

The Asvamedha Ritual

The Asvamedha, otherwise known as the Indo-Aryan Horse Sacrifice, is a ritual that closely resembles an Indian fertility rite. The earliest mention of the Asvamedha is found in the *Rg Veda* (Stutley 254). The ritual is often defined by three different phases of Indo-Aryan expansion in Upper India, with each phase representing a different pattern of settlement. The development of the Asvamedha is dependent on the occurrence of these patterns. Therefore, the Asvamedha would not have been introduced without the representation of the phases. By putting the three sections into chronological order, a time-line is given for the creation of the Asvamedha ritual. The three phases include the Aryavarta, the Madhyadesa, and the advance of the tribes. The Aryavarta phase is the first phase that occurs in the time-line, and it includes the initial north-west settlement of the Aryans. During this time most of the *Rg Veda* was written. The Madhyadesa phase, otherwise known as the second occurring phase in the development of the Asvamedha, is about the expansion of the Aryans to the middle-land. The other three Vedas were constructed during the Madhyadesa phase, along with some of the Brahmanas. The final phase, known as the advance of the tribes, represents the first historic evidence of the formation of a caste system. Kings and priests were the most dominant figures during this time. This phase also concentrated on the introduction of a legal code. The three phases or periods in Hindu history are defined by important rulers. The ruler for the West was known as Svaraj, the North was named after Viraj, the middle country was Raja and finally the East was known as Samraj (Stutley 253).

According to the *Rg Veda*, a king performs the Horse Sacrifice in order to gain wealth, power, offspring, horses, and to “fulfill the rivers”. The *Vajasaneyi Samhita* also expresses similar requirements to those of the *Rg Veda*. In contrast, the *Taittiriya Samhita* and the *Brhad-Aranyaka Upanisad* have quite different requirements (Stutley 255-256). Specifically, the *Satapatha Brahmana* divides the Asvamedha into two distinct parts, the preparatory rite, which includes a military challenge, and the culminatory rite, representing a celebration of the former’s success (Stutley 256).

The preparatory phase is described in the *Satapatha Brahmana*. It begins with a specific person who is made to do the sacrifice, usually a king. The king is to select a stallion to be offered to the gods. The horse that is chosen must be a good stallion, as it is representative of the king himself. The horse is purified by *darbha* (another name for *kusa*). The horse is then offered to various gods such as Agni (fire god), Soma, to the waters, Savitar, Vayu (wind-god), and is eventually offered to Visnu, Indra, Brhaspati, Mitra, and Varuna. The horse is now able to wander around for one full year and is escorted by armed followers of the king (Stutley 256). This year of wandering can be seen as a ritualized conquest. The armed escorts are to make sure that the ruler of the land that the horse wanders onto recognizes the authority of the king that is performing the sacrifice. The Asvamedha, therefore, is seen as a very dangerous ritual; both by neighbouring areas and by the king himself (White 284). Neighbouring rulers can either keep the horse, initiating warfare, or may choose to leave the horse and submit. If the rulers decide to keep the horse, then the escorts are already there, fully armed, and ready to fight. The escorts are to guard the horse throughout the entire year to prevent any complications with the ritual. If any complications should occur, alternative offerings are to be made to the

gods. Additional offerings are routinely made to the gods such as Savitar during the horse's time of wandering in order to sustain the horse. Prayers are repeated every eleven days by the *hotar* priest. When the horse finally returns home the king's consecration has begun (Stutley 256-257). Significant people are placed in specific places around the area in which the ritual is taking place. Specifically, there are four separate groups of one hundred and one people that surround the area. The groups represent the four directions, North, South, East and West, along with kinship ties. The surrounding people are representative of the kingdom and the world (White 298). A symbolic "four eyed dog" is killed in hopes to drive away evil spirits from the horse. The horse itself is now representative of the evil enemy. After the horse has wandered to neighbouring lands and has met with the neighbouring enemies, it is no longer seen as a symbol of the king. The horse is now thought to be possessed with *papman*, and therefore must be slain. It is believed that when the dog is slain, the *papman* is also being killed. [White (1989) describes the *papman* as the name of a demon or cosmic evil; the origin of *papman* comes from Prajapati's incest with his own daughter Rohini]. The sacrificial instrument that is used to kill the dog is made of *sidhraka* wood (White 297). The ritual of killing the four eyed dog serves as a sort of "pre-sacrifice" in some ways. The dog is to be killed first, in preparation for the sacrifice of the horse. However, in some texts the idea of a four eyed dog is regarded as non-sense. For example, the *Taittiriya Brahmana* describes the additional eyes as two light spots above the eyes of the dog (White 284-285). In continuation of the ritual, the king, along with three other companions, are strapped to a chariot with the horse. The horse is then killed on a golden cloth, laid on the ground. The Queen Consort is expected to lie down beside the horse to mimic copulation. This act, in turn, is believed to result in fertility and offspring (Stutley 259). The

horse is then dissected, and offerings are made to various gods, such as Prajapati. The ritual ends with a purifying bath and gifts are often presented to the priests (Stutley 260).

There are various symbols that are used to represent significant figures and ideas in the Asvamedha ritual. The four eyed dog, for example, is killed to hopefully drive the evil spirits from the horse. The dog is often also regarded as “the embodiment of evil and misfortune” (Stutley 257-258). By binding and killing the dog, the king is symbolically beating his enemies and future peril. After being killed, the dog is sent to float south, which is known as the direction of death. By sending the dog in the direction of death, the rite is concluded (White 300). The god Yama (god of death) is believed to have two dogs of his own named *syama* and *sabala*. Each of the dogs is said to have four eyes. By relating the sacrificial four eyed dog to Yama, the dog becomes a symbol of death (White 285). A phrase that describes the four eyed dog used in the Asvamedha is “*catur-aksa svan*”. *Catur* simply means “four”, and *svan* means “dog”. *Aksa* has multiple meanings, one being eye, and in another context can be taken to mean “die”, as in the singular form of dice, which can be brought to the conclusion that “dice” is another symbol in the Asvamedha ritual (see White 287). The meaning of the dice has gradually come to be lost in the ritual. One explanation for the use of dice in the Asvamedha is similar to Einstein’s; “God plays dice with the universe”. A second interpretation of the meaning of dice is that “The gods move around like dice throws which give us wealth and which take it away”. This explanation insinuates that the universe plays dice with the gods (White 288). Another significant symbol used during the sacrifice is the ewe, which is offered to the goddess Sarasvati. The ewe is placed under the horse’s jaws, displaying the ongoing dependence of women on men (Stutley 258). The “body-encircling” animals are the fifteen different animals

which are used in the sacrifice of the horse to represent *varja* (the magical thunder bolt) [Stutley (1969) *Varja* is believed to be representative of power and vigour to repel evil]. Knives are also important symbols during the Asvamedha. The knife that is used to slaughter the horse is gold, representing royalty. A copper knife is used on the “body-encircling” animals to represent chiefs, heralds, and minor aristocracy. Finally, an iron knife is used to kill the remaining animals, representing the commonalty (Stutley 258).

Work Cited

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Related Topics for Further Investigation

- *The Rg Veda*
- *Svaraj*
- *Viraj*
- *Raja*
- *Samraj*
- *The Vajasaneye Samhita*
- *The Taittiriya Samhita*
- *The Brhad-Aranyaka Upanisad*
- *The Satapatha Brahmana*
- Savitar
- Agni
- Visnu
- Vayu
- Indra
- Mitra
- Varuna

- Prajapati
- *Papman*
- Yama

Noteworthy Websites

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http://www.indianetzone.com/6/asvamedha_yajnya.htm

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