

The Agnicayana Ritual

In earliest forms of Aryan religion [1000 BCE] there are *Vedic hymns*, the oldest being the *Rg Veda Samhita*, which consists of over 1000 hymns in praise (*Rg*) of various deities. Two other *samhitas* were produced through the *Rg Veda Samhita*, being *Sama Veda Samhita* and *Yujur Veda Samhita*, which together count as early orthodox Aryan scripture. The Sama Veda Samhita contains mainly scriptures of the *Rg Veda* which explained ways of sacrificial offerings and Vedic rituals performed with chanting (*saman*) performed by a certain group of priests (*udgatsrs*) (Rodrigues 54). Included in the majority of the rituals in the sacrifice of soma, a hallucinogenic plant, and the construction of fire altars. The Agnicayana ritual exemplifies the *Rg Veda* chants requiring the construction of a fire altar (*agni*) as a gateway to pour sacrifices into over a twelve day period where it is believed that to have the host performing the sacrifice for personal gain [wealth, offspring, vitality, etc] (Rodrigues 64). It has been dated as originating around 1000 B.C., however it has been an on again-off again ritual, and has only been captured and observed once in 1975. The ritual has been best translated from the *Vedic Yajnavalkya* section of the *Satapatha Brahmana (SB)*, stating that the Agnicayana rite is for a *yajamana* (the patron of sacrifice) to instill an immortal body on himself, in the rebuilding of the “unstrung” body of the god Prajapati (Converse 83).

A fire altar must be built in order for the Agnicayana ritual to take place. The preparation can take up to a year before the ritual can fully take place, and the timing of the ritual must be precise as well. The ritual must take place in between the time of the new moon and the full moon in spring (Rodrigues 64-65), and then preparations for the ritual space must be concise and made in sequences “The ritual site is a reconstruction of the cosmos itself, whose dimensions are mirrored in that of the human microcosm. One sees, in this ancient rite, early applications of the astronomical sciences in the necessary timings of each event, of mathematics, in its computations and structural geometries, and of the physical sciences in the casting of bricks, the making of fire, and the offering of oblations” (Rodrigues 65). The fire altar can be made into different shapes, however the most common shape is that of the bird of prey (*syena*) that is dedicated to the god Agni. Agni has been described as eating the forest, a killer of demons and enemies, and although a god, he is never disengaged from his element, fire. Agni is closely interconnected with the home/family/clan/rituals, being represented by domestic fires that burn constantly; Agni guards the home and all within it (Staal Vol. I). Through the Agnicayana ritual, one prays to Agni to help in the desired outcome of the ritual.

Agnicayana is the building of the fire alter, which is an important part of the ritual. The fire altar includes placing of a minimum of 10 800 kiln-fired bricks, placed in a specific and detailed layout, in five layers with the sacrificial layer placed on top. Fire altars in other rites are normally made of packed earth. The Agnicayana ritual uses bricks, and every brick is placed with a special mantra attached to each individual one; with special actions carried out, and the

religious meanings of each part of the rite carefully explained (Converse 83). Recently, the most common shape of the altar is that of a falcon, *syena* or *suparna*; even though the altar can be made into different shapes, the bird shaped altar is most common. The altar dimensions and brick pilings have been considered to be partly based on the cosmos, where every piece has a number and that number signifies a time and place, which fits into the ‘astronomical code’ or symbolic associations with shapes and time. The bricks are classified into two different kinds: ordinary (*lokamprna*) and special (*yajusmati*). For the yajusmati bricks, each brick is shaped a certain way and labeled/marked in a unique way, and the total of the bricks made is to be 396. This aids in the symbolism, as there are 360 days in a year and then the additional 36 days left as the days of the intercalary month. The first layer laid out with the yajusmati bricks has 98, the second 41, and third 71, the fourth 47, and the fifth 138; all containing certain equations within each of the numbers and together to form the number of days in a lunar year, half year, and a nakshatra year. For the lokamprna bricks, there are a total of 10 800, and this refers to the number of muhurtas in a year, and are divided up in 3 ways for the layout: 21 go into the *garhapatya*, 78 to the eight *dhisnya* hearths, and the rest to the *ahavaniya* altar (Kak 7(1995)). The five layers of the bricks indicate the five divisions of the year, the five physical elements, and five senses (Kak 1 2005). Many of the sequences and numbers are grouped together in triples; this symbolizes the relevance to the cosmos during the Agnicayana ritual. At the home, the patron will have three altars: one circular (earth), half-moon (atmosphere), and the last square (sky), which symbolizes the head, heart, and body of the Cosmic Man (*purusa*). During the Agnicayana ritual, the two altars representing the sky and the atmosphere will be built to the east end of the ceremony (Kak 2 (2005)). After the five layers a wooden mortar is placed on top (a ‘sixth layer is the heavenly world’), and on top of the mortar the *ukha* will be placed (which represents a ‘seventh layer, immortality’) (Kak 3 (2005)). The connectedness of the cosmos with the construction of the fire altars are very precisely practiced and honored during the Agnicayana ritual.

After all the preparation and during the correct time, the Agnicayana ritual is officially held over a twelve day period, where each day signifies the beginning of a new layer to the altar and sacrifices given to certain deities. The first day begins with the yajamana (patron of sacrifice) and 17 different priests carrying three sacred fires in different pots (Staal Vol. I); the *ukha* pot, the main ritual vessel which symbolizes Sakti, the womb of all creation, is prepared from clay. The yajamana goes through various rites of passage [one instance has the yajamana given a sacred garment and staff to wear for the remaining twelve days until the final bath on the twelfth day (Staal Vol. I)], and a vow of silence for the remainder of the ritual aside from during the Vedic prayers (Rodrigues 66). During the second day the mahavira pot, the main vessel of the Pravargya, is prepared from clay, and on the third day measurements of mahavedi and the bird-shaped offering altars are laid out in the east of the enclosure. The fourth day consists of the starting of the construction of the first layer of the fire altar, where mantras are spoken to each brick by the advaryu priest on behalf of the *yajamana*; a new domestic altar is constructed to replace the old hearth; soma, a hallucinogenic plant, is purchased while the subrahmanya priest invites Indra, Agni (as Rudra), and other Brahmins to join the Soma ingestion on the sutya day;

and the first Pravargya (offerings of boiled milk) and Upasad (offerings and oblations of clarified butter (ghee)) are executed in the morning and at night. On the fifth, sixth, and seventh day a morning practice of the Pravargya and Upasad is performed, followed by the building of a new layer to the altar accompanied by prayers and hymns, and then closes with the Pravargya and Upasad. On the eighth day the Pravargya and Upasad open the morning with the laying of the fifth layer to the altar while the yajamana prays for the original desires of the ritual for himself, and a oblation of substances are made into the fire for Rudra (Agni) with the Udgata priest singing chants around the altar, and then closes with the evening Pravargya and Upasad. The ninth day opens the same, with the Pravargya and Upasad performed, and then the mahavira pot and other things used in the Pravargya are put down on the new offering altar in the shape of a man; the ukha pot is placed in the middle of the bird shaped altar; oblations of ghee are made into the sacrificial fire with a large wooden ladle (preseka) called the 'flow of wealth' and is followed by many more offerings and oblations; and the Agnisomiya animal sacrifice is performed. From the tenth – twelfth day the pressing of the Soma is conducted and ceremonies will continue for two days and nights with the constant consumption and offerings of Soma to the priests and gods; fires are installed on the hearths in the sadas; eleven animals are sacrificed for various deities; the yajamana and his wife and the priests take the avabhrtha bath; a final goat is sacrificed for Mitra-Varuna. In closing, the yajamana and his wife go back home bringing with them three of the fires from the ceremony where he will then place them in the home, and keep performing the morning and evening Agnihotra for the rest of his life (Staal Vol. I). The last step helps in the patron keep the connection with the gods and his promise to them he had made throughout the Agnicayana ritual.

The Agnicayana ritual was traditionally performed as an important aspect to the Vedic literature in India, and preserves the earlier features of India's culture in distinguishing between Buddhism and Hinduism (Staal Vol. I).

References and further recommended readings

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Article written by: Erica Wendland (2010) who is solely responsible for its content.