

The Vedic Sacrifice in Transcultural Public Spheres

Nowadays, traditional performances are frequently endangered both in Asia and in the “Western World”. Nevertheless, simultaneously, such practices turn out to be more and more significant for people and countries concerned. They become realized as “one’s own tradition” and further as cultural heritage which has to be maintained, whereby revitalization practices vastly differ.

In my project I will focus on the Vedic sacrifice, as one example for maintaining and reviving tradition. Especially the *homa*-sacrifice, an Indian ritual, that is characterized by “the act of making an oblation to the *devas* or gods by casting clarified butter into the fire (Monier-Williams 1999: 1306)”, will be considered here. It is an excellent example that can be traced back to the early stages of Vedic religion and – for this study even more important – still persists today. Further, the contemporary *homa*-sacrifice is not only performed throughout the Indian subcontinent, but can be found all over the “Western World”¹ as well.

Nowadays, *homa*-sacrifices can frequently be observed throughout the Indian subcontinent. Whereas it is difficult to give a funded statement about the use of those rituals in former times, it is obvious that today simple procedures, which are primarily connected with the traditional “domestic” rituals (*grhya*-rites), are performed comparatively often. The more complicated ritual acts instead, that are embedded in the classical corpus of the “public” rites (*śrauta*-rites), are rare, albeit research during the last decades mainly focused on these.² Simpler performances, which are carried out today for individual purposes as well as for joint reasons, are often left unnoticed. In this context different *homa*-sacrifices concerning health (*āyusyahoma*, *dhanvantarihoma*), prosperity and wealth (*gaṇapatihoma*, *lakṣmikuberahoma*, *mahālakṣmihoma*), the removal of for acquiring knowledge and wisdom (*sarasvatihoma*) have to be mentioned.³ Those shape the contemporary cultural, religious and social life in India, and even affect the political scenery, where *homa*-sacrifices are organized as religious happenings on behalf of various parties often emphasizing a welfare or charity purpose. Further, *homa*-sacrifices are performed on the Indian subcontinent for Indian people living abroad. End of the last century, an elaborate system developed which enables emigrants to

¹ When I talk about the “Western World” I will refer in my work especially to the European states.

² Staal, Frits (Ed.): *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press.

³ These ten forms of *homa*-sacrifices represent just a small variety of traditional *homa*-practices. But those seem to be of a major interest today.

practice their religious traditions even away from home. An increasing number of internet presences emerged, which offer sacrificial services, combined in individual packages, which promise to overcome difficulties in life.⁴ Now, various websites provide individual enquiries or organize occasionally collective sacrificial events. If a client has chosen a particular ritual, an expert performs it in his name in a local temple, whereas the propitiatory gift (*prasāda*) is delivered to the customer's home by airmail. To get a proof of the performance, it is frequently possible to order video material or photographs of the event.

Simultaneously, an increasing practice of *homa*-sacrifices outside the Indian subcontinent can be observed. During the last decades, the number of Hindu temples outside India rapidly increased. They became an important meeting point for an ethnic and religious minority, and formed an oasis of Indian culture in an alien environment. Here *homa*-sacrifices are performed for individual reasons as well as to establish a corporate feeling of an Indian community. At the same time several formerly merely Indian organizations⁵ expanded their branches to the "Western World" and influenced Indian people living in the diaspora as well as various parts of the "Western Society". As a result even these people become attached to the practice of *homa*-sacrifices, which are here mainly performed as public events, whereby charity and welfare purposes are often emphasized again.

Considering these aspects, it becomes obvious that the *homa*-sacrifice is an excellent example of "religion on stage", where a formerly socially limited small-scale happening is transferred into a global event influenced by migration aspects as well as by means of numerous new media and technologies. Therefore, one of the main questions I want to investigate is: "How do new media and technologies change form and content of the *homa*-sacrifice, and bring it from a socially limited context (family, clan, caste, etc.) to new public spheres (printed media, television, video, internet, festivals, "Western World", etc.)? On one hand it is obvious that there is a tendency to keep the tradition of performing *homa*-sacrifices alive, but on the other hand there is an evident change in the practice as well as in the intention going on that needs to be considered from a scientific point of view.

⁴ Just to mention a few references, there is www.hindupurohit.com, www.kalighatonline.com, www.malaimandir.org, www.pariharam.com, www.prarthana.com, www.saranam.com or www.yagnya.com.

⁵ Here organizations as Divine Life Society, International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness (ISKCON), Ramakrishna Order or Transcendental Meditation (TM) have to be mentioned.