variations – *homa*, *havana*, *yajña*, and *yāga* – appear to be the dominant ritual forms. The first two are closely related to activities in the private realm, whereas *yajña* and *yāga* are again linked to public events. Upon closer inspection, however, various modifications arise according to the locality and context in question.

According to Frederick Smith, the first public *yāga* outside the Indian subcontinent was performed in 1996 in Roundwood Park, London.¹ Sponsored by several diasporic Hindu communities, the ritual performance was promoted by planners as an authentic Hindu practice. Yet it would appear that Vedic sacrifices performed outside the Indian subcontinent such as in this case are usually adjusted to their new environment and local requirements.

Just one of the most obvious challenges during London's sacrifice – and one of the difficulties nearly every diasporic public ritual has to deal with – was the arrangement of the officiating priests (*ṛtvik*). As the style of the ritual is one of the essential components that already differentiated Vedic ritual practice in India from region to region, the origin of the performing priests is of crucial importance. Stylistic elements vary from reciting techniques to forms of holding sacrificial spoons used for pouring the offerings into the sacrificial fire. As soon as the required priests do not belong to the same traditional background the performance unavoidably has to result in a compromise (Smith 1996: 254-256).

The same time the contemporary Vedic sacrifice is often reinterpreted in a way to give participants an active role. While the acting priest (*adhvaryu*) alone is said to hold the

¹ Frederick Smith refers in his article *Indra goes West: Report on a Vedic Soma Sacrifice in London* (2000) on a specific form of Vedic sacrifice. As this falls within the contemporary classification to the category of *yāga*, it will be named as such in the following text. To go in line with Smith, this form of sacrifice can be considered as the first ever Vedic sacrifice performed in the West, even though similar forms of sacrifices might have occurred there before, no scholar was able to proof their Vedic origin until now.

right to give offerings into the fire according to ancient scriptures, today's offerings are frequently handled by the audience as well. In bestowing the participants with responsibility for offerings, both the importance of the ritual and a feeling of community are stressed.

5. The Contemporary Vedic Sacrifice in the “Western World”

Whereas the ritual practice in the Hindu Diaspora seems to be an explainable phenomenon, the contemporary Vedic sacrifice performed in the West for Westerners may seem rather odd at first glance. But such cultural adaptation is in some ways a natural development. Diaspora communities have shown, generally move from particularism to universalism in their outlooks, especially regarding membership in associations. This shift at least partly occurs because Hinduism in the Diaspora must accommodate itself to the diverse indigene traditions of its adherents. Toward this end, religious centers incorporate various customs. From here, it is but a small step to go beyond religious and ethnic boundaries to include Westerners seeking new religious paths.

What compels Westerners to attend and participate in these events? Are they simply “exotic” happenings they want to experience or do they seek religious elements they cannot find in their own tradition? Indeed, both factors may be relevant. But as many public sacrifices are connected to charitable projects, they also provide the opportunity to support people or organizations in need. In such a fashion, people from the West, who are currently worried about their own status in the world, due to the rising power especially emerging from the Asian superpowers India and China, reposition themselves into a superior rank simply by providing financial means and by using an extrinsic religious element while forging a new cultural identity.

Example:

Very recently, Vedic sacrifices have even been repackaged in such a way so as to serve a niche market for Western consumers. In 2008, for example, the European non-profit organization Yoga Vidya (2008) organized a 1,008-hour *yajña* in Bad Meinberg, Germany. While the organizer emphasized the spiritual aspects of the event, the participants were offered a rich program focusing on health treatment, wellness, and recreation. By appealing to the personal and religious desires of a purely Western-oriented clientele, a new spiritual market was created in which a single religious element was transferred into a new social context, in the process fulfilling the

holidaying, personal care and leisure needs of Westerners. The success of this *yajña* resulted in Yoga Vidya's attempt to organize it - even though on a smaller scale - on a monthly basis.

6. Conclusion

Why does a ritual like the Vedic sacrifice contemporary change within its original context? Why does it become important for people living in various countries around the world and belonging to different cultural backgrounds? How may the current global shift be explained? Further, how does it affect the ritual performance itself? These are the questions inevitably proffered after one investigates the appearance and arrival of the contemporary Vedic sacrifice in different public spheres.

Surely, particular forces operate everywhere. The most evident and most powerful one was paradoxically supposed to bring about the death of religion: namely, the process of "modernization" that captivated the world in the late 20th century. Yet with the increased geographical mobility and global interactions associated with modernization, individuals have become increasingly estranged from their original cultural roots and identities. As they seek to reconnect to their heritage or find fresh answers to life's questions, they create and interact in new networks with ever larger numbers of people in ever wider geographical zones of influence. Rather than making religion less relevant, modernizing processes have instead prompted new quests for sources of identity, with religion being one such source.

In performing a common ritual, participants confirm and consolidate their identities. What occurs during the performance of the Vedic sacrifice is no exception; an ancient practice is revitalized on the one hand and a common tradition is confirmed on the other. The Vedic sacrifice in the process moves from the private to the public sphere, its importance for both individual and community augmented. Promulgated through new media and technologies, the ritual becomes more widely known and spreads to those living beyond communal boundaries.

In the merely Indian context, in order to defend the rituals relevance in times of globalization, it gets connected to global issues as the conservation of a cultural heritage, the environmental protection, the creation of world peace, or the combat against diseases. The Vedic tradition emerges here as a contemporary appropriate tool to deal with global problems, without neglecting one's own heritage. The same times it increases the status of the generous initiator, who attracts and gathers the masses under the disguise to provide a mean to handle global dilemmas.

As the contemporary Vedic sacrifice as a practice now spreads to new geographic regions, it inevitably is forced to adapt to further previously unfamiliar contexts. Whereas in former times the ritual was mainly viewed as a mean for individuals to overcome personal difficulties in life, social problems and community needs have come to shape where and why the ritual is performed in contemporary contexts. In addition to its intrinsic value as a cultural asset, the Vedic sacrifice in global contexts today is also associated with such issues as the provision of healthcare, education, disaster relief, and other forms of social welfare. In a sense, contemporary forms of the ritual have come to be seen as philanthropic events with both symbolic and practical significance for practitioners' communities and cultures.

After the Cold War, at the end of the last century when globalization quickly became a watchword, the "Western World" headed towards a major crisis. To cope with the rising power emerging from the Asian countries, especially India and China, the West began to redefine itself, but now as a transnational, multicultural entity. By comparison, the "New East" defined itself by referring to its religious heritage – especially in regard of Hindu or Islamic tradition – an outstanding crucial factor missing in the West (Huntington 1996). The Westphalian separation of religion and politics in 1648, a distinctive product of Western civilization, was responsible for the decline of religion on the Western side, but today, religion seems "increasingly to intrude into international affairs (Mortimer 1991: 7)."² The adapting of non-Western religious elements and practices in the "Western World" maybe can be seen as a logical response to a rising religious resurgence in the non-West. By integrating certain religious ideas and practices the West is now trying to overcome this lack. As a result certain religious practices, as for instance the contemporary Vedic sacrifice, become adapted by various people all over the world, get changed according to their requirements, and are finally staged as religious events in order to define or redefine one's own cultural identity towards "others."

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