



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3144 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3145 (Print)

Volume-III, Issue-VII, August 2017, Page No. 57-61

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

Concept of Sacrifice and Prayer in the *R̥gveda*

Dr. Rupsmitta Buzarbaruah

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sanskrit, Nalbari College, Nalbari, Assam, India

Abstract

The earliest and the most important record of the religion and the institutions of the Āryans, is the Veda. Everything related to the Indian way of life has its roots in the Vedic lore. Among the four monumental Vedas, the R̥gveda is said to be the oldest one. In the R̥gvedic age, one can find highly philosophical thoughts side by side with naive ideas about gods, the other world and the material world around. The Vedic Āryans were constantly engaged in a sever struggle for existence through the ages. The fear of losing life and anxiety for protection characterized the Vedic prayers. It can be presumed that the R̥gvedic Āryans had a confirmed belief in the power of prayer. They believed that they derived supernatural power through prayer and sacrifice. People believed that through the performance of sacrifices, gods were pleased and, in return, the gods fulfilled all the desire of the sacrificers. In the R̥gveda, it is seen that the people of that period prayed the gods for various attainments like achievement of offspring, cattle, food and bodily welfare, etc.

The method adopted in the present paper is chiefly analytical and descriptive. An attempt has been made here to impart an acquaintance with the concept of sacrifice and prayer in the R̥gveda.

Key Words: Āryan, R̥gveda, Sacrifice, Prayer, Attainment.

The word *dharma* stands for different meanings, viz. duty, righteousness, justice, virtue, religion, sacrifice, ordinance, etc. The term is derived from the root *dhr*, meaning to uphold, to support and to nourish. In the Vedas the word is found to have been used both in its masculine form *dharma* and the neuter form *dharman*. According to M.M.Williams, the word *dharma* connotes the senses of being established, or firm, steadfast decree, statute, ordinance, law, usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty, right, justice, virtue, morality, religion, religious merit and good works, etc.² Again the term *dharman* denotes bearer, supporter, arranger... support, prop, hold... established order of things, steadfast decree (of a god, esp. of Mitrā-Varuṇa), any arrangement or disposition, will, pleasure, law, rule, duty, practice, custom, mode, manner... nature, quality, characteristic mark or attribute.³ In various contexts of the *R̥gveda*, *dharma* denotes religious ordinances or rites.⁴ In some other references of the *R̥gveda*, the term *dharma* is

used to mean the fixed principles or rules of conduct.⁵ In the *Atharvaveda*, *dharma* is used in the sense of merit acquired by the performance of religious rites.⁶ In the *Śrīmadbhagadgītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa used the word *dharma* in the sense of the particular duties of the castes.⁷ The *Mahābhārata* holds that not killing the living beings is the highest *dharma*.⁸ In the *Manusmṛti*, it is stated that contentment, forbearance, non-attachment to worldly concerns, non-avarice, purity, subjugation of the senses, knowledge of the immutable principles, erudition, truthfulness and non-irascibility, these are the ten specific attributes of virtue (*dharma*).⁹ According to Macdonell, religion in its widest sense includes on the one hand the conception, which men entertain of the divine or supernatural powers and, on the other, that sense of the dependence of human welfare on those powers which finds its expression in various forms of worship.¹⁰ Max Müller states that religion is a mental faculty or disposition which in spite of sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the definite under various disguises.¹¹ Early people were impressed by the powerful forces of nature and this sense of wonder made them to worship the inexplicable forces of nature. This kind of behavior and attitudes led to the concept of religion in the mind of the Vedic people. Thus, it is noticed that *dharma* or religion bears various meaning. It includes both the socio-ethical duties as well as religious orders. *Dharma* or religion contains all the rules for sustain and uphold all the living beings. P.V. Kane states that it is used in the sense of upholder or supporter or sustainer in the *R̥gveda*.¹² In the very beginning, people worshiped the natural elements as their deities. They were overwhelmed to see the powerful force of nature. Early people believed that there must be some power behind the nature. The sense of wonder made them to worship the nature. Without knowing any scientific ground people tried to please the nature with prayer and sacrifice. They believed that nature should be pleased for their benefits. Their helplessness compelled them to believe in the omnipotence of the supernatural, which inspired them to worship the various phenomena of nature. This belief almost amounts to blind faith and this is the root of religion.¹³ According to Max Müller, religion sprang from spontaneous emotional reactions of wonder, awe and fear, evoked in man by natural phenomena, such as the sun, the moon, rain, lightning, etc.¹⁴ Thus, all the natural elements became the objects of worship and took the places of gods and goddesses. The deities were conceived as the presiding deities of nature. Thus, the concept of religion formulated in the mind of the early people, who were lived amidst the nature.

There were different views regarding the concept of religion among the R̥gvedic Āryans. A group of people believed in the plurality of gods, while some other worshipped only one god. In the beginning, people believed in the multitude of gods. But this belief soon changed into the concept of one god. Afterward people believed that there is only one god, of whom the many gods are different names or descriptions. The theory, where god is believed to be one is known as Monotheism. Here the god appears in many forms because of the supernatural power. On the other hand, the theory called Polytheism supports the plurality of gods. It is stated that in the *Veda*, there is a progression from a multitude of gods to single god then to a unity of the world, i.e. Polytheism to Monotheism and then to Monism.¹⁵ The eternal mystery of life beyond death agitated the mind of the Vedic people.

In the *Ṛgveda*, great importance is shown to the ritualistic performance called sacrifice. The *yajñas* formed an integral part of the religious practices of the Vedic Aryans. People of that period believed that through the performance of sacrifice, otherwise called as *yajña* gods are pleased and in return the gods helped the worshipper. In other words *Yajña* serves as a means by which one may gain desired wealth. A remarkable aspect of Vedic sacrifice is that in it the *Yajamāna* invokes and offers oblations to the deities not only for his own benefit, but for the well-being of all. In the very first verse of the first *maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*, the worshipper says – *agnimīle*, i.e. ‘I invoke Agni’, but in the last verse of the same hymn he offers his prayers with the words *sacasvā nah svastaye*– ‘May you endeavour for our well-being’. Gods also promise to execute all the wishes of the sacrifice.¹⁶ The chief aim and objective of a *Yajña* being the all round benefit of all, *Yajña* has been given the appellation *viśvatodhāra* in the *Śukla Yajurveda* (17.38) as well as in the *Atharvaveda* (IV.14.4). *Yajña* has a great impact on the religious life of the Vedic people. The concept of *yajña* is well enumerated in the tenth *maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgveda*. The origin of creation was traced to the mysterious primeval sacrifice.¹⁷ Sāyaṇācārya also holds that sacrifice constitutes creation.¹⁸ The creator of sacrifice or *yajña* is said to be Prajāpati.¹⁹ The five elements of sacrifice are mentioned as grain, Soma, the Kine, the Purodāśa and the clarified butter.²⁰ *Yajña* is called *ṛtasya nābhi*,²¹ i.e. the center of cosmos. This place of sacrifice is said to be in the world of good deeds.²² In the *Puruṣasūkta* of the *Ṛgveda*, it is stated that the universe itself along with the laws which leads it, proceeds from *yajña*.²³ In the first *maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgveda* also, *yajña* has been described as *bhūbanasya nābhiḥ*.²⁴ The Dakṣiṇā or offering is always related to the sacrifice. Regarding the offerings of the sacrifice it is found that the dead body was an offering to the fire.²⁵ A cow was burnt with the dead body of a person.²⁶ In a Ṛgvedic hymn, it is seen that gods are invoked to confer blessings on the sacrifice.²⁷ There is a clear hint of the everlasting result of performing sacrifice. It is noticed in the *Ṛgveda* that in the sacrifice performed by Śatanu, the priest Devāpi acquires a magic charm to create rain and released the waters. After twelve years of heavy drought, Śatanu’s kingdom was blessed with rains.²⁸ Reference to the Pitṛmedha *yajña* is also found in a passage, where the term *devāhuti* is used.²⁹ According to Sāyaṇācārya, the term *devāhuti* stands for Pitṛmedha *yajña*, where the gods are duly propitiated.³⁰ Another significant part of the sacrifice, i.e. the four principal priests and their functions are found mention in the tenth *maṇḍala*. It is stated that Hotṛ utters the ṛcas, i.e. verses, Udgātṛ sings the holy sāmans, Brahmā has the knowledge of all and Adhvaryu prescribes he rules of sacrifice.³¹

The distinction between praise and prayer is explained in the *Bṛhaddevatā* thus, ‘Praise is expressed by means of name, form, action and relationship, but prayer by means of objects, viz. heaven, long life, wealth and sons.’³² Many hymns can indeed be said to consist for the greater part of praise alternating with prayers and references to the god’s deeds.³³ It is found in a Ṛgvedic passage that a sacrifice, which is not accompanied by prayer does not please the gods like Indra.³⁴ In the *Ṛgveda*, it is seen that the people of that period pray the gods for various results like achievement of rainwater, cattle, food and bodily welfare, etc. Horses and cows were regarded as the most precious possessions of the

Vedic Āryans. Prayer for the protection of such animals is observed.³⁵ For the people with pastoral and agricultural economy, rain is one of the most urgent necessities of life. It enriches the pasture lands and enables the soil to produce food in abundance. Here the Vedic hymns are full of prayers for rain.³⁶ In the *R̥gveda* also prayer for rain is heard.³⁷ Food is the vital requirement of every living creatures. There are also prayers in praise of food and bodily welfare.³⁸ Regarding the importance of the prayers, J.Gonda states, ‘When properly pronounced, prayers, like blessings and curses, were believed to be practically operative, because man’s solemn word exercises potent influence over men, gods and unseen powers.’³⁹ Though there are many magical chants contained in the *R̥gveda*, those are also not considered as worthless. Regarding those formulas Gonda again states, ‘We should not distinguish between ‘religion’ or ‘official ritual’ on the one hand and witchcraft on the other, but rather between dignified and complicated ceremonials stimulating the gods into a display of their power to maintain, in the interest of the sacrifice, the normal and desirable state of affairs in the universe...’⁴⁰

Thus, it is noticed that in the period of the *R̥gveda*, sacrifice and prayer play a significant role for the protection of the lives of the Vedic people as well as the attainment of their desired objects. In the present day society also, it is seen that prayer and sacrifice are relevant for the relaxation of mind and bodily comfort. Hence, importance of meditation, which is directly related to prayer, is increasing day by day. Still there are many scopes of research for the scientific ground of sacrifice and prayer. After a careful study of the hymns of the *R̥gveda*, it can be said that relieved from superstitious belief, sacrifice and prayer have a great contribution for moulding the society.

References:

1. vedo’khilo dharmamūlam smṛtiśīle ca tadvidām/
ācāraścaiva sād̥hūnāmātmanastuṣṭireva ca// *Manusmṛti.*,2.6
2. Williams, M. Monier, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 510
3. *Ibid.*, p.512
4. i) trīṇi padā vicakrame viṣṇurgopā adābhyah/
ato dharmāṇi dhārayan// *R̥gveda.*, 1.22.18
ii) vṛṣa dharmāṇi dadhiṣe// *Ibid.*, 9.64.1
5. Vide, Kane, P.V., *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol.1, Part 1, p.1
6. ṛtaṁ satyaṁ tapo rāṣṭraṁ śramo dharmasca karma ca/
bhūtaṁ bhaviṣyaducchiṣṭe vīryaṁ lakṣmīrbalaṁ bale// *Atharvaveda.*, 9.7.17
7. śreyānsvadharmo vigunaḥ paradharmātsvanuṣṭhitāt/
svadharme nidhanaṁ śreyaḥ paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ// *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā.*,3.35
8. ahimsā paramo dharmah/ *Mahābhārata.*, *Anuśāsānaparvan*, 115.1
9. dhṛtiḥ kṣamā damo’steyaṁ śaucamindriyanigrahaḥ/
dhīrvidyā satyamakrodho daśakaṁ dharmalakṣaṇam// *Manusmṛti.*,6.92
10. Vide, Macdonell, A. A., *The Vedic Mythology*, p.1
11. Vide, Chaubey, B. B., *Treatment of Nature in the R̥gveda*, p.48
12. Kane, P.V., *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol.1, part. 1, p.1

13. Vide, Srivastava, M.C. P., *Mother Goddess in Indian Art Archeology and Literature*, p.13
14. Vide, Chaubey, B.B., *Treatment of Nature in the Ṛgveda*, p.48
15. Vide, Raja, C.K., *Vedas, A Cultural Study*, p.74
16. aham dadhāmi draviṇam haviṣmate suprāvye yajamānyā sunvate/ *Ṛgveda.*, 10.125.2
17. Ibid., 10.130
18. sargātmako yajñastam yajñam ime pitarah pālakāḥ prajāpateḥ prānabhūtā viśvasṛjo devāḥ vayanti nirmimate/Sāyaṇa, Ibid., 10.130.1
19. pumān puruṣa ādipuruṣaḥ prajāpatih enam yajñam tanute vistārayati/ sṛṣṭavānityarthaḥ/ Sāyaṇa, Ibid., 10.130.2
20. pañcasamkhyākāni dhānāsomapaśupurodāsājyakhyaṇi padāni paditṛṇi hotṛtvena devān prati ganṭṛṇi havīṃsi anvaroham anurohami/ Sāyaṇa , Ibid., 10.13.3
21. pañca padāni rūpo anvaroham catuṣpadīmanvemi vratena/ akṣareṇa prati mima etāmṛtasya nābhāvadhi sam punāmi// *Ṛgveda.*, 10.13.3
22. Vide, Wilson, H.H., *Ṛgveda Samhitā*, Vol.6, on 10.85.24, p. 282
23. yajñena yajñamayajanta devastāni dharmāni prathamānyāsan/ te ha nākaṁ mahimānaḥ sacanta yatra purve sādhyāḥ santi devāḥ// *Ṛgveda.*, 10.90.16
24. Ibid., 1.164.35
25. ava sṛja punaragne pitṛbhyo yasya āhutaścarati svadhābhiḥ/ āyurvasāna upa vetu śeṣaḥ sam gacchatām tanvā jātavedaḥ// Ibid., 10.16.5
26. agnervarma pari gobhirvyayasva sam pronusva pivasa medasa ca/ nettvā dhr̥ṣṇurharasā jarhṣāṇo dadhr̥gvidhaksyanparyankhayāte/ /Ibid., 10.16.7
27. Ibid., 10.65.14,15
28. Ibid., 10.98
29. ime jīva vi mṛtairāvavrtrannabhūdbhadrā devahūtirno adya/ Ibid. 10.18.3
30. devahūtiḥ devānāmahvānam yatra sa devahūtiḥ pitṛmedhākhyo yajñāḥ bhadrā kalyānaḥ bhāvatu/ Sāyaṇa, Ibid.
31. ṛcām tvaḥ poṣamāste pupuṣvagāyatram tvo gāyati śakvaṛiṣu/ brahmā tvo vadati jātavidyām yajñasya mātṛām vi mimīta u tvaḥ// Ibid., 10.71.11
32. stutistu nāmnā rūpeṇa karmaṇā bāndhavana ca/ svargāyurdhanaputrādyair arthairāśistu kathyate//BD.1.7
33. *Ṛgveda.*, 3.22; 5.84; 10.170
34. ava no vṛjinā śiśīhṛcā vanemānṛcaḥ/ nābrahmā yajña ṛdhagjoṣati tve //Ibid., 10.105.8
35. punarena ni vartaya punarenā nyā kuru/ Indra enā ni yacchatvagnirenā upājatu//Ibid., 10.19.2
36. Ibid., 5.63.1-3, 6.70.5, 7.65.4, 8.7.3 etc.
37. ā no drapsā madhumanto viśantvindra dehyadhiraṭham sahasram/Ibid., 10.98.4
38. Ibid., 10.59.47, 10.37.6-7
39. Gonda, J., *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol.1, p.110
40. Gonda, J., op. cit., Vol.1, p.142