

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOMAYAGNYAS AND VEDIC YAGNYAS IN GENERAL



Produced for Vedic Society for Auroville Somayagya 2010 by Samskriti Foundation

Authors:

R.S.Alvar, Geetha Alvar, M.A.Lakshmithathachar (Editor), M.A.Alwar (Editor)

Grant provided in memory of C H GLUCKMAN

© 2010 Samskriti Foundation, Mysore

The Meaning of Yajnya

The Sanskrit word '*yajnya*' is derived from the verbal root *yaj* which means 'to worship', 'to sacrifice', or 'to bestow'. There is no specific English equivalent as the term *yajnya* has a number of meanings depending upon the context in which it is used. It could mean either 'a sacrifice', or 'a

sacrificial rite’, or ‘an act of worship’, or ‘a pious or devotional act (one of the five which every householder has to perform)’, or ‘of Agni’, and lastly ‘of Vishnu’. Thus there are multiple meanings of the term *yajnya* which convey different aspects of this broad concept. *Yajnya*, in the general sense, is any karma done in the spirit of offering such as worshipping, praying, remembering, meditating, and so on. In the specific sense, it represents the performance of rituals ordained in the *Shastras* for propitiating the *Devas* and invoking their divine help for various reasons.

A sacrificial rite instituted according to the Vedic rules with all the necessary approved ingredients and performed according to the prescribed order of actions and in accordance with the *Shastras* is called a ‘*yajnya*’ and not otherwise. Both the words *yajnya* and *yāga* are synonymous though the former is more often used in the context of sacrifices performed in the house at the *grahastha’s* (*householder’s*) level while the latter refers to major sacrifices performed in specially built places involving a large number of participants.

Yajnya is the very essence of the Vedas. The fundamental concept of *yajnya* in Hindu religion and philosophy has always been that the *yajnya* is a god-given expedient by means of which humanity can directly invoke the help of the Gods, firstly to attain the objects of human existence, secondly to overcome the hurdles in the path of human emancipation and final liberation. From the very beginning, the practical rituals connected with all *yajnyas* was developed on the basis of certain fundamental concepts propounded by our ancient Rishis.

Firstly, that man must take into account his place in the environment and his role in the cosmic scheme of things. Secondly, man must live in harmony with nature by taking into account the cyclical nature of natural phenomena. This means that man must understand the true nature of the inter-dependence between himself and the different components of nature and the also need for man to regulate all his actions in accordance with the principles of sustainability. Thirdly, that man must regulate his desires and actions in accordance with the lawful aims of human existence always bearing in mind the need to progress towards final liberation. In other words, man must attain internal harmony as well as external harmony. Fourthly, man must use every opportunity to worship divinity and express his gratitude for the bounties of nature and for all the help and grace received.

It is not an exaggeration to state that Vedic culture evolved keeping the concept of the *yajnya* at the core of all activities. The Human-Divine link provided by the medium of *yajnya* was designed to enable mankind to obtain the help of the Gods for various external as well as internal goals. Some of the external goals sought through the *yajnya* are good crops, cattle, good weather, progeny, good health, wealth, prosperity, and so on. Examples of internal goals are happiness, mental peace, internal harmony, internal purification, atonement and so on.

The Classification of Yajnyas

Over 400 types of Yajnyas are described in the Vedas. Yajnyas have been classified in various ways. The Bodhāyana Grhyasutras ^{1/1/18/21} contains a description of the system of Yajnyas as a whole as follows:-

“Yajnyas can be classified into 21 groups. They are performed in conjunction with the recitation of mantras from the three Vedas, namely the Rig, Yajur, and Sāma. The materials used for the oblation are products of domesticated and wild animals as well as of various plants, trees. The emoluments paid to the Priests enable them to earn their livelihood. Yajnyas can also be classified into four categories, namely, svādhyāya yajnya, japayajnya, karma yajnya, and mānasayajnya. Each succeeding yajnya give results ten times that of previous one.”

Svādhyāya Yajnya is the study and recollection of the Vedas learnt at the feet of the Guru in the Gurkula. *Japa Yajnya* is the focussed repetition of certain Vedic mantras. *Karma Yajnya* is the performance of the sacrificial rites associated with the various *yajnyas* in accordance with the *Shastras*. *Mānasa Yajnya* is the performance of a *yajnya* entirely in the mind using various appropriate mental constructs and concepts, thoughts, resolutions, mental offerings and meditations.

With regard to the *karma yajnyas*, for all practical purposes, it is sufficient to understand the classification of 26 *yajnyas* as follows:-

1. The panca mahā-yajnas - 5
2. The sapta pāka-yajnas - 7
3. The sapta havir yajnas - 7

4. The sapta somayajnas - 7

The Pancha Maha Yajnyas

A *gṛhastha* or householder is enjoined to perform five *yajnas* every day. These are called the *panca maha yajnas*. In these *yajnyas*, appropriate offerings are made to the Devas, the Rshis (Sages & Seers of Truth), the Pitris (the manes or departed ancestors), fellow creatures and men. They are called the *deva yajna*, *ṛishi yajna*, *pitṛ yajna*, *bhūta yajna* and *manuṣya yajna* respectively.

Man is fundamentally indebted to all of them for his well being and prosperity. By means of these *yajnyas*, he offers oblations to each category of entities, and discharges his debts to them. By praying to the Devas and offering oblations to them, the *gṛhastha* clears his personal debt of gratitude to the Gods for their favours and help. This is called *deva yajñā*.

By acquiring Vedic knowledge, by teaching, sharing and passing it on to subsequent generations, one clears one's debts towards the Rishis & the Seers. This is *rishi yajñā*. By offering oblations to *pitris*, and by continuing the race by begetting progeny, raising them properly, by acquiring a good name for one's lineage, one clears one's debts towards the *pitris*. This is called *pitṛ yajna*.

By showing compassion towards fellow men, by treating the guests well, by helping those in need, by excusing those by whom one has been wronged, by doing actions that are beneficial to men, one clears his debts towards his fellow men. This is called *manuṣya yajñā*. Lastly, *bhūta yajñā* is the offering of compassion towards living beings in general. This includes abstaining from violence and killing, and living in harmony with nature.

The Sapta Pākayajnyas

As the term *pāka* implies, in the *pāka yajnyas*, cooked offerings such as boiled grains mixed with butter are offered in the *aupāsanāgni* or the *grhyāgni* which are the sacred fires lit up and duly consecrated at the time of marriage. The seven *Pāka Yajnyas* are *Astaka (Anvastaka)*, *Sthalipaka*, *Parvana*, *Sravani*, *Agrahayani*, *Caitri*, and *Asvayuji*. These rites are meant for material gains and prosperity.

The Sapta Havir Yajnyas

The *havis* is an oblation (generally uncooked) that is poured into a duly consecrated Vedic Fire. It consists of ingredients such as barley, rice, milk or clarified butter. The seven *Havir Yajnyas* are *Agnyādheya*, *Agnihotra*, *Darsha Purnamāsa*, *Cāturmāsya*, *Āgrayana*, *Nirudhapasubandha*, and *Sautrāmani*.

These *yajnyas* are performed in the three *Shrautāgnis* namely *Gārhaptya*, *Akshina* and *Āhavaniya*.

The Sapta Soma Yāgas

As stated earlier, a *Yāga* is a major sacrifice that is performed in a spacious location in which the elaborate infrastructure for the *Yāga* is constructed and which involves the participation of many priests and other participants. This group of *Yāgas* are so called because the juice of the soma plant is the main ingredient of the offerings in all these *Yāgas*.

The *Soma Yāgas* are *Agnistoma*, *Atyāgnistoma*, *Ukhtya*, *Sodasi*, *Vājapeya*, *Atirātra*, and *Aptoryāma*.

It should be noted that *Aupasana* and *Agnihotra* are part of the daily religious routine. Though a *Pākayajna*, *Aupasana* is not included in the group of seven *Pākayajnas* mentioned above. *Agnihotra* is one of the seven *Haviryajnas*. *Darsa - Purnamasa* is a *Haviryajna* to be performed once in fifteen days. The other five *Haviryajnas* and the seven *Somayajnas* are to be performed once a year, if not, at least once in a lifetime. As if out of consideration for us, the *Smrtis* have granted us the concession that the difficult *Somayajnas* need be undertaken only once in a lifetime.

But for the *parvani - sraddha* which is to be performed once a month and the *sthalipaka* every *prathama*, the other five *pakayajnas* are to be performed once a year. In short, the injunction of the *Shastras* is that the five *Mahayajnas* together with *agnihotra* and *aupasana* are to be performed everyday; the *darsa-purnamasa* and *sthalipaka* once a fortnight; and the *parvani-sraddha* once a month. The other *yajnas* are to be conducted once a year if possible or at least once in a lifetime.

The Yajnya Rites

Certain rites are performed by Vedic priests according to the rules laid down in the Shruti which is “The Heard or Divine Text” while others are performed by *Grahastās* or Householders according to the Grihya Sutras and assisted by the wife in many cases.

The *Sulabha* (Sulba) Sutras deal with the planning and constructional aspects of the ‘Vedi’. It should be borne in mind that the *Vedi* is rather loosely translated as ‘altar’ in English and bears no relation to the altar in a Church. The *Vedi* is the place where the sacred fire will be placed and around which all the Brahmins sit.

The *Srauta Shāstras* written by the following Rishis deal with the detailed procedures for performing the Vedic rites connected with *Yajnyas*. They represent different methods of performing rituals which are faithfully followed by different sects according to their time-honoured traditions which are named after the authors respectively:-

1. Apastamba
2. Asvalayana
3. Baudhayana
4. Bharadvaja
5. Katyayana
6. Satyashada

The Dharmasutra of Āpastamba forms a part of the larger Kalpasūtra of Āpastamba. It contains thirty *praśnas*, which literally mean ‘questions’ or books. The subjects of this Dharmasūtra are well organized and preserved in good condition. These *praśnas* comprise of the *Śrautasūtra* followed by *Mantrapāṭha* which is used in domestic rites and is a collection of ritual formulas, the *Gṛhyasūtra* which deals with domestic rituals and lastly the *Śulbasūtra* which are the principles of geometry needed for Vedic rituals.

The Sulba Sutras are part of the larger corpus of texts called the Shrauta Sutras, considered to be appendices to the Vedas. They are the only sources of knowledge of Indian mathematics from the Vedic period. Unique fire-altar shapes were associated with unique gifts from the Gods. For instance, "he who desires heaven is to construct a fire-altar in the form of a falcon"; "a fire-altar in the form of a tortoise is to be constructed by one desiring to win the world of Brahman" and "those

who wish to destroy existing and future enemies should construct a fire-altar in the form of a rhombus". We will deal with the fire-altars in detail later.

The four major Sulba Sutras, which are mathematically the most significant, are those composed by Baudhayana, Manava, Apastamba and Katyayana, about whom very little is known. The oldest are the *sutras* written by Baudhayana around 800 BCE to 600 BCE. Baudhāyana was an Indian mathematician, who was also a priest in all probability. He is noted as the author of the earliest *Sulba Sutras* called the Baudhāyana Śulbasūtra, which contained several important mathematical results. He is older than other famous mathematician Apastambha. He belongs to the Yajurveda School.

The Baudhayana Shrauta Sutra is a late Vedic text dealing with the solemn rituals of the Taittiriya School of the Krishna (Dark) Yajurveda. Baudhayana, the traditional author of the Sutra, originally belonged to the Kanva School of the Shukla (White) Yajurveda. The *Grhyasutra* of Maharishi Bharadvaja is not widely known. It is never quoted in the *nibandhas*. The School of the Bharadvajins, whose roots may have been in Southern India, declined in the early period.

The *shrauta* rites are much more elaborate compared to *Grihyya* rites since the aims of the former extended far beyond the purposes of a household. The *shrauta* rites laid particular emphasis on the necessary articles for each sacrifice and their usage during the sacrifice. Particular attention was given to how the various actions were to be performed and how the participants had to conduct themselves throughout the *yajnya*. The *vedi* of the sacrificial ground was systematically arranged in an arena suitable for that specific purpose according to what the ritualistic literature recommended. All this will be dealt with in greater detail.

The Aim of a Yajnya or Sacrifice

The basic aim of any *yajnya* or sacrifice is to secure our well-being through the worship of the Gods or the Supreme Being. Man does not have the power to control every aspect of his life. There are times when he must seek divine help to overcome his difficulties or to secure some desired objects of enjoyment or seek that which is conducive to his good. Why did God establish the system of sacrifice which made it possible for man to invoke divine help for the realisation of various ends?

In the Bhagavad Gita ^{3/10}, Sri Krishna explains to Arjuna, *“In the very beginning of creation, Prajāpati (The Lord of All Beings) having created man along with sacrifice said – ‘By this sacrifice you shall grow and prosper. Let this sacrifice be the yielder (the divine cow Kāmadhenu) of the coveted objects of desire.’”* But was the concept of a sacrifice propounded by the Supreme Lord merely to enable human beings to fulfil their personal desires and enjoyments? Āchārya Sri Rāmānuja in his Gita Bhashya commentary on this verse says, *“In the very beginning of creation, He, the Lord of Beings, saw the utter helplessness of all beings in their conjunction with insentient matter that had no beginning, bereft of the distinctions of name and form, and submerged in Himself. He foresaw that they would be incapable of attaining the major ends of human existence. Being supremely compassionate and desirous of helping them, He created them together with the expedient of the sacrifice so that they may perform sacrifices as His worship and told them: ‘By this sacrifice shall you prosper and multiply. May this sacrifice fulfil your supreme object of desire called moksha (final liberation from worldly existence) and also your other desires that are in conformity with it’”* That then was the real aim of the Para Brahman when He created human beings together with the expedient of the sacrifice. As we shall see, human beings ran into problems when this god-given expedient was misused for personal ends that were not in conformity with the highest aim.

How should this expedient of sacrifice given to man by the Supreme Lord be used to prosper and progress towards the main goal? Sri Krishna reveals to Arjuna in the Gita ^{3/11}, *“By this, nourish the Gods and let those Gods nourish you in turn. Thus nourishing one another, you shall attain the highest good.”* Āchārya Adi Sankarāchārya describes this highest good as liberation through the attainment of knowledge or of heaven. Āchārya Sri Rāmānuja says that the highest good is *moksha* (final liberation). The Mahānārāyanopanishad ^{78/10} also speaks of sacrifice as the means of liberation for the seekers of the highest good.

Sri Krishna clarifies further in the Srimad Bhagavad Gita ^{3/12} that he who enjoys all the objects of desire bestowed by the Gods without offering them anything in return is but a thief. What happens to such a thief? Regarding this, Āchārya Sri Rāmānuja says in his commentary in the Gita Bhashya ^{ibid}, *“The purport is that such a person becomes unfit not only for the supreme ends of human endeavour but goes downwards towards purgatory (naraka).”* In the next verse ^{ibid 3/12}, Sri Krishna Paramātma tells Arjuna, *“Pious men who eat the remnants of sacrifices are freed from all sins. But the unholy ones, who cook only for their own sake, incur sin.”*

What is the meaning of this word of caution given by the Lord? Ācharya Sri Rāmānuja clarifies this point in his Gita Bhashya^{ibid} as follows, “*But they are evil-minded who acquire for their own selfish use all the things which the Supreme Being, abiding as the Self of Indira and all the other Deities, has given them for worshipping Him; and instead use it for feeding themselves (for their own ends) – such persons eat only sin. Turning away from the vision of the Self, they cook (use the materials of the sacrifice) only for being led to Naraka (Hell).*”

Thus if the sacrifice has a selfish motive or the objects of desire sought therein is not in conformity with the lawful aims of human existence, no part of it will be acceptable to the Gods who will consequently be deprived of their due share. Thus the performer of the sacrifice will be deemed a thief as stated by Sri Krishna. He will incur sin. The Para Brahman alone brings about the fruition of all the rituals of the Vedas as declared by Sri Krishna Paramātma in the Gita^{15/15}. If a sacrifice is against the Shāstras or if it is against Dharma, it will not please the Para Brahman.

External & Internal Sacrifices

All *Yajnyas* can be divided into two broad categories from the conceptual point of view. It is useful to know this for a better understanding of the gradual evolution of the system of *Yajnyas* in Hindu Religion and Philosophy. The two broad categories are as follows:-

1. External Sacrifices.
2. Internal Sacrifices.

External Sacrifices

External sacrifices manifest themselves in the form of external karmas or actions which can be perceived by our outward senses. Such sacrifices use material substances and are directed towards securing some tangible material end or object of desire which can be experienced externally. The results of such sacrifices are generally the attainment of the some object of desire in this world or the next, some benefit for people and living creatures in general, the world of the Manes (Pitraloka) and the Moon.

External sacrifices directly invoke divine help. It is a tangible mode of worship which most householders can easily perform except for the *yāgas*. The householder can also undertake major *yāgas* with the help of qualified priests. The procedures laid down for external sacrifices instil spiritual, mental and physical discipline. Apart from the benefits to the performer of the sacrifice, external sacrifices help to preserve our *sanātana dharma*, our scriptures, and our religion and culture. External sacrifices are known to yield health and ecological benefits to a large number of people participating in such *yajnyas*.

There is a growing body of supporting personal and scientific evidence in favour of *Yajnyas* & *Yāgas*. Properly performed, external sacrifices are sure to yield the desired results. In external sacrifices more than one person can participate and derive subsidiary benefits. There is a welcome trend in the last fifty years or so to revive the periodic performance of the *Yajnyas* & *Yāgas* because of the rediscovery and realisation of its material and spiritual benefits.

Internal Sacrifices

Such sacrifices use no material substances but employ concepts, thoughts, faculties, emotions, powers etc and the aim of such sacrifices is to attain non-materialistic ends. Internal sacrifices are not easily perceived by our outgoing senses because there are almost no external manifestations which are obvious. Internal sacrifices aim at the internal purification and perfection, attainment of some internal non-material desire, or attainment of the Worlds ranging from that of that of the Gods (Devaloka) to that of Hiranyagarbha (Brahmaloka) and final liberation.

Not only Brihadaranyaka Upanishad but also other major Upanishads like Ishavāsyā, Chandogya, Katha, Kena, Aitareya, do emphasize on the knowledge of Brahman as essential to liberation. The transition from the outer *yajna* towards the inner *yajna* is suggestively described in Garbha Upanishad, one of the minor Upanishads. According to it, the sacrifice could be performed by the sacrificer within one's own body that has all the necessary articles/ items and functions required by the *yajna* according to the *shrauta* rite.

In a sense, sacrifices using the consecrated fire, oblations and mantras represent the external aspects of *yajnyas* which have some object of desire in mind. Sri Krishna Paramātma tells Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita ^{4/25-29} of various types of sacrifices which are internal in nature. He says ^{ibid}, “Some

yogins resort only to the sacrifice related exclusively to the Gods.” Ācharya Rāmanuja in his commentary in the Gita Bhashya clarifies that such a sacrifice takes the form of worship of the Gods and the meaning of the Lord’s statement is that such yogins have steadfast devotion only to this form of sacrifice. Lord Krishna says in the same context that, “*Others offer the Self as sacrifice by the Self itself in the fire of Brahman.*” Āchārya Sri Sankarācharya in his commentary elucidates that the offering of the Self by the Self in the fire of Brahman is nothing but the realisation of the Brahman without any limiting adjuncts.

Sri Krishna tells Arjuna about other types of sacrifices ^{ibid} wherein the sacrifices are conceptual involving no tangible material objects. He speaks of those who offer as oblations like hearing and other senses in the fire of restraint; of others who offer as oblations the sense objects such as sound etc into the fires represented by the corresponding senses; of still others who offer as oblation the functions of the senses and the activities of the vital breaths into the Yoga of the restraint of the mind, and of those who perform sacrifices through sacrifice of wealth, through austerities or yoga; and through scriptural study and acquisition of right knowledge. And there are some of restricted diet who are devoted to the control of the breath, sacrificing the inward breath in the outward breath and vice versa. In all these sacrifices mentioned by Sri Krishna Paramātma, the effort put in, the self-control exercised, the self mortification or torture undergone, the vows taken, the apprehension, the anxiety, and the suffering experienced during the course of the sacrifice are on the part of the *yajamāna* of the sacrifice alone and none else.

The *yajnya* is in essence a spiritual practice as it is a form of worship. The *yajmana* must be competent to perform the *yajnya*. There are certain conditions for any type of *yajnya* to be successful. One is that the particular deity should be invoked by reciting the appropriate mantras with faith and full knowledge of its deeper meanings. The other is that the *yajamāna* must be internally fit in all respects.

The immediate aim of the inner *yajnya* is the perfection of all the faculties of the *yajmana* who has resolved to perform it. These faculties include the physical aspects of the human body as well as the mental aspects such as intuition, intelligence, foresight, powers of reasoning and discrimination, a range of emotions, passions, attitudes, and ideals. All these may be collectively thought of as parts of the subtle body of the *yajamāna*. If the *yajamāna* is internally unfit to receive the powers that the invoked deity has resolved to plant in him, the deity will not act and the *yajamāna* will feel

no effect whatsoever and the *yajnya* will be a failure. On the other hand, if the *yajamana* is internally fit in all respects, the deity invoked will duly plant the germ of his power which will grow steadily to yield the desired benefit.

The inner *yajnya* is essential for preparing the body and the mind and making it fit to receive the powers poured down by the invoked deities. The Taittirīya Samhitā mentions details of several inner *yajnyas* like *darshapūrṇamāsau*, *agniṣṭoma* etc., which are in the first kāṇḍa. Once one of these *yajnyas* is properly done, the body will become fit to receive the powers or the benefits which the deity can transfer. These inner *yajnyas* involve the use of the *ṛk mantrās*, *yajus mantrās* or *sāma mantrās*. In the inner *yajnya*, all the actions and their effects are directed towards various aspects of the subtle body of the *yajamāna*. In this context, the *yajamāna* is not the human body with its external manifestations and actions but the very self or the soul.

Whatever the mode of the sacrifice, the *yajnya* or sacrifice is essentially an act of worship. One may worship the Para Brahman directly or indirectly through other divinities. Provided it is done in accordance with the Shāstras and is not adharmic, such worship goes to the Para Brahman alone as stated in the Gita^{9/23}. The Para Brahman or the Supreme Being has made His worship very easy, for He has said ^{ibid.9/26}, “*Whosoever offers Me with true devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit or even some water, I accept such offerings made with devotion by one who is pure of heart*”. Out of compassion for human beings, the Supreme Lord has made it so simple to worship Him. He has recommended the use of common, easily available inert materials for his worship. He is easily satisfied by this. The Gods are appeased by the conduct of sacrifices as laid down in our Shastras. To seek their divine help, they have to be duly invoked. For this we have to perform the various *yajnyas* as per the prescribed Rules and Procedures.

Both the external and internal sacrifices are essential for the material and spiritual well being of mankind as well the rest of the living beings. They are complementary to each other and not mutually exclusive. Each type of sacrifice, in any case, requires a different specific approach. The degree of difficulty also varies. For all round growth, development and prosperity both forms of sacrifice have been enjoined in our Scriptures and other Sacred Texts. We cannot afford to neglect either.

THE CONSTITUENTS OF A YAJNYA

Introduction

The resolve to perform a *yajnya* and its subsequent performance depends upon the following essential concepts:-

- *Bhavana*: It is the thought or the urge which arises in the prospective sacrificer to perform a certain *yajnya* for a given purpose. It is the motivational force which leads to the undertaking of the *yajnya*. This bhavana arises due to one or more reasons and are very complex and esoteric. It may be due to some identifiable reason such as one's good karmas or the benediction of one's Āchārya. It may be due to a reason beyond the understanding of human beings such as the *nirhetuka katākshā* or the grace of God which has been showered upon us for no specific reason we can think of. Nor can we assign any matching quality in us or any appropriate karma done by us as the probable cause for this grace of God.
- *Svādhyāya*: This implies self study or inquiry and self reflection. It is a form of yoga. Every *yajnya* should be performed as ordained in the Scriptures if it is to achieve its stated purpose. Only if the *yajamana* knows all about the various aspects of the intended *yajnya*, will he be able to make himself competent to perform the *yajnya* and to perform the external actions correctly. Hence, he must enquire into and learn all about aim, scope and procedures of the proposed *yajnya*.
- *Karma*: These are the rites and rituals which must be performed in the correct order and in the manner prescribed.
- *Tyāga*: This represents the offerings to be given in the *yajnya*.
- *Devas*: These are the Deities or divine powers who are to be propitiated and whose help is to be invoked.
- *Phala*: This is the end result of the *yajnya* as given in the Scriptures.

The Nature of Karmas or Actions in Sacrificial Rites

The karmas or actions involved in all rites and rituals can be divided into two categories for a better understanding namely *artha karmas* and *guna karmas*. *Artha karmas* are the principal actions connected with the purpose of the *yajnya* while the *guna karmas* are subsidiary rites associated with the principal rites.

Artha Karma

Artha Karmas are of three types as follows:.

- *Nitya Karmas* are those karmas (or rituals) which have to be performed daily by Hindus. The Hindu Shastras say that non performance of *nitya karmas* leads to sin. Some examples are *Snāna* (bathing) , *Sandhyāvandanam*, *Aupasanam*, *Agnihotram* *Deva-Rishi-Pitru Tarpanam* and *Brahma Yajnam*,
- *Naimittika Karmas* are the rites to be performed on special occasions by the *grhastha* (householder). Some examples are *Garbhadana* (conception), *Jatakarma* (at birth), *Nāmakaranam* (naming ceremony), *Annaprasana* (first feeding), *Chaula* (tonsure), *Vivāha* (marriage), and *Anthyesti* (death). The *naimittika karmas* are also obligatory as per the Shastras.
- *Kāmya Karmas* are those actions or karmas (or rituals) which are performed with a specific objective in view. Unlike *nitya karmas*, these rituals are not required by the Shastras to be performed on a daily or regular basis. They are not obligatory but optional. A *kāmya karma* is performed with a specific desire in mind. Examples of some *kāmya-karmas* are *Putrakameshti*, *Jyotistoma Yaga*, *Agnistoma*, *Agnicayana*, and *Soma Yajnya*

Guṇa Karmas

Guṇa karmas, which are subsidiary and form components of *artha karmas*, are intended for preparation and purification. *Prāyaścitta* or expiation rites are also part of the subsidiary rites/*guṇa karmas*

Tyāga

Tyāga is associated with offering. There are three kinds of offerings:

- Yāga (sacrifice)
- Dāna (giving)
- Homa (offering)

Of these, the word *yāga* refers to the principal rite and the other two are associated with subsidiary rites. *Dāna* is the act of transferring one's complete rights over what is given to the recipient of the *dāna*. *Dāna* is not done in anticipation of anything. The results are invisible and accrue only if there is no expectation.

Homa is the act of offering *havis* or oblations to Agni. This involves *tyāga* of what is being offered with the *sankalpa* or thought contained in the words “na mama”, meaning that which is being offered is no more mine, it belongs to the *Deva* (or the *Pitri* as the case may be) to whom the offering is being made. There is no expectation in the act itself but the results will come to the *yajamāna* or sacrificer as part of the overall results of the entire sacrifice. *Homa* is central to any *agni kārya* or sacrifice performed in *Agni* and this term has become almost synonymous with the word *yajnya* itself though *homa* is a component of *yajnya*. In some kinds of *yajña* which do not involve *agni kārya*, oblations are offered as *dāna*.

Devas

The term *Deva* denotes the Deities who are invoked in the sacrifice. *Devas* accept the *havis* offered in a sacrifice and bestow the results sought. Along with the results, the sacrificer gets the grace of the Gods. *Devas* are *mantra-baddha* which means that they are bound to bestow the results of a

sacrifice when invoked in the prescribed manner. Thus a sacrifice performed according to the Shastras is bound to yield the prescribed results.

Havis offered in a sacrifice constitute the food for Devas. Nourished by the *havis* offered in worship or sacrifices, the Devas grow and prosper on *havis* and in turn, help to bring about the well-being of men (through rains and so on).

The Participants of the Yajnya

The Yajamāna or the Sacrificer

The *Yajamāna* is the the most important person in any *Yajnya*. He is the pivot around which all the rituals are performed. The decision to undertake the *yāga* is his. He is the one who employs the priests to conduct the sacrifice. He meets all the expenditure. The fruits of the *yāga* accrue to him alone. The etymological meaning of the word *Yajamāna* is “one who is the performer of a sacrifice”. The *rtviks* or the priests are only to assist the *Yajamāna* in performing the *yāga*. It should be noted that though many of the physical actions connected with the rituals are performed by the priests, since they receive their *dakshina* or emoluments, the way is clear for the *Yajamāna* to attain the fruits of the sacrifice.

A *grhastha* (married man) belonging to the first three *varnas* (castes), namely *brāhmana*, *kshatriya*, and *vaishya* are entitled to maintain the Vedic fires and perform sacrifices. According to the Shastras, the Vedic fire could be established by the householder as soon as he is married. But due to various constraints such as expenses involved, the need to travel from one place to the other etc these Vedic fires could not be maintained in many instances. Hence, it became the practice to set up these fires in one’s middle age when there were greater chances of remaining in one place. Once established, it was obligatory to maintain the fires throughout one’s life. If extinguished for some reason, the householder had to ceremonially rekindle them.

The wife of the *Yajamāna* is called the *patni*. She too has an important role to play in the Vedic sacrifices.

Rtviks or Priests

The *rtviks* or priests are crucial to the planning and erection of the required facilities and for the proper conduct of the *yāga*. It is, of course, the *Yajamāna*'s privilege to choose the priests. They specify all the materials, utensils, implements and materials needed for the sacrifice. They are the guardians of the ancient rules and procedures laid down in concerned texts and it is their responsibility to ensure that there is no deviation so that no *dosha* or defect in the rituals occurs, which may negate the sacrifice entirely or yield poor or bad results.

A *rtvik* should preferably be on the younger side because the *yāga* rituals are elaborate, taxing and spread over many days. There is, however, no bar on selecting older persons if all the qualities are met. A *rtvik* should be well-versed in the Vedas having acquired that knowledge by attending the *gurukula* (traditional school). He should come from a line of traditional priests with a good lineage. He should be leading a pure and spiritual life as described in the Smruti texts. He should have no physical deformities or disabilities.

The various duties connected with any *yāga* are divided between the priests according to an ancient system which remains unchanged even today. The main priests are divided into four categories, each representing one of the 4 Vedas as noted against each as follows:-

- The Rig Veda - The Hotr.
- The Yajur Veda - The Adhvaryu.
- The Sāma Veda - The Udgātr.
- The Atharva Veda - The Brahmā.

Each of the Vedas is so enormous that each category contains 4 priests to share the task. Thus there are a maximum of 16 priests as follows:-

1. The Hotr Group consists of (a) Hotā (b) Sautrāvarun (c) Acchāvāka (d) Āvastut
2. The Adhvaryu Group consists of (a) Adhvaryu (b) Pratiprasthātā (c) Nestā

(d) Unnetā.

3. The Udgātr Group consists of (a) Udgātā (b) Prastotā (c) Pratihartā (d) Subrahmanya

4. The Brahmā Group comprises of (a) Brahma (c) Brāhmanācchamsi (d) Āgnidhra (d) Potā

In each group, the first named is the main priest and the other three are his assistants. These assistants are called *dvītyī* or *ardhi*; *trīyī*; and *pādi*. The level of their responsibilities, the scope of their duties as well as their fees are in declining order. For instance, the *dvītyīs* are paid half, the *trīyīs* one-third, and the *pādis* one-fourth of the fees paid to the chief priests known as the *mahārtvijas*. The number of priests in a given sacrifice depends upon the extent of the tasks involved. It is in the Soma Yāgas that all sixteen priests take an active part.

The Head Priest of the Brahma Group i.e. the *Brahma*, usually the most learned, is the Master of Ceremonies and the Supervisor of the entire *Yaga*. However, the key priest of a major *yajnya* like the *Soma Yāga* is the *Adhvaryu* because he carries out certain most important tasks as follows:-

1. Selection, planning and layout of the sacrificial ground.
2. Marking with exact measurements for construction and erection of various facilities required as per the Shastras.
3. Supervises the construction of all facilities like structures, platforms, plinths, enclosures etc.
4. Procurement of all vessels, implements, instrument, dravya and other material to be used in the sacrifice.

The success of any *yajnya* depends upon ensuring the right set-up at the very start. Therefore, the knowledge and competency of the *Adhvaryu* is most critical.

Agni

Agni or Fire is the most important constituent of Vedic *yajnyas*. Lord Agni is the Presiding Deity of the elemental fire. Rig Veda ^{1/1/1} describes Agni as the Presiding Priest, God of *Yajnya*, Rtvik, and the one who brings the Gods to the sacrifice. This is again confirmed in the Rig Veda ^{1/1/2}

which says “sa devan iha vakshati” meaning “He brings the Gods here”. He is the bearer of the *havis* or oblations to the various Deities. He is therefore also called by the name of ‘Havyavāt’ or ‘the one who carries the *havis*’. The Rig Veda ^{1/1/4} declares, “O Agni, that *yajnya* which is surrounded on all sides by Thee, that alone reaches the Gods.” Agni bestows auspicious happiness ^{ibid 1/1/6} and is the luminous guardian of the truth ^{ibid 1/1/18}. Since Agni is the elemental source of light and energy, it is sometimes identified with the Para Brahman. That is why Lord Agni is also referred to as ‘Jātavedas’ or ‘One who knows everything immediately upon manifestation’.

The Mundakopanishad^{1.1.2 & 1.2.5} says, “When *the sacrificial fire has been well-kindled and the flames begin to move, then pour the oblations between the two portions of the fire. He, who performs the sacrifice by offering the oblations into these radiant flames at the appropriate time, these oblations like the rays of the sun, verily take him to the place where the one Lord of the Gods resides.*”

There are two reasons why the consecrated sacrificial fire is pivotal to the performance of a sacrifice according to the Hindu Shāstras. One is because Lord Agni is the most important part of the vedic sacrifice being the deity who supervises over the elemental fire. The Mahānārāyanopanishad ^{76/1} declares that Agni is born on the days of the sacrifices as the protector of men in general and of those who offer sacrifices, in particular. The Mahānārāyanaopanishad ^{79/9} says that the great sacrificial fires are indeed the three-fold knowledge leading to Godhood and that the sacrificial fires are the supreme means of liberation.

There are three types of Agni collectively called the *tretāgnis* as follows:-

- Gārhapatya meaning that which belongs to the *grha pati* or the owner of the house.
- Dakṣiṇa.
- Āhavanīyā.

Gārhapatya is the origin of the other two, and all the three are worshiped regularly.

Agnis are also classified into two types on the basis of mobility as under:-

- Viharaṇīyā which can be moved from one spot to the other.
- Upastheya which are fixed and cannot be moved.

Each of these two categories contains 8 different types of fires which are positioned in different places in the sacrificial layout as follows:-

The Viharaṇīyā Agnis are placed next to rtviks as follows:-

1. Vibhūrasi Pravāhā is placed next to the Āgnīdhra.
2. Vahnirasi Havyavāhana is placed next to the Hota.
3. Śvātrosi Praceta is placed next to the Maitra Varuṇa (the place where these Devatas are invoked)
4. Tuthosi Viswaveda is kept next Brāhmaṇacchamsi.
5. Uśi Gasi Kavi is placed next to the Potā
6. Anghāri rasi jambhārīs kept near the Neṣṭā.
7. Avasyurasi Duvasvān, near the ṛtvik called Acchāvāk.
8. Śundhyūrasi Mārjālīya is kept near the ṛtvik called Mārjāla (the one who does mārjana or purification and consecration)

The Upastheyas are stationed at the following places:-

1. Samrādasi Kṛṣānū is located at the secondary altar in the north. This is the Āhavanīyā Agni.
2. Pariṣadyosi Pavamāna is located at Dhruva Sthali
3. Pratakṃvāsi nabhasvān is located at the Cātvāla Sthāna
4. Asamṛṣṭosi Havyasūda is located at Samitra (the place of paśu)
5. Ṛtadhāmāsi Suvarjyoti is located at the Audumbara.
6. Brahmajyotirasi Suardhāma is located with the Brahma (Chief Rutvik) of the sacrifice
7. Ajosyekapāt is located at the Sukhāśāla. This is the Gārhapatya.
8. Ahirasi Budhniya is located with the Yajamāna.

The Oblations

Then there are the oblations to be offered into the consecrated fire. What are these? The Mahānārāyanopanishad ^{12/7} speaks of clarified butter as the oblation which will invoke the presence of the Gods and delight them. The Mahānārāyanopanishad ^{40/4} also mentions about the fuel for the consecrated fire in the form of unbroken currents of clarified butter which kindle the splendour of the holy fire. The Mahānārāyanopanishad ^{50/1} further says, “*Kindling the consecrated fire with chips or small sticks of wood, may I attain both the worlds. Having attained the prosperity of this world and the next, I shall cross over death.*”

Dravya depends on the nature of rite. The essential principle is to perform *annahoma* which means that the offerings should be in the form of acceptable nourishments. In general the Vedic offerings consisted of one or more of the following ingredients as enjoined in the texts:-

- rice,
- corn,
- specific samidhas,
- blades of grass,
- milk,
- other cereals,
- curd,
- barley,
- fruits,
- various powders,
- vegetables and flowers

Phala

Phala literally means ‘the fruit or fruits’. The *phala* of any sacrifice is bound to accrue provided the sacrifice is performed in accordance with the Shastras. It may accrue in this world in the present life of the sacrificer or it may materialise in the after-life in this world or some other world such as heaven.

The overall results of a sacrifice are a combination of the fruits of each of the subsidiary rites and the fruit of the main rite. Each rite creates a unique result which may be perceptible or invisible. Visible results are called *pratyaksha* while invisible results are called *ālaukika*.

The Vedi

Vedi is the term for the "sacrificial altar" in Vedic terminology. Such altars were built either as an elevated or an excavated plot of ground, generally strewn with *darbha* grass on which sacrificial utensils and implements were kept. The *Vedi* is shaped within a given rectangular area with its northern and southern sides being concave. Vedic altars are described in the Vedic texts dealing with Kalpa (The Texts for Proper Performance of Sacrifices) notably the Satapatha Brahmana. The Sulba Sutras say that the entire Rig Veda corresponds to an altar of mantras.

The exact measurements and the shape of a *Vedi* would vary according to the type of *Yajnya* being performed since different measurements are given for different *Yāgas* in the concerned texts. The units of measurement are always relative being equal to either the height of the *Yajamana* of the particular *Yajnya* or the distance from his elbow to the tips of the fingers or the length of the normal step. For instance, the dimensions of the *Vedi* and the *Yāgashāla* depend upon the height of the *Yajamāna*. In the *Darshapūranamāsa Yāga*, the length of the *Vedi* is equal to his height.

The *Mahavedi* is the great or entire altar. The *Uttaravedi* is the northern altar made for the sacred fire *agnyayatana*. The *dhishnya* is the subordinate or side-altar, generally a heap of earth covered with sand on which the fire is located. The *drona* is an altar shaped like a trough^{Shulba Sutras. 3.216}. The *adhvaradhishnya* is a second altar at the Soma *Yajnya*.

Cayana or Agnicayana

Closely linked with the setting up of the *Vedi* is the ritual of piling up the bricks for the fire-altar in the Soma *Yāgas*. This is called *Cayana* or *Agnicayana*. The altar is built up with five layers of bricks. It may have several shapes such as *suparna* or the eagle; *syena* or the hawk, and *drona* or a

trough. The construction of the fire-altar is the most complicated part of the *Srauta* Sacrifices. Almost one third of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa where it is associated with the Rishi Śāṇḍilya is devoted to its exposition. *Agnicayana* probably began as an independent rite, which was later incorporated into the system of soma sacrifices. Although it is not obligatory at every soma sacrifice, it is always a part of one.

One of the unique features of the *Soma Yaga* is that the *uttaravedi* is constructed by piling up five layers of fired clay bricks in the form of a *śyena* (a bird of prey like a hawk). Built into this construction are the ‘heads’ of a man, a horse, a bull, a ram, and a he-goat, all of which can be made of gold or clay. After the *cayana* ceremony which is performed with various offerings, the elaborate rituals of the *soma* sacrifice begin. The *Yajamāna* who has performed *agnicayana* has to observe certain special vows for a year, with variations if he performs it more than once. The duration of the ritual, and the distribution of the rites over particular days, is not clear from the classical manuals, although some rites may have been extended over a year. It obviously entailed a lot of expenditure.

The Yajnyayuddhas, Instruments & Implements

The *yajnyayuddhas*, instruments and implements used in Vedic *yajnyas* are as many as 43 in numbers. Some of the major ones, commonly, used are described here as follows:-

1. *Agnihotrahavani*: It is a large ladle made of *vaikankata* wood (flacourtia spadia) used for pouring oblations of milk into the *gārhapatya* fire.
2. *Ājyasthāli*: It is a bronze vessel for storing *ājya* or ghee.
3. *Anvāhāryasthāli*: The food that is distributed amongst the priests after the main sacrifice has been completed, is cooked in a big metal vessel on the *dakshināgni* which is also called *anvāharya pacana*.
4. *Aranis*: The *aranis* consist of two pieces of wood which are used to generate a fire by vigorously rubbing one against the other. Due to friction sufficient heat is produced to cause a fire. The upper piece name *uttarārani* is shaped like a round pestle. The lower piece has a slot into which the upper piece can be inserted easily.

5. *Camasa*: Soma juice is kept in these deep wooden bowls which have short handles.
6. *Dashapavitra and Dronakalasha*: The former is a small cloth sieve used to strain the soma juice while the latter is a wooden vessel into which the strained juice is collected.
7. *Dohana*: It is the vessel in which milk is collected during milking.
8. *Drshad and Upala*: These are two grinding stones used to pound grains for preparing the *purodāsha* (rice cakes). The former, which is the lower stone, is flat while the latter, which is the upper grinding stone, is cylindrical.
9. *Idāpātra and Dārupātra*: The former is an oblong shaped vessel made of *ashvatta* wood. It is used to retain the remnants of *havis* after offering. The latter is also a similar vessel but used to store the *purodāsha* and *caru* (porridge). As the two vessels look alike, some distinguishing marks are made for easy identification.
10. *Juhā and Upabhrt*: These are wooden spoons similar to the *agnihotrahavanī* but smaller in size.
11. *Kapālas*: They are small troughs square-shaped made of burnt clay which are used for cooking the *purodāsha* cakes.
12. *Krshnājina*: It is the deer skin on which the *drshad* and *upala* are placed before pounding the rice-grains.
13. *Madantī*: It is the vessel for heating water to cook the *purodāsha* cakes.
14. *Musala*: This is a pestle made of *khadira* wood (acacia catechu) and used for any pounding.
15. *Pranītā Pranayana*: This is a long rectangular-shaped wooden vessel made of *asvattha* wood used by the *adhvaryu* priest to carry the holy water.

16. *Sānnāyya Tappanī*: These are two bronze vessels in which the milk collected in the morning and in the evening are heated mixed together.

17. *Sruk* and *Sruva*: These are small wooden spoons for offering *ājya* or clarified butter.

18. *Yoktra*: It is a rope made from the *munñja* grass straw which is used as a belt.

19. *Yupa*: It is the octagonal-shaped wooden post to which the animal to be immolated is tied.

Yajnya Dravyas & The Pātras

Agni Kārya forms the core of a sacrifice. It includes purification rites and the *homas*. The ingredients used in a *yajña* are called *dravya*. For performing any *Agni Kārya* the following are required:-

- *Sruk* and *Sruva* which are wooden spoons/ladles used for making offerings into the fire.
- *Idhma* which are wooden pieces/sticks called *samidhas* used as fuel in the sacrifice.
- *Pātras* which are large plates or bowls containing various ingredients..

The rituals can be conducted smoothly without unwarranted delays if all the materials, vessels, instruments are readily available at hand in the order in which they are required. A *pātra* is a plate or a bowl in which, depending upon its size, certain articles can be conveniently arranged beforehand. Three kinds of *pātras* are generally used as follows:-

- The *prokṣiṇi* which is used for sprinkling for purification.
- The *ājya* which is used to hold the clarified butter.
- The *pūrṇa pātra* which literally means “complete plate” is used keeping all other ingredients needed for completion of the rite.

Catuspātra & Satpātra

Depending upon on the *dravya* used according to each specific rite to be performed, there are two major classes of *pātras*. One is the *prayoga* – *catuṣpātra* containing four ingredients and the other is the *saṭpātra* using six ingredients. *Ṣaṭpātra* involves the usage all the six *dravyas* mentioned above. *Catuṣpātra* does not involve *idhma* and *pūrṇa pātra*. Most of the *prayogas*, nitya or otherwise involve *saṭpātra prayoga* which means ‘the usage of the plate with seven ingredients’.

Some of the sacrifices involve more than six primary ingredients. For instance marriage ritual in Āpastamba Sāmpradāya is called *dasa pātra* (involving 10 ingredients). Major yāgas like the Vajapeya of the Soma Yāga group use many more. However all of them come under the classification of *saṭpātra* only and the additional *dravyas* are included as one of the six standard items.

SOMA IN THE VEDAS



Introduction

The literal meaning of the term *soma* in Sanskrit is “juice”. *Soma* is widely referred to in the Rig Veda. In fact the Ninth Mandala of the Rig Veda consisting of 114 *suktās* (hymns) is entirely devoted to *soma pavamana* (purified *soma*). It is described as being the juice extracted from the

stalks of a certain plant and then purified for offering to the Gods at sacrifices. The Sanskrit word *sav* which means “to press” gives us the clue that *soma* drink was prepared by pressing the stalks of a plant.

It is important to note that in Vedic tradition, both the *soma* plant and the juice extracted thereof are considered as a single divine entity and with regard to this conscious visualisation, both are synonymous. Further, the God is both the plant and the drink and vice-versa. Thus in all references, rituals, and thoughts, all three are the same.

The Characteristics of Soma

The Soma Plant

There has been much speculation as to the exact nature of the original *soma* plant in botanical terms and its location or habitat. The Rig Veda ^{9/18/1} mentions that the *soma* plant is to be found in the hills. However, the *Susruta Samhitā* states that while some varieties of *soma* are to be found growing in the hills and mountains of ancient India, like the Himalayas, Arbuda, Sahya, Mahendra, Malya, Sree Parvata, Devagiri, Devasaha, Pāriyaatra and Vindhya, a few other varieties are known to grow in the aquatic habitats around Devasunda Lake, the Sindhu River and the little Mānas Lake in Kashmir. The famous Āyurvedic scholar Susruta wrote that the best Soma is found in the upper Indus and Kashmir region ^{Susruta Samhita: 537-538, SS.CS. 29.28-31}.

Our belief is that much before mortals, the *Soma* drink was first prepared, stored and distributed by the *Gandharvas*. The Rig Veda ^{8/7/29; 8/64-10 & 11} links certain regions such as Sushoma, Arjikiya and others with *soma*. Another location mentioned in the Rig Veda is Sharyanavat which was possibly the name of a pond or lake on the banks of which *soma* could be found.

In the late Vedic period substitutes for *soma* came to be used apparently because the original plant could not be obtained probably because it had become very rare or even extinct. It is also possible that knowledge regarding the original plant and its source was lost in due course. It has recently been identified with the fly agaric mushroom, *amanita muscaria*, used in Siberian tribal rituals. But there is no direct evidence in the Vedas that the *soma* plant was a mushroom. The Rig Veda mentions only of the ‘*soma* stalk’ ^{9/74-2 & 5}. Besides that, the Rig Veda clearly states that the juice is

to be extracted by pressing and pounding which seems relevant only in the case of fibrous or hard plant material (twigs, roots, and seed). Present day research has focussed on 20 different plants as likely candidates for the original *soma* plant.

In due course of time, when all knowledge of the original plant had been lost altogether, our rituals began to offer expiatory prayers apologizing to the Gods for the use of a substitute plant because *soma* had become unavailable. However, the important thing to bear in mind is that when offering anything to the Gods, true faith and devotion are far more important than the absolute authenticity of any specific material whether ordinary or rare and exotic. Wherever it may be, we can safely follow the prevailing traditions as advised by our Āchāryas provided we do so with full faith and devotion. Sri Krishna Paramātmā has declared in the Bhagavad Geetha ^{9/26}, “*Whosoever offers Me with true devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit or even some water, I accept such offerings made with devotion by one who is pure of heart*”.

The Colour of Soma

The Ninth Mandala of the Rig Veda contains a number of references to the colour of *Soma*. *Soma* has been described as possessing a brown hue ^{ibid 11/4 & 7; 31/5} or a tawny (orange brown) shade ^{ibid 5/4}. It has been described as ever green and green hued ^{ibid 5/10 & 25/1}. Its colour has also been described as golden hued ^{ibid 5/10}. Elsewhere, the *soma* juice has been called bright red ^{ibid 8/6}.

It is quite possible that these variations in colour may have been due to the specific variety of the *soma* plant available and the process of extraction and stage of storage. Whatever the colour, there is no doubt that the juice radiated feelings of power, potency, divinity. The Rig Veda ^{9.42.1 and 9.61.17} describes it as ‘bright and shining’.

The Preparation of Soma

The Rig Veda ^{9/3/9, 9/9/1 & 9/16/1} clearly mentions that the *soma* juice is extracted by pressing. The pressing is to be done by stones and this requires skill as mentioned in the Rig Veda ^{9/34/3}. Under pressure, the sap is said to come out in copious quantities like “a flood” ^{ibid 9/16/1}.

Soma is referred to as *soma pavamana* (*soma* purified) in the Ninth Mandala. Two suktās of the Rig Veda ^{9/3/1 & 9/3/9} mention the use of straining cloth, no doubt for filtration and purification. The use of fleece is mentioned in ^{ibid 9/13/1} while a woollen straining cloth is mentioned in ^{ibid 9/13/6}. The use of a sieve is mentioned in several places in the Rig Veda ^{9/16 -2 to 4} which indicates that the process of preparation of the *soma* juice involved removal of sediments and other impurities by filtration and consequent purification.

The Benefits of Soma

There is no doubt about the general and most outstanding benefits conferred by the *soma* juice as stated in the Rig Veda ^{8.48.3} as follows:-

a āpāma sōmam amṛtā abhūmāganma jyōtir āvidāma devān
c kīṃ nūnām asmān kṛṇavad ārātīḥ kīm u dhūrtīr amṛta mārtyasya

We have drunk *soma* and attained immortality; we have ourselves seen that light which was discovered by the Gods. Now then what harm can the evil intentions of our enemies do to us? Of what avail is the deception of mortals, O Immortal One?

The implication of this verse is that *soma* confers excellent health and the power, both physical as well as mental, to effectively counter the evil designs of the enemies.

Soma Confers Prosperity:

There are many references which clearly mention that *soma* confers great wealth, treasures and prosperity. Some examples given in the Rig Veda are as follows:-

“O Indra, O *Soma*, send us now great opulence from every side, Pour on us treasures a thousand fold.” ^{Ibid 9/90/3}

“Since you are purified, give us the strength of a hero and riches to those who worship you.” ^{Ibid 9/40/5}

Indra ! O *Soma* ! Being purified, bring to us riches doubly piled. (Bring us) wealth, O Mighty Indra which are worthy of the praises (rendered by us).^{ibid 9/40/6}

Soma Confers the Ability to Fight the Enemies:

Soma has the capacity to bring down the enemy's might, his vigorous strength and vital powers, whether he is far or near according to the Rig Veda^{9/19/7}. *Soma* can drive away our enemies^{ibid 9/8/7} and give us victory in war ^{ibid 9/8/8}.

Soma's Ability to transform us for the Good:

There are a number of verses in the Ninth Mandala, Hymn 4 of the Riv Veda which mention of the various ennobling qualities of *soma* which makes us better than what we are, and which confers number of other aspects such riches, the strength to uphold the law, victory in battle, general prosperity and the wealth of cattle & horses.

*May we gain skill, strength and mental power O Soma! Drive away our foes;
and make us better than we are.*^{ibid verse 3}

*Give us our place under the Sun through your powers of the mind and other forms of help;
and make us better than what we are.*^{ibid verse 5}

*Soma Possessor of Weapons ! Pour on us streams of riches doubly great;
and make us better than what we are*^{ibid verse 7}

*As one victorious unsubdued in battle pour forth wealth to us;
and make us better than what we are.*^{ibid verse 8}

*By worship, Pavamana ! Men have strengthened thee to support the Law: Make thou us
better than what we are.*^{ibid verse 9}

Allegorical References to Soma:

In the Ninth Mandala of Rig Veda, *Soma* has been compared to many forms of life and things that symbolise its special qualities. *Soma* has been compared to animals such a strong bull ^{ibid 2/1 & 5/7}, to a most splendid specimen of cattle ^{ibid 2/2}, to a war horse ^{ibid 3/3 & 28/1}, and to a bird upon the wings ^{ibid 3/1}. *Soma* is like a tree whose praise never fails to yield heavenly milk amidst our hymns ^{ibid 12/7}.

Soma is regarded as a God in its own right ^{ibid 3 -2 & 5}. *Soma* has been compared to a warrior setting forth with heroes to win many boons ^{ibid 3/4} and to a fast car ^{ibid 3/5}. *Soma* is looked upon as the friend of the King of the Gods, Indra ^{ibid 6/9} and as the faithful friend of mortals ^{ibid 14/8}. *Soma* is seen as the Lord of the Mind ^{ibid 28/1}. In fact, *Soma* is considered the very support of Heaven ^{ibid 2/5}. *Soma* is regarded as the Prajapati ^{ibid 5/9}.

The sound of *Soma* trickling through the sieve is compared to that falling rain and flashes of lightning across the sky ^{ibid 41/3}.

The Qualities of Soma

The Ninth Mandala of the Rig Veda mentions many desirable qualities of *Soma* some which are given below as examples:-

Soma is the destroyer of fiends, the friend of all men ^{ibid 1/2}. *Soma* confers bliss ^{ibid 1/3}. *Soma* gives us kinship with the Gods ^{ibid 10/8}.

Soma is considered the food of the Gods in many hymns/verses of the Ninth Mandala of the Rig Veda. *Soma* is urged to flow onwards to the Banquet of the Gods ^{ibid 1/4}. *Soma* is regarded as fit for the feast and service of the Gods ^{ibid 6/6}. The Sages call upon Indra to drink the *Soma* juice ^{ibid 12/2}. *Soma* goes to Indra, Vayu and the Ashvins with the gladdening juice which gives them joy ^{ibid 7/7}. *Soma* goes to Indra, Vayu, Vishnu and the Maruts ^{ibid 33/3}. All Deities of one accord come to drink of *Soma* ^{ibid 18/3}.

References to the Soma Sacrifice

There are many references to the Soma Sacrifice in the Vedas which confirms the fact that the Soma Yāga is one of the oldest forms of Vedic Sacrifices. The Rig Veda

^{9/5/8} says the three beautiful Goddesses Saraswati, Bharathi, and Ila will attend the Pavamana (purified Soma Juice) Sacrifice. The Rig Veda ^{9/10/11} invites all the Gods to consecration rites of Pavamāna. The Rig Veda 9/10/3 says that the Somas adorn themselves with milk even as Kings on whom eulogies are heaped and that with the seven priests the sacrifice is performed.

Soma in Hindu Mythology

In art, the Soma Deva was depicted as a bull or bird, and sometimes as an embryo, but rarely as an adult human. In Hinduism, the God Soma evolved into a lunar deity, and became associated with the world of the Moon. The Moon is the cup from which the gods drink Soma, and so Soma became identified with the moon god Chandra. A waxing moon meant Soma was recreating himself, ready to be drunk again.

An alternative mythological belief is that Soma's twenty-seven wives were daughters of Daksha. Daksha was aggrieved that his son-in-law paid far too much attention to just one of his wives, Rohini. He cursed Soma to wither and die, but the wives of Soma intervened and the curse was mitigated to that periodic and recurring withering and death enabling Soma to be born again and again after each death as it were. This is symbolized by the periodic waxing and waning of the Moon.

THE HISTORY OF SOMA YAJNYAS

Introduction

The earliest mention of *Soma* and *Soma Yāgas* are to be found in the Rig Veda which is the oldest of the Vedas. Thus there is no doubt that *Soma Yajnyas* are as old as our Vedic history. *Yajnyas* have formed an important part of Vedic worship since the very beginning of Vedic religion and culture. Amongst the various *Yāgas*, the *Soma Yāgas* are one of the oldest and most important groups of *Yāgas*.

Soma Yāgas have been performed by many great men in our ancient history. The results obtained by them are well documented. In the Middle Ages also, there are records referring to the performance of this type of *Yāga*. In the past millennium, particularly in the last three hundred years

or so, we find evidence of the Soma *Yāga* being performed for specific personal reasons as well as for the general welfare of people.

Thus throughout our long history extending over several thousands of years, we find instances of the *Soma Yāgas* being prevalent in various regions of our country. This is one of the great unbroken rituals which have been faithfully followed by our people since the beginning of our civilisation. It is important to note that *Yāgas* are performed according our divine and sacred Scriptures called “The Shruti” which our Rishis have received from divine sources directly and which they have recorded for the benefit of posterity.

Ancient History

Scriptures:

There are numerous references to the *Soma Yaga* in our Scriptures and ancient texts. It is difficult to quote them all due to constraints of time and the scope of this booklet. However, we will mention a few here to convey an idea of the antiquity of this *Yāga*.

There are many references in the Vedas to *Soma* and *Soma Sacrifices*. These have been mentioned in the Chapter “Soma and the Vedas”. It is mentioned in the Srimad Bhāgavatam ^{4.3.3} that having performed the *Vājapeya* Sacrifice, Daksha (confident of the support of Brahma) and insulting those who were skilled in knowledge (and neglecting Lord Shiva) began the best of the sacrifices called *Brhaspati Sava*. The *Vājapeya Sacrifice* is a type of *Soma Yāga*.

The Srimad Bhāgavatam ^{9.14.10-14} mentions about the son of Soma who was of great intelligence and effulgent like gold. It is stated ^{ibid 3.13.38} that Soma is the fluid that procreates life. Rishi Cyavana ^{ibid 9.3.12} tells the Ashvin Kumaras that although they are ineligible to drink soma-rasa in sacrifices, he will give them a full pot of it in return for youth and good looks. There is specific mention ^{ibid 9.13.7} that Nimmi’s body was preserved in fragrant substances at the end of the *Sattra* Sacrifice. This sacrifice is a type of *Soma Yāga* which is of a very long duration.

The Yajur Veda, Taittiriya Samhita Kanda 1, Prapathka 2 deals entirely with the *Soma Yāga*.

Soma Yāgas Performed by Famous Kings & Rishis:

The *Atirātri Yāga* and the *Ukhtya Yaga* were performed by King Dasharath to beget sons.

Maharishi Cyavana performed it for King Sharyāti to get sons

King Janaka performed the *Vājpeya Yāga* at the time of the Swayamvara of Sri Seetha ^{Padma Purana 5/40}.

Sage Angirasa performed a *Sattra* and obtained *osadhis* (herbs).

In ancient times, *Soma* was pressed in almost every temple of the Deva kingdom, using the *Linga* (or *Lingam*), a heavy stone-mill. According to the legends, it was their key weapon in the long conflict with the *Asuras*.

In more recent times, there is evidence of facilities in places like Vijayanagar (earlier Matanga) which produced considerable quantities of *Soma*. Soon *Soma* became an important element in the struggle for power and a potent political instrument in statecraft. In due course valuable evidence like statues and reliefs showing ingredients or the procedure of making were destroyed. Eventually, the recipe was hidden and only known to the highest Dravidian priests in the South.

The Modern History of the Soma Yāga

In the 19th century it was Martin Haug who succeeded in persuading Brahmins in Pune to perform a *Soma-Sacrifice* and allow him observe all the rituals from near by. This was quite unprecedented. He was also permitted to photograph the sacrificial utensils and take them to Europe, something which had never been done before at least openly. Haug was then studying the Aitareya Brahmana, the Vedic text which he was editing and translating. He felt that the close observation of the Soma Yāga would help him to get a better understanding of his subject. Other scholars in his time were only too happy to make use of the collection and the photographs made by Haug while pursuing their studies of Vedic rituals. W. Caland and V. Henry, for instance, added a table of photographs of Haug's collection to their study of the *Agnishtoma*.

In 1969, perhaps after some centuries, a purely non violent *Soma Yāga* was performed at Shivapuri under the supervision of Param Sadguru Shree Gajanan Maharaj.

In 1975, Indologist Fritz Stāl documented in great detail the *Agnicayana Yāga* performed by Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala. The last such *Yāga* had been held in 1956, and the Nambudiris were rightly concerned that the ritual might die out due to non-performance over a long period of time. In any case, no outsider had ever witnessed it. In exchange for a financial support towards the cost of the ritual, the Nambudiris agreed that the *Yāga* could be filmed and recorded. The *Yāga* was performed from 12 to 14 April, 1975. The tradition of Vedic rituals had become quite weak, and without the encouragement and support of Stāl, the ritual would probably not have been performed. In this particular performance, it was necessary to take into account new circumstances not catered for in the traditional rules of the ritual. The ritual was to be filmed, and extensive sound recordings were to be made. The *Yāga* attracted much media attention, and there were strong protests against the killing of sacrificial animals. At the last moment it was decided to use non-sentient alternatives. The publicity generated greater awareness in the public of our ancient and most invaluable *Yāga* traditions. This also encouraged traditional Brahmins to engage themselves again in the performance of major Srauta rituals.

Since the 1980's two persons have been very active in the organisation of the major Vedic rituals, Mr. Selukar Maharaj and Mr. Nana Kale. Both have succeeded in going through the *Gavam-Ayana*

in 1999-2000: this is a sacrificial session (*Sattra*) lasting for a year in which Soma is pressed and offered. The *Jyotistoma/Agnistoma* and the *Pravargya* are recurring elements in this complex ritual.

There is a film which has recorded the Vedic *Pravargya* Ritual performed in Delhi, from December 11-12, 1996. It shows the *Pravargya* as performed in an eleven-day Soma-Sacrifice. This is a *Soma Yāga* in which unlike the *Jyotistoma*, the pressing of Soma is not restricted to one day. In the case of the *Pravargya*, a larger number of pressing days makes no difference.

After the 1975 *Agnicayana*, there have been several more Nambudiri *Śrauta Yajnas*. In 1984, the *Agnishtoma* was performed at Trivandrum. In 1990, the *Agnicayana* was done at Kundoor. In 2003, the *Agnistoma* was performed at Trichur. In 2006, both the *Atirātra* and *Agnishto* were held in the same place. The *Agnishtoma* was performed for the first time in 222 years at Aluva from 25 April till 1 May, 2009. In recent times, two Soma Yāgas were conducted at Bangalore and Nanded.

THE SOMA YĀGA OR YAJNYA

The Classification Of Soma Yāgas

The name 'Soma Yāgas' has been given to this group of ancient and time-honoured Vedic sacrifices because the juice of the soma plant is the main *havis* or oblation offered in these sacrifices. As we have already seen, the Soma plant and the juice are considered divine and a God in its own right. Moreover, Soma is the beloved of all Gods who are ever eager to come to the Soma Sacrifices if invoked properly and partake of the Soma and other oblations. Thus Soma Yāgas are accorded great importance in the Hindu tradition of sacrifices.

From the point of view of the time needed to complete the *yajnya* rituals, Soma Yāgas are divided into four categories as follows:-

1. Ekāha.
2. Ahīn.
3. Sādhyaska.
4. Sattra.

That Soma Yāga which takes one day for completion is called 'Ekāha'. Those that take from 2 to 11 days for completion are termed 'Ahīn' and those that take between 13 and thousands of years for completion are called 'Sattra'. It may be kept in mind that the time-frame mentioned above for completion of the yāgas is the time needed to perform the main yajnya rituals fully. It does not include the time needed for various preparations and preparatory rites which have to be completed before the main yajnya rituals can commence. These include various preparations like nomination of the priests, planning and construction of the facilities, collection of the implements and materials, purificatory rites, and ceremonial extraction of the soma juice.

For instance, in the case of the *Ekāha Soma Yāga*, it takes four days for all the pre-yāga preparations to be completed. Thus the *Ekāha Soma Yāga* takes a total of 5 days from the moment of *sankalpa* or formal resolve to the formal ending of the yāga i.e. four days for preparations and the subsidiary rites and one day for conduct of the main rites. However, in the event, all the actions that are normally done over five days can be completed in one day, then such a Yāga is called 'Sādhyaska'.

The Ahīn Soma Yāga which takes twelve days forms the basis for all other Ahin Soma Yāgas. Similarly, the Sattra Soma Yāga which takes twelve days is the model for all Sattra Soma Yāgas. The Sattra Soma Yāgas are also divided into two groups, namely 'Rātri Sattra' and 'Ayan Sattra'. Of these, those that take between twelve and 100 days are called 'Rātri Sattra' while those that take more 100 days are termed 'Ayan Sattra'.

There are seven types of Ekāha Soma Yāgas as follows:-

1. Agnishtoma.
2. Atyāgnistoma.
3. Ukhthya.
4. Shodasi.
5. Atirātra.
6. Vājpeya.
7. Aptoryāma.

The hymns of the Sāma Veda which eulogise Agni Deva are called Agnishtoma. The Soma Yāga which is concluded with the recital of the Agnishtoma Hymns is called the Agnishtoma Soma Yāga.

In the same manner, the other six Soma Yāgas are named respectively after the six different Sāma Veda Hymns which are sung at the end. *Agnishtoma Soma Yāga* is the model for all the other Ekāha Soma Yāgas which are derived by applying a few variations to the procedure for the Agnishtoma Soma Yāga.

The *Agnishtoma* is the first of the Soma Yāgas. It is spread over five days and needs all the sixteen priests. It is performed annually in the spring season. The first four Soma Yāgas, namely, Agnishtoma, Ukhtya, Shodashi, and Atirātri are also called Jyothistoma Yāgas because in these four Yāgas, the hymns recited are called ‘Jyothi’ or ‘Light’.

Stotras

In the Agnishtoma Yaga 12 stotras are recited. Stotras are hymns of the Sāma Veda which contain laudatory verses in praise of the Gods. In the Ukhtya Soma Yāga, in addition to the 12 verses of the Agnishtoma Soma Yāga, 3 more stotras are recited making a total of 15 verses. In the Shodashi Soma Yāga, in addition to the 15 stotras of the previous Yāga, an additional stotra is recited making a total of 16 stotras. In the Atyāgnishtoma Soma Yāga, the 12 stotras of Agnishtoma are recited followed by the recitation of the single stotra of Shodashi Soma Yaga. Thus the Atyāgnishtoma Soma Yāga has a total of 13 stotras. The number of stotras in the Vājpeya Soma Yaga is 17, in the Atirātri Soma Yāga it is 25 and in the Aptoryāma Soma Yaga, it is 33.

Shastra

As stated earlier, Stotras are hymns of praise of the Gods in the Sāma Veda. Before the Yāga begins, the Gods are praised by recitation of these laudatory hymns. Thereafter, the same Gods are again praised by recitation of the hymns from the Rig Veda. The group of such hymns from the Rig Veda are collectively known as ‘Shastra’.

The Mode of Recitation

As mentioned previously, in the southern half of the Sadomandap is erected the Audumbari which is the thick round wooden pillar of the height of the Yajamāna.

Touching this pillar, facing the north, the west and the east, sit the Priests named Udgātr, the Prastotā, and the Pratihartā in that order. They recite the Stotras in different permutation and combinations. Close to them, in the Sadomandap itself, to the west of the khars named dhīshnya and facing the east, sit the following priests from the north to the south in this order – Achhāvāka, Neshta, Pota, Hotr, Mairāvarun(Pratiprashthātā), and Grāvastut. These seven priests recite hymns from the Rig Veda known as Shastra.

The Stotras are recited first followed by the Shatra. In every Soma Yāga, the number of Stotras and Shastra are equal. But three Rig Veda Hymns are based on one hymn of the Sāma Veda. Hence, the same Rig Veda Hymn is repeated three times in different permutations.

The recitation is begun by the Priest called Prastotā and after every cycle of repetitions, kusha (small stick) is kept in front to facilitate counting as the recitation proceeds forward.

THE YAJNYASHĀLĀ

The Yajnyashālā is the specially built hall or superstructure under which the yajnya is conducted. It provides a degree of privacy for the *yajnya* rituals as well as overhead protection from the sun, wind, dust and rain for the *kundas* or ceremonial fires lit underneath, the materials being used and the people taking part in the *yajnya*. The roof is traditionally made of leaves or thatch supported by poles of wood or bamboo. In our times, *yajnyas* have been performed under structures having a roof of canvass or thick cloth as in *shāmianās*, and even semi-permanent or permanent structures with tiles or concrete roofing have been used.

The *yajnyashāla* has to be large and spacious for conducting the major *yajnyas* such as the Soma Yāgas which involves many different fireplaces, altars and a large number of participants. The process of construction begins with the proper alignment and marking of the *prushtyā* or the central axis which is the east-west line running in the centre of the area earmarked for the *yajnya*. This is a most important line. All the *shālas* or halls, and other major facilities are constructed symmetrically astride the *prushtyā*. It is also the reference line dividing the various sectors and for planning and siting the other facilities. The marking of this line is done either by embedded bricks or white lime powder.

The *Yajnyashāla* consists of two major enclosures called the *Prāgvanshshāla* and the *Mahavedi* which contain most of the facilities required for the *Yāga*. Some other relatively minor facilities are located outside the boundaries of the two enclosures and in two cases, half inside and half outside.

The Prāgvanshshāla

Astride this central axis equally to the north and the south, a large hall is constructed which is called the *prāgvanshshāla*. This Hall is constructed towards the western end of the general area earmarked for the Soma *Yāga* so as to leave the major portion of the area to the east of the *prāgvanshshāla* free for construction of the *mahāvedi* which we shall discuss later. The length as well as breadth of this *shāla* or hall is either 10 or 12 *aratnis*. The *aratni* is the Vedic unit of measurement which is equivalent to the distance from the elbow to the tip of the fingers of the *yajamana*. The *prāgvanshshāla* is also called *prāchīnavanshmandap* or *vimit*.

This hall has four doors, one in each of the four directions. Each door is of the width of two *aratnis*. The roof is covered with dried grass or thatch. The main central bamboo or wooden pole supporting the roof lies directly over the *prushtyā*. . To the east of the western door at a distance of two *aratnis* astride the *prushtyā* is built a round fire-place or fire-altar¹ called the *gārhapatya*. Similarly at a distance of two *aratnis* west of the eastern door and astride the *prushtyā* is built a four-cornered fireplace called *āhavaniya*. In between the *gārhapatya* and the *āhavaniya* is built the *vedi*. To the north of the *gārhapatya* and the *āhavaniya* respectively are built round plinths called *pravanjnīya khar* and *udvāsanīya khar* which are mounds of earth about 3 to 4 fingers in height. These two mud plinths are also termed *dharma khars*. With respect to the *udvāsanīya khar* is built the *ābasadhyāgni* fire-place to the east and in the north-eastern corner is built the *ucchishta khar*. To the south of the *āhavaniya* is the *sabhyāgni* fire-place. To the south of the *āhavaniya* is the *rajasandī* and to the east of the *rajasandī* is the *samādasandī*. These are four-legged platforms.

Close to the southern door but outside the *prāgvanshshāla* are four pegs for tying cows and goats and their young ones. The half-moon shaped fire-altar called the *dakshināgni* is located to the south of the *gārhapatya*. In the south-western corner of the *shāla* is located the *patnishāla* which is enclosed on all sides with bamboo thatch or *kanāt* (canvass/thick cloth sheets). The *prāgvanshshāla* is also enclosed by bamboo thatching. The construction of the *prāgvanshshāla* is done before the commencement of the *yāga*.

The Mahāvedi

The *Mahāvedi* is constructed on the third day of the *Yāga*. From the eastern boundary of

1. Fire altars are mentioned in the Rig Veda. According to the Taittiriya Samhita^{5.2.3} fire altars are made of 21 bricks. According to the Shatapatha Brahmana^{10.4.3.14-20} the altar is made of 396 (360 + 36) *yajusmati* (special) bricks, and of 10,800 *lokamprna* (ordinary) bricks. 10,701 *lokamprna* bricks belong to the *ahavaniya* altar, 78 to the *dhisnya* hearths and 21 to the *grahapatya*. Around the altar are 360 parisrita stones (261 around *ahavaniya*, 78 around *dhisnya*, and 21 around *grahapatya*).

the *prāgvanshshāla* at a distance of 3 *prakrams*, a mark is made on the *prushtya* which is called *antahapātya*. The *prakram* is a unit of vedic measurement used in sacrifices which is equal to two steps of the *yajamāna*. A line is drawn running through the *antahapātya* marking extending fifteen *prakrams* to the north and the same distance to the south of the marking. This line marks the western boundary of the *Mahāvedi*. To the east of the *antahapātya*, at a distance of thirty six *prakrams* (seventy two steps of the *yajamāna*) the marking for the *yupa* is made on the *prushtyā*. Again a north-south line through this marking extending twelve *prakrams* to the north and the same distance to the south. This line marks the eastern boundary of the *Mahāvedi*. When the ends of the two lines running north-south are joined by lines running east-west, the boundaries of the *Mahāvedi* are fully marked. Thus the *Mahāvedi* is divided into the northern and southern sectors. The boundaries of the *Mahāvedi* are also marked on the ground with either bricks or white lime powder.

Within the *Mahāvedi*, at a distance of one and a half *prakrams* east of the *antahapātya*, a long and spacious hall running in the north-south direction called the *sadomandap* or *shadashāla* is built. The total length of the *sadomandap* is 28 *aratnis* extending equally to the north and south of the *prushtyā*. Its width is six *aratnis*. In the centre of the southern portion of the *sadomandap* the *audumbari* is erected. It is a big pole made of *gular* wood which is of the height of the *yajamāna*. In the northern portion of the *sadomandap* six *dhishnya khars* are erected. The *dhishniya khar* is an earth mound which is of four fingers height and 18 fingers radius. Slightly south of the *prushtyā* is the *maitrāvarun dhishnya* and to its north are located the *dhishnya khars* for the priests named *Hota*; *Brāhmanachhamsi*; *Pota*; *Neshta*; and *Acchāvāk*. The *Sadomandap* has doors to the east and the west astride the *prushtyā*.

Along the *prushtyā*, at a distance of 10 *aratnis* east of the *Sadomandap*, a spacious *mandap* called the *havirdānmandap* is constructed symmetrically about the *prushtyā*.

This *mandap* also has doors to the east and the west astride the *prushtya*. In the southern portion of this *mandap*, four holes are dug called *uparav*. The *sadomandap* and the *havirdān mandaps* are also enclosed with bamboo sticks tied with ropes or thatching. From the *yupa* at a distance of three *aratnis* to the south the *uttaravedi* is built which is of four fingers or one hand in height.

To the north of the *sadomandap* at a distance of five *aratnis* is built the *āgnignīya mandap* which is half inside the *Mahāvedi* and half outside it. A *dhishnya* is built inside this *mandap*. To the north of the *āgnignīya* are built in order the facilities called *utkar*, *uvadhyagoha*, *shāmitrashāla*, and *chantval*.

The *stotra* (*Sāmagan*) or the recitation of the *Sāma Veda* and the *Shashtra* (the *Hrucha Pat* or the recitation of the verses of the *Rig Veda*) are two important constituents of the *Somayag*.

THE SOMA YĀGA RITUAL

Introduction

The *Soma Yāga* rituals are not only complicated but very elaborate. It is impossible to mention all the rituals in detail for every type of *Soma Yāga* as it is beyond the scope of this work. We give below the salient aspects of the *Agnishtoma Yaga* which is the basis of all the other *Soma Yāgas*.

The various *mantras* to be recited are highly technical and only the most competent priests have proper knowledge of the *mantras*. The procedures are also very complex and elaborate and require the close supervision of well read and well versed priests. Those who wish to learn more about the detailed rituals and the *mantras* should do so directly from knowledgeable priests who have sufficient experience in performing the *Soma Yāgas*.

Qualifications & Pre Conditions for Performance

The *Soma Yāga* can be performed only by the *dvijas* or twice born, namely, *Brahmins*, *Kshatriys* and *Vaishyās*. There are two contingencies catered for by the Rules in the *Shastras* as follows:-

- A *dvija* who is an *anāhitāgni* or one who is devoid of the sacred fires can perform the *Soma Yāga* in the *vasanta ritu* or the spring season after first performing the ceremony of *agnyādān* according to the procedure prescribed.
- A *dvija* who has performed *agnyādān*, *agnihotra*, *darshpurnamās*, and *chāturmasya yāgas* in their correct time can perform the *Soma Yāga* in the *vasanta ritu*.
- A person whose father or grandfather has not performed the *Soma Yāga* is not eligible for performing this *Yāga*. Similarly, that Brahmin whose father and grandfather have not studied the Vedas or not performed the *Shrauta Haviryajnyas* is not entitled to perform the *Soma Yāga*.

However, the Shastras prescribe certain propitiatory rites to overcome these restrictions. Prior to the commencement of the *Yāga*, the Priests are selected. The nominated priests are duly invited through the priest named Sompravāk. Upon being so invited, the priests present themselves at the appointed time and place.

The Rituals

On the First Day:

At the auspicious time laid down, the *Yajamāna* performs the *yāga-sankalpa* or the formal resolve to perform the said sacrifice. The Priests are then ceremonially welcomed and honoured. The words which pertain to the *Varanmantra Deva* are uttered in a low tone while those pertaining to human beings are uttered in a louder voice. Thereafter, the *Yajamāna* seeks from the Raja the *Devayajan* or the appropriate piece of ground for conducting the *Yāga* by uttering, the words, “Devayajanam me dehi”. If the *Yajamāna* is the Raja himself, he seeks the same from the Priests. On this day the *Prāgvanshāla*, the *Patnishāla*, and the *Vratasrapanāgār* (the place for heating up the milk for the consumption of the *Yajamāna* and his wife) are all erected.

At his home, reciting the mantra “Ayam te yoni”, the Yajamāna warms the *aranis* over the *gārhapatya* and the *āhavaniya* fires. He then extinguishes these two fires in his house, takes up the heated *aranis* and together with his wife goes to the *Devayajan*, enters the *Prāgvanshāla* through the eastern door and touches the centre pole. The various articles for the *Yāga* are also taken to the *Devayajan*. Then the fire created by rubbing the two *aranis* is used by the Adhvaryu to ceremonially light the *gārhapatya* and *āhavaniya* fires in the *Prāgvanshāla*. To the north of the *Prāgvanshāla*, the Yajamana has a hair cut, then his nails are trimmed and he has bath. Except for the hair-cut, the wife also follows the same ritual. Then the *Yajamana* and his wife eat a meal of their choice.

When they are seated in the *Prāgvanshāla*, the *Dikshaniya Ishta* ceremony is performed. The main Deity of this ceremony is Agnāvishnu and the *havis* is *ekādashkapāl purodasha*. After this, the *Yajamana* and his wife are given *dīksha*. As soon as it is announced that the couple have been given *dīksha*, they remain silent till the stars come out. That night, they observe a fast, taking only milk and keep awake the whole night. So ends the first day of the *Agnishtoma Yāga*.

The Second Day:

On the second day, first of all, the *Prāyaniya* or *Ārambhaniya Ishta* ceremony is performed which is the starting ceremony. The main Deities of this *Ishta* are Pathyā Svasti; Agni, Soma; Savita; Aditi; and Agni Svishtkrut. Thereafter at the site called *Uparav*, the ceremonies with regard to Soma begins. The Adhvaryu gives the *Hiranyavati Āhuti* in the *Āhavaniya*, and together with the *Yajamāna* lights it behind the cow called the Somakripani and walking behind the cow, puts gold at the cow’s seventh step and invokes Aditi. The *Yajamana* then makes a *tyāga* or donation of ten things which includes a one year old cow, gold, goats, bull, cart and so on by means of which the God Soma is purchased. Then Lord Soma is ceremonially brought unto the eastern door of the *Prāgvanshāla*. Then the *Ātityeshthi Ceremony* of Soma Raja is performed with due reverence. The Presiding Deity of this ceremony is Sri Vishnu and the *havis* is *navakpāl purodasha*. Thereafter, Lord Soma is carried in a vehicle and taken to the *Rajasandhi* located south of the *āhavaniya* and east of Brahma where Lord Soma is kept. The ghee which is leftover after this ceremony is kept in 4 or 5 small vessels and all the priests as well as the *Yajamāna* touch the ghee in a symbolic representation of an oath not to oppose each other during the *Yāga*. Then all of them holding *kusha* grass in their hands and reciting the appropriate mantra, “amshuramshuste deva somāpyāyatām”,

sprinkle hot water on the *Soma* and perform the *Somāpyāyan*. This is symbolic of satisfaction. Then a ceremony is performed in which the left palm is placed over the right palm placed on the *prastar* as a symbolic gesture *namaskār* called *Nihanva*. The *Somāpyāyan* and the *Nihanva* are performed twice everyday.

The *Pravargya* (heating milk and offering to the Ashvins) and *Upasad* (homage or worship) ceremonies are important features of the *Soma Yāga*. They are performed twice a day at sunrise and sunset. After the *Upasad*, *Somāpyāyan* and *Nihanva* are performed. Thereafter under the leadership of the priest called *Subrahmanya*, Lord Indra is invoked to come and partake of the *Soma*.

The Third Day

After the rituals of *Pravargya*, *Upasad*, *Somāpyāyan*, *Nihanva*, have been duly performed the construction of the *Mahāvedi* is carried out. We have already described the layout of the *Mahāvedi*. In the evening also all the morning rituals, the *Pravargya* and others are performed.

The *adābhyagraha* is performed in which the *adābhyagraha* is filled with curds or milk, three parts of the soma plant are placed on the *graham*, and the mantra *āhuti* of Soma Deva is performed reciting the mantra, “Yat te somādābyam nāma” ^{Taittiriya Samhita 3.3.3}. Then the *amshugraha* ceremony is done. In this ritual, one *graha* full of soma plant is taken according to capacity and placed on the grinding stone, and it is wetted with the *vastivavarī*. Then using a stone called *upānshusavan*, it is struck once making a single dent on the soma plant. The juice is then extracted and is filled in the same container. Then uttering the words, “Prajāpati Svāha”, the *āhuti* of Prajāpati is performed. The *Soma* juice is divided into two lots. The bigger portion is for consumption in the morning and the smaller portion is for the afternoon.

Then follow the rituals called *Mahābhishnav*, *Antaryamgraha*, *Grahagrahanāsādan* which involves the ritual extraction of soma juice, its consecration and the formal invitation to the Gods to partake of it. Thereafter the rituals called *Praspana*, *Bahishpamānstotra*, *Savanīyapashu*, *Dvidevatya*, *Shukrāmanthi*, *Hritugraha*, *Indrāgnagrahagrahana*, *Ājyashastra*, *Indrāgnagraha*, *Vaishvadevahrahagrahan*, *Prathama Ājyastotra*, *Prauga Shastra*, *Vashvadevagraha*, *Ukhtya Grahan*, *Dvitiya-Trutiya-Chaturtha Ājyastotra*, *Maitrāvarun*, *Brāhamanāchhamsi*, *Achhāvāk*

Shastra, Maitrāvarun, Indrāgnagraha which are part of the first group of yajnya rituals classified under the heading *Prathama Savan*.

All these rituals are elaborate and should be done under expert guidance. There are many other rituals performed over the fourth and final days which are not only complicated but very elaborate and highly technical. It is beyond the scope of this work. Hence we shall only mention the names of these rituals. Interested readers are advised to study the same from the relevant texts and only under the guidance of expert priests or scholars of our Vedic traditions.

The Fourth & Fifth Days

Over the fourth and final days the following rituals are performed:-

1. ***Mādhyandina Savan*** which consists of the following rituals: Somābhishan, Grahagrahana, Prasarpana, Mādhandin Pavmāna Stotra, Dadhidhrma Orachār, Savaniya Purodāshayāga, Shukrāmanth Prachār, Hotrakachamasa Prachār, Savanmukhabhaksha, Dakshina Homa, Vibhāg, Dān, Vaishvakarman Homa, Marutvatīyayāga, Graha Grahana, Shastra Graha Orachār, Mndra Graha Grahana, Prushtastotra, Nishkevalyashastra, Māhendragraha Prachār, Atigrāhyagraha Prachār, Ukhtyagraha Prachār, Prushta Stotra and Shastra (three each).
2. ***Trutiya Savan*** which consists of the following rituals: Āditya Graha Prachār, Abhishava, Grahagrahana, Prasarpana, Ārbhavapavamānastotra, Savaniya Havi Prachār, Hotrakachamasa Prachār, Sāvitra Graha Prachar, Vaishvadevagraha Grahana, Vaishvadeva Shastra, Vaishvadevagraha Prachār, Sowmya Charu, Pātnīvatagraha Prachār, Chamsagrahana, Agnishtoma Stotra, Agnimāruta, Shastra Chamasa Prachār.
3. ***The Yajnyapruchoha*** which consists of the following concluding rituals: Anuyājādi, Hāriyojana Prachār, Avabrutheshti, Udayanīyeshti, Anubandhyāyāga, Devikāhavi, and Udavasānīyeshti.

We shall describe the final ritual called *Udayanīyeshti* (Samāpanīya) briefly as a matter of interest. After the *Devikāhavi*, the *Udayanīyeshti* is performed at the *Shālāmukhiya* Agni. This is performed

in the same manner as the *Prāyanīyeshṭi* ritual. In the previously established *charupātra*, *charu* (milk rice porridge) is cooked. The principal Gods are Agni, Soma, Savita, and Pathyāsvasti in that order. After the *Udayanīya* is over, the *Anubandhyāyāga* is performed. The main Deity of this ritual is Mitravārun and the *havis* is *āmiksha*. This is followed by five *devikā āhutis* and one *āhuti* of *dvādasha purodāsha*, to the family Deity. Thereafter, the *charu* cooked earlier, and kept in the four *pātras*, are offered as four different *āhutis* to Anumati, Rāka, Sinīvāli and Kruha respectively. After the hair cut of the *Yajamāna*, the agnis are merged with the *aranis*. Returning home, the domestic fires are again lit by rubbing the *aranis* together and the ritual of *Udvāsanīya Ishta* (Devajana Tyāga) is performed. The main Deity of this ritual is Agni Deva and the *havis* is *Kapāl Purodāsha*. Alternatively, instead of this *Ishta*, the *Havi Vishnu Mantra* can be recited while offering one *āhuti* of the *ājya* in the *āvahaniya* fire. This concludes the *Agnishtoma Yāga*.

THE SCIENTIFIC ASPECTS OF SOMAYAGA

Introduction

A proper study of Hindu Religion and Philosophy would show that our Rishis knew a great deal of science in the modern sense of the term. The theory that the Universe evolved out of nothing as propounded in Sāṅkhya as well as the Upanishads bears close resemblance to the current ‘big bang’ scientific theory on the origin of the universe. The ancient idea of the great “elements,” Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Ether may be different from the elements of modern science; but the ancients conceived of them as *pancha bhutas* or the five great forms of life which enter into the constitution of all things in the world. This is not far fetched or unscientific.

Although, the existence of ether has been disproved by science, the idea of an all pervading background medium has not. The residual radiation from the ‘big bang’, which currently pervades the entire universe, has been detected. The ancient Rishis of India evolved many systems designed to promote man’s harmony with all the forces of nature. The concept of *yajnya* was one of them. Today there is a growing body of scientific evidence which indicates that *yajnyas* yield various tangible benefits for man and the environment around him.

Global Consciousness

The Global Consciousness Project (GCP) is an international effort involving researchers from several institutions and countries. It designed to find out whether the construct of interconnected human consciousness can be scientifically validated through objective measurement. The project has been built up on the basis of excellent experiments conducted over the past 35 years at a number of laboratories. These experiments have shown human consciousness interacts with REGs¹ (random event generators) apparently "causing" them to produce non-random patterns.

The experimental results clearly show that a broader examination of this phenomenon is warranted. In recent work, prior to the Global Consciousness Project, an array of REG¹ devices in Europe and the US showed non-random activity during widely shared experiences of deeply engaging events. For example, the funeral ceremonies for Princess Diana, and the international Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, created moments of strong shared emotions and a coherence of consciousness that appeared to be correlated with structure in the otherwise random data. In the fully developed project, a world-spanning array of labile REG detectors is connected to computers running software to collect data and send it to a central server via the Internet. This network is designed to

1. REGs or Random Event Generators are electronic devices which generate quantum-indeterminate electronic noise providing high-quality random sequences. To eliminate biases of the mean that might arise from such environmental stresses as temperature changes, electromagnetic fields, or component aging, an exclusive or (XOR) mask is applied to the digital data stream. Thus if a non-random pattern is observed i.e. a deliberate sequence, it can be inferred that there is some external effect causing it.

document and display any subtle, but direct effects of our collective consciousness reacting to global events. The research hypothesis predicts the appearance of coherence and structure in the globally distributed data collected during major events that engage the world population.

In this context, a scientific study¹ was conducted in Bangalore to determine the effects of *Aptoryāma Yaga*. Effect on collective consciousness was measured using REG techniques. The effect on the environment was determined by analysing the yaga ash and also measuring the bacterial counts at various distances from the

centre of the *Yāga*. The results were as follows:-

1. The effect " collective consciousness' , the chanting of mantras, the extraction of soma juice, the oblations etc and the presence of people gathered sufficient strength made the random sequence non-random on the day .There was significant difference in levels of consciousness between day and day nine which had lots of Yāga activities.
2. Attitudinal surveys indicated a positive change for the better. It showed that people attend Yāgas for spiritual reasons and their lives are affected by spiritual activities like Yāgas.
3. Analysis of the homa ash showed no bacteria or bacterial activity while there was an increase in the counts of air-borne bacteria at various distances.
As the Yāga progressed there was increase in bacterial counts.

This is encouraging evidence that *Yāgas* have an effect on human consciousness and the environment. Similar studies on *Agnihotra* suggest positive effects on agriculture and human health. Growing evidence of the positive benefits of *Yāgas* may be behind the efforts to revive our age-old tradition of *Yāgas* for human and world welfare.

1. Surendra

Rawat, under the guidance of Dr. H. R. Nagendra And Dr. Ram Chandra Bhatt Towards the partial fulfillment of Master's Degree in Yogic Sciences, Vivekananda Yoga Mahavidyapeetham

The Unique Nature of Yajnyas

According to Prof. Fritz Staal, a Vedic ritual is very different from a health cure, a psychoanalyst session, an anthropological meeting or a religious service. He maintains that a Vedic ritual follows its own principles and has a life of its own. He points out that a Vedic ritual requires very detailed and specific knowledge. He estimates that the extent of specialised knowledge needed to put the sacrificial altar together ritually is on a par with the extent of technical knowledge required to build an aeroplane. 'The bird shaped altar is in fact a kind of aeroplane...' says Stall 'only it takes off in a different way...' Scientific evaluations were also made on the changes occurred on physical and metaphysical levels on the individuals who performed the ritual, by experts from Canada and in association with Prague Institute of Czechoslovakia. Kirillian photography was also undertaken by Mrs. Rose Mary Steel from London to record aura or the electro-magnetic radiation around the

human organism and hundreds of pictures of not only the performers but also of the visiting people and of their finger tips were taken. The results show that Vedic rituals have a definite and demonstrable effect on people and the surroundings at the time of their performance.

At the end of any Vedic ritual the final oblation is called the *purna āhuti* or *the offering of the complete oblation* into fire. And then a rain occurs. It used to rain every time when the ritual is totally offered as an oblation into fire at the conclusion of such a ritual. The Illustrated Weekly of India ^{May 27, 1990} reported an incident as follows, “ The association between the *yajna* and rain is indelible. Did it rain when a *purna āhuti* was performed at the end of a Yāga on, May 9, 1990? It did...’

The Healing Power of Agnihotra Homa

Agnihotra is a Vedic sacrifice enjoined on every householder to be performed daily. It is an expedient for purification through the agency of element 'Fire'. At precisely local sunrise & sunset timings, two pinchfuls of uncooked rice grains smeared with few drops of cow's ghee are offered into a specially prepared Fire. The Fire is prepared in a semi pyramid shaped copper - vessel. While offering the two portions into the Fire, two simple Vedic mantras are chanted.

The positive effects of *Agnihotra* are remarkable and experienced first-hand by many people all over the world. It is the outcome of the simultaneous operation of many subtle scientific principles, such as, the effects of the chanting of specific sounds on the atmosphere and mind, energies emanating from geometrically perfect, special shape of pyramid, purifying effect of burning of medicinal ingredients, effects of biorhythms etc. In the process of *Agnihotra* these factors are harnessed to give rise to an unparalleled purifying and healing phenomenon.

There are many documented instances in which *agnihotra homa* has cured people of many chronic and difficult to cure diseases. A 63 years old man in Mexico was suffering from heart disease, rheumatism, bone pain and migraine. He was unable to breathe properly or walk. After *homa* therapy, there was a big improvement in his condition. He was able to sleep well and he could walk easily. A nine year old boy in Columbia, South America was cured of asthma by taking the ash from an *agnihotra* sacrifice. These are written testimonials from ordinary people. There are many

such documented experiences in India as well as in other countries. There is no doubt that the smoke of the Homa, the ash and the mantras are beneficial to man's spiritual as well as body health.

It has been determined that *Agnihotra Homa* is performed five gases are created released into the air, namely, propylene, ethylene, formaldehyde, acetylene, and brutopopiolanctone at exactly the time the sun is said to rise or set. It is the fifth gas that sucks the pollution from the Atmosphere. All pollutants become neutralized. The residue also neutralizes all artificial elements and nuclear wastes. Any artificial element is deadly to the natural elements. They do not fit into the pattern of nature. . Nuclear waste can now be destroyed – it does not fit. It can be neutralized alone with other artificial elements. An Austrian who does Agnihotra daily has testified that nuclear material on his farm were rendered safe by means of Homas ^{Experience with Agnihotra and Radioactivity Karin Heschl (Austria)}.

If the Agnihotra can be so beneficial, the major Yāgas which are much more powerful will Yield much more benefits to a larger section of society. In scientific experiments performed under rigorous conditions, it has been demonstrated that the of all the languages in the world, Sanskrit is the only language which produced demonstrable improvement in various body parameters like pulse, heart beats, BP, EEG waves and so on in persons who had no knowledge of the language they were made to listen to. It has been demonstrated time and again that Sanskrit mantras have a power of their own beyond their literal meanings.

CONCLUSION

The Path of Knowledge is not easy for the common man. It is fraught with grave consequences in the event of a defect or failure in its practice. On the other hand the Path of Karma is easier for most of us. There is no set back if we fail at anytime. We can always start from the same point and progress further. *Yajnyas* or *Yāgas* are Karmas performed as an act of worship of the Gods thanking them for their grace and kindness and invoking their help for our well being and the welfare of our Planet. *Yajnyas* are tangible concepts which we can see and observe. The results of *Yajnyas* are sure to follow if properly performed.

There is a gradual revival of interest in our Vedic traditions both in India and abroad because of the realisation of its inherent worth. Since the past fifty years or so, there has been steadily increasing

stream of evidence in favour of the spiritual, material and health benefits of *Yajnyas* and other Vedic traditions. The experience of people has been corroborated by scientific experiments and tests.

The *Yāgas* cannot be performed unless the Priests are there to assist the *Yajamāna*. The performance of *Yāga* requires great skills, technical knowledge and expertise. Priests cannot be churned out like graduates and post-graduates from a University in 3 to 5 years time. It requires a lifetime of study of the Scriptures and Related Texts from a very young age under the Gurukula System. This process of learning, contemplation and practice will never end as far the Vaidiks are concerned. Further, it is not just knowledge acquired through studies and expertise through practice that makes for a Vaidik. There is much more to it than knowledge and expertise alone. Along with study and practice, a Vaidik has to lead a life of austerity and spiritual discipline according to the enjoined rules. As a Vaidik, you have to come from a family of Priests or Vaidiks. Your father and his father and grandfather and back into time as far as anyone can remember, should have all been traditional Vaidiks. You should be steeped in the Vaidik way of life. It should be a part of your genes, if you can ever hope to master the Vedas and the other Sacred Texts and perform all the rituals with spiritual authority. Where do you get such continuous links? Once broken, a family of Vaidiks is lost forever. It is then a big loss for all of us, for our faith, our way of life and our Sanātana Dharma.

If the priceless spiritual heritage of India is to be preserved for prosperity, we must ensure that Vaidiks also survive and prosper along with the rest of us. If the future of Vaidiks is bleak, a Priest may hesitate before committing his son irrevocably to the Vaidik way of life. Many traditional Vaidik families have already lost their sons to other professions which have offered more prestige and greater financial rewards. The trend is alarming indeed. If the Vaidiks become extinct, it will signal the end of our Vedic traditions. We must act before it is too late. We must be united in our resolve.

What does a Vaidik need? Like the rest of us, he is also entitled to economic security, due honour, respect and a demand for his services. The Vaidik way of life must carry sufficient prestige and compensation so that no family of traditional priests will ever have second thoughts on continuing their ancient and time honoured way of life. It is the duty of the rest of the Society to provide for these reasonable needs of every Vaidik.

We must revive the Vedic traditions wherever we live in our respective circle of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. We must encourage such initiatives taken by anyone whether we know that person or not. We must learn all about our Vedic traditions. We must teach as much as we know to others and motivate them to learn more and more. We must perform *Yajnyas* and *Yagas* and other Vedic rituals. We must encourage others to do likewise. We must attend as many *Yajnyas* or *Yāgas* performed by others as far as possible and make it a success. We must honour our Priests on every occasion. We must pay them adequate remuneration. We must create or support Trusts, Charitable Institutions, and other Organisations which will promote Vedic traditions, *Gurukulas* and take concrete measures to ensure the economic well being of Vaidiks. These are some of the steps; we must think of and put into action at the earliest.

This Booklet is a humble effort to give a basic and elementary introduction to the vast subject of Vedic *Yajnyas* and *Yāgas*.