

## The Significance of Sacrifice in Hinduism

The idea of sacrifice is something that is considered unorthodox in our world today; a notion with a somewhat negative connotation. However, many religions in the Western world involve rituals and sacrifices; however, sacrifice is more common a notion in Hinduism. Sacrifice, or *yajna*, means to “consecrate, to worship, to convert the profane into the holy” (Thapar 309). Romila Thapar describes sacrifice as a “salvation of a limited kind [that] [has] been present in the ritual of sacrifice, intended, among other things, for the attainment of the heightened pleasures of the heaven of Indra” (309). Nowadays, though, sacrifice is not performed in hopes to reach heaven; sacrifice can be performed in order to obtain liberation, known as *moksa*, or some type of heaven. *Moksa*, which is not “associated with sin and redemption but was conceptualized as the liberation of the soul”, is believed to be the attainment of *Brahman* or *Atman* (Thapar 309). *Atman* can be the realized self, the “knowledge of the true Self” which is “thought to provide liberation from the bondage of *samsara* and *karma*” (Robinson, Rodrigues 170). *Brahman* is sometimes referred to as the “Supreme Being or Absolute Reality” and one’s “individual essential nature (*Atman*) is thus intimately grounded in *Brahman*” (Robinson, Rodrigues 171).

There are different types of rituals performed in Hinduism. The first is a smaller, more compact ritual known as *grhya*. *Grhya* is considered to be a more domestic ritual and involves a single priest. Another, more traditional ritual is called *srauta*. *Srauta* is a more elaborate ceremony that has many priests, many altars and continues for many

days. The patron of a sacrificial ceremony, or *yajamana*, first has to be changed from a profane condition to a sacralized one which involves a “lengthy purification during which all other activities [are] set aside” (Thapar 312). During a sacrificial ceremony, possible offerings can be things such as fruit and select objects that are chosen specifically, like animals for example. Priests are indispensable persons in the ritual of *yajna* because they are the only ones who have the knowledge of the Sanskrit *mantras* and the ability to chant them properly (Robinson, Rodrigues).

What makes sacrifice so special is not the fact that it can lead to the attainment of Brahman, but the fact that it is radically different from the rest of one’s day to day life. Thapar states that “ritual activity, even where it involves a simple, everyday act, must be demarcated from the mundane, sometimes by archaizing its artifacts” (312). Essentially, Thapar is enforcing the idea that sacrifice is made special through making certain objects archaic, along with the actual ritual itself. Sacrifice, and the historical context of the sacrifice itself, is first outlined in the *Rg Veda*, the oldest of the Vedas (Thapar). The Vedas are made up of narratives, mixed with instructions on rituals which outline the proper way to perform a sacrifice ritual. A sacrifice ritual is seen as an attempt to achieve or attain three possible worlds- the world we are living in right now, an intermediate world, and heaven of course. Sacrifice was considered to be an exchange or motion of reciprocity in which the gods are the recipients. Thapar further explains sacrifice by stating that:

“Theories on the purpose and function of the sacrifice arrange over many explanations such as homage to a communion with the gods, catharsis, renunciation, rejuvenation, and social legitimacy. The Vedic sacrifice had many functions; what it

distinctly was not, however, was a covenant between a man and his jealous God”.

(312)

This idea is supported by Tom Robinson and Hillary Rodrigues when they state that “*yajna* is believed to be a mechanism through which the gods are nourished with the offerings made in to the sacred fire. In return, the gods reciprocate by bringing the rains, or providing the patron with offspring, generally ceding to the patrons their desires for social and natural order” (176). Laura Patton further emphasizes the importance of sacrifice when she states that “without sacrifice, the sun would not rise in the morning, nor would the cattle grow and multiply, nor would the crops flourish throughout the year. . . the possibility of long and healthy life for humans, and the worship of the fathers after death, or the ancestors, would not be present” (18-19). People that perform sacrifices are treated with respect, a fact Patton reinforces when she states that “a person who [performs] a *sattra*, or year-long soma sacrifice, would be remembered as having performed one and treated with appropriate honour and prestige for the rest of his life and in future generations” (22).

Ritual sacrifice has negative connotations mainly because a lot of people see it as barbaric or primitive. The truth is, although sacrifice is a notion many are familiar with or simple aware of, *yajna* is the only notion that belongs to Hinduism and Hinduism alone. However, “many of these rites, collectively known as *yajna*, are no longer practiced” in many other religions (Robinson, Rodrigues 176). But in Hinduism, on very special occasions, priests often times will perform select types of *yajnas* which are performed by uttering mantras in very specific, exact ways.

Dennis Keenan considers “the Eucharist as either a repetition of or a memorial of the sacrifice of Jesus, rather than as inaugurating a new way of sharing the divine” (169). Also, the idea “that most of our societies have been built on sacrifice” is examined by Keenan, though from a Christian aspect. Essentially, the idea of sacrifice is something that should not be regarded as barbaric because a lot of our religious beliefs revolve around the idea of self sacrifice or sacrifice of others. Jesus sacrificed himself for the betterment of his “children”, yet we overlook the barbarism it could be regarded with because of the selfless end result. Sacrifice has monumental importance in Hinduism because it furthers ones heavenly existence. Essentially, its Christian equivalent would be the Eucharist or possibly even baptism. It is an act that has both an emotional and spiritual significance.

#### Works Cited

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