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A Brief History of Indian Religious Ritual and Resource Consumption

Was there an Environmental Ethic?

In order to investigate the history of the relationship between ritual practice in India and environmental changes, this article will examine two classical accounts of ritual practice and provide notes from field studies in the last three decades on similar rituals. The first part will examine a late first millennium text that assigns values to prescribed payments from much older texts. The second will examine certain conflicts in ritual performance seen in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, which reveal tensions and modifications in the rituals due to environmental change. The third part will provide a description of an animal sacrifice performed in 1995 and note actual payments from account ledgers gathered in the last three decades. A few conclusions on the nature of ritual and environmental change will close the article.

KEYWORDS: Vedic ritual—environmental change—*Mahābhārata*—India—tradition and modernization

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, I found myself in Indore, India, on a blistering hot summer day, standing with hands on knees, leaning forward over the shoulder of my teacher from Madras, Agnihotram Ramanuja Tatachariar, who was seated with legs crossed on a straw mat (*chatai*).¹ We were at the periphery of a large rectangular sacrificial arena, demarcated by a broad chalk line above which hung a thin, loosely strung knee-high rope held up at intervals by sticks sunk in the ground. We were observing the performance of a Vedic sacrificial (*śrauta*) ritual of unusual complexity. Not only were seasoned ritualists such as Agnihotram serving as guides and choreographers, but Sanskrit texts were scattered throughout the ritual arena and were regularly consulted. The primary Sanskrit text referred to here was a handbook composed in the fourteenth century by a South Indian scholar named Āṇḍapillai, and was based on two millennia of prior textual models of different genres.² The manuscript, a copy dating to the eighteenth or nineteenth century, was written in the Grantha script (slightly expanded from Tamil), and was difficult to read even in bright sunlight. This text formed the basis for the Sanskrit dialogue, mantra recitation, and stage instructions that allowed the ritual to flow more or less unimpeded. Nearly every aspect of this sacrifice had been studied and prescribed by two millennia of ritualists through regular processes of rewriting and augmentation, as well as through oral transmission that introduced a steady accretion of regional and lineage differences. In spite of approximately three millennia of textuality and performative adaptations (or perhaps because of it), the sacrificial arena was buzzing with activity of different kinds. Some people were chanting ritually reorganized parts of Vedic hymns, some were offering various substances into fires (rice flour balls, clarified butter, and soma, a pressed local succulent used as a substitute for the long lost original), some were calling out Sanskrit instructions, some were preparing for ritual actions to be performed a few minutes or a few hours later, some were milling around or speaking with others, and some were at rest, napping or drinking tea. And a few of the senior ritualists in attendance were studying the texts, both printed books and palm leaf or paper manuscripts. Among the senior ritual authorities was Agnihotram, waving his right hand as if conducting an orchestra, eyes intently locked onto a manuscript, scanning it for a slip of evidence to support his position in a debate with another learned pandit on a point of ritual minutiae.

The image (and reputation) of Vedic ritual as little more than tightly scripted revivalist choreography that is barely understood by those who practice it has proven to be more wrong than it is right. It has also been characterized as “controlled chaos,” in J. C. HEESTERMAN’S (1993, 63) inimitable phrase.³ Although Heesterman was referring to the threat of violence that he saw at the root of Vedic ritual, in the present instance the chaos, barely under wraps, was much more prosaic. There was simply a great deal to attend to; it was full time work, plus considerable overtime, for more than a week for a highly trained coterie of ritualists,⁴ not including the countless hours and years that went into the unique education and on the job training that preceded it. Among the assignments of the Vedic ritualists is the arrangement of resources to be used in the sacrifice. Included here are vegetarian and grain ingredients for offerings into various fires, construction materials including special mortar for bricks, decorations for the arena, animals for sacrifice (if any), wood to be carved into various special implements (they cannot be used in two separate sacrifices), material for presenting to the ritualists as payment, food and accommodation for the staff and their guests, and countless incidental expenses. In the end it becomes very expensive; in fact, one of the oft-cited reasons for the decline of Vedic ritual in India as early as the first millennium BCE is because very few people could afford it. One of the features in managing these resources was resorting to substitution if for some reason the original item were unavailable or otherwise impossible to use. The change in resource utilization within Vedic sacrificial ritual was, then, due not only to massive culture change, but because of the unavailability or scarcity of prescribed substances. This, in turn, was due not only to changing patterns of wealth and patronage, and the geographic redistribution of communities that performed these rituals (for example, their movement from the north into the southern part of the subcontinent from about 500 BCE to about 1000 CE), but to environmental change as well. Indeed, it is certain that the debate among presiding ritualists in the mid-1980s, for which Agnihotram was seeking guidance in his old manuscript, was over the issue of substitution, of juxtaposing the ancient and classical texts with the demands of contemporary performance. As a partial agent of such change, we shall inquire into the possibility of the introduction and evolution of an environmental ethic.

I will discuss two examples and a general set of performance issues that illustrate this change, drawn from historical sources in India, including Vedic ritual texts, the great Indian epic or *Mahābhārata*, and modern ritual performances in India. In the process, I will examine the relationship between contested ethical standards and expenditure in ritual performance, inquire into the question of how certain ritual performances were impacted by environmental change in classical and modern periods, and identify what these changes were. I will first inquire into some of the prescribed expenses involved in Vedic ritual performance and certain symbolic values attached to them. The primary source for this will be a brief late first millennium CE text on monetary values that serve as substitutes in the remuneration of Vedic ritual priests. The second example will draw from the highly mythicized description of the royal horse sacrifice (*āsvamedha*) in the *Mahābhārata*, attend-

ing particularly to the interaction between ethical dilemmas and environmental pressures. In addressing this, we will explore the ecologically conservative ethics of generosity and hospitality that play a surprising role in the *Mahābhārata*'s discussion of this sacrifice. Then I will return to the modern rituals in order to delineate some of the general features of change under the pressures of modernization, including environmental change, providing an account of a Vedic animal sacrifice I observed in 1995. Finally I will conclude with a few words on the virtues of consumption, attempting not to indulge very heavily in backreading into the history of ritual performance and textuality in India.

THE *MŪLYĀDHYĀYAPARISĪṢṬA*

This brief text is of undetermined date and authorship, but surely dates to the last few centuries of the first millennium CE. It is a supplement (*pariśiṣṭa*), not far from a partial field report, to an important Sanskrit prescriptive text of approximately the third century BCE called the *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra*.⁵ The latter text, adeptly if often elliptically, prescribes rules for the performance of a large number of Vedic rituals, and has been in constant use in North India for more than two thousand years. However, due to the occasional lack of textual precision and the unrealistic nature of many of the prescriptions, eighteen supplementary treatises commenting on various parts of it were composed during the next thousand years or so (VĀRE n.d., probably published in the 1920s). The present text addresses the problem of exorbitant fees prescribed to be paid to the ritualists by the chief patron (*yajamāna*) of the Vedic sacrifices (VĀRE n.d., 212–15). For example, the prescribed fee to all the ritualists combined for an exotic soma sacrifice called *vājapeya*⁶ comes to 1,700 cows, 17 chariots with horses, 17 additional horses, 17 animals on which men may ride (presumably additional horses or donkeys), 17 slave girls, 17 gold coins (*niṣka*), 17 draught oxen, 17 goats and ewes, and 17 elephants. This was clearly beyond the means of all but the wealthiest patrons even 2500 or 3000 years ago when the population of India was much less and presumably the ratio of animals to humans was much greater. In fact, it is fair to ask whether this fee was ever actually paid in full or whether it is inscribed in the texts because of the requirements of the ritual of numerological symmetry.

Nevertheless, it was occasionally performed, so the ritualists of the Kātyāyana performative tradition felt compelled to set monetary equivalents for these and other material gifts. The amounts were all in denominations of copper coins (*paṇa*), which was 1/16 of a gold coin (*kārṣāpaṇa*). For example, a cloth or garment was fixed at 1 *paṇa*, a chariot at 6, a goat at 8, a sheep at 12, a firstborn cow at 20, a slave girl at 50, a milk cow at 160, a horse at 240, and an elephant at 500 (for the complete list see SMITH 1988, 71–72). Thus, under these circumstances a *vājapeya*, which featured a chariot race with 17 chariots (that the sacrificer, according to ritual injunction, would inevitably win) was still an expensive proposition. At a Vājapeya performed in Pune in 1955 the total of 116 articles to be given to each of the 17 officiants (one hundred cows plus sixteen other items) was replaced with

116 rupees—a sharp reduction. At a Vājapeya I observed in Gujarat in 1993, the fee was 75 rupees per cow, plus reduced amounts for the remaining items.⁷ At the very least this reflects the dramatically shifted balance of nature and the increased importance of symbolic capital, such as money, over the actual good of life. The end result was that many of the most crucial ritual items were reduced to secondary status in the interest of rigorous maintenance of both the ritual structure and the personal purity of the participants, both of which were strongly emphasized in the classical texts. The most unvarying and sustained elements of the sacrifice, then, became the performance itself (howsoever compromised), the orderly recitation of the mantras, and the emphasis on personal purity. Even if all else failed, which is to say if the required offering materials were unavailable, the most auspicious wood for carving the utensils was nowhere to be found, local sentiment forbade the sacrifice of animals, or even if the proper number of qualified people to fulfill the various officiating duties could not be rounded up, the sacrifice was still usually performed. This is an instance of the veracity of Humphrey and Laidlaw’s observation that what is most important is ritual intent, and that as a result this ritual threatens to implode into messiness.⁸ The question for us here, then, is how much of this transformation is driven by environmental exigency? And to what extent was this a factor in the reevaluation of ritual practice? The next sections might shed additional light on this possibility.

THE HORSE SACRIFICE IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

The fourteenth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the great Indian epic, is called the “book of the horse sacrifice” (*Āśvamedhika-parvan*). Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest and most pensive of the five victorious Pāṇḍava brothers in the disastrous war that had just concluded, was required by custom to legitimate his claim to the throne by performing a massive and massively expensive horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*).⁹ This complicated year-long sacrifice required raising a small but powerful army, consisting of four hundred warriors, whose mission was to challenge any ruler onto whose land the horse, free to wander at will, encroached. It was only after this year-long ritual of conquest that the horse and hundreds of other animals were sacrificed. The personnel involved in this great sacrifice could easily number close to a thousand. And this was just the beginning of Yudhiṣṭhira’s expenses. In addition to the sacrifice, he also had a kingdom to look after. However, the Pāṇḍavas’ treasury, not to mention its morale, had been depleted by the demands of the war, as the once proud kingdom lay in ruins. But as luck would have it, Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers learned of a hoard of gold hidden in the Himalayas. Yudhiṣṭhira quickly organized an expedition under the leadership of his brother Arjuna, the most accomplished warrior among the Pāṇḍavas, to search for it and bring it back to the capital city, Hastināpura (about 105 km north of present-day Delhi). The expedition was an extraordinary success, enabling the Pāṇḍavas to replenish their treasury and Yudhiṣṭhira to undertake the horse sacrifice. Under the leadership of Arjuna, the army of four hundred followed the sacrificial horse through all of

India, on a remarkable journey, dispatching all the other kingdoms of the subcontinent. Although the epic describes incalculable mayhem, adventure, and heroism on all sides in this juggernaut, some involving serious threats to Arjuna's mission, none of the defeated kings were killed. Instead, they were coerced to come to Hastināpura to attend the denouement of the horse sacrifice, in this way agreeing to their subjection and the overlordship of Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍava kingdom.

All of this, of course, lay in the realm of legend and mythology dating from approximately the second century BCE to the second century CE. Historically, no such kingdom existed even if recent credible theorizing demonstrates that the epic war reflected or was in part based on actual historical events.¹⁰ What we must examine here, however, in the briefest manner, is the *Mahābhārata's* description of the performance of the sacrifice and its surprising and ambiguous conclusion, because they shed considerable light on resource consumption and ethical dilemmas associated with it at the time.

The *Mahābhārata* states in several places that the *āśvamedha* was performed by the most capable *ritual* officiants available in full compliance with textual injunction (which, in the case of this sacrifice, would be very difficult). Such statements are more than formality, or lip service to the normativity that one expects from a text that loudly proclaims its orthodoxy; indeed, the final text, regardless of the internal anxieties and reinscriptions that undoubtedly contributed to the final production of the epic, is deeply Brahmanical, containing long sections that have spawned and reinforced certain aspects of orthodox Hindu thought. Nevertheless, assertions of such unflinching orthodoxy are reached uneasily, as nearly every one of its thousands of pages is marked with dissension, conflict, and moral compromises that strike at the heart of this orthodoxy.¹¹

Among the most colorfully written chapters in the *Āśvamedhika-parvan* are two that depict the extravagance of the arrangements for the sacrifice. These chapters tell of an entire city constructed at the site of the sacrifice to house the direct participants, the considerable support staff, and the invited guests, including the kings from far-flung lands and hundreds of thousands of highly educated Brahmans. Even if this settlement, imagined as a semi-rural bucolic idyll, was intended to be short-lived, its opulence was depicted as unbounded. *Mahābhārata* 14.87.1–16 says the following:

At the commencement of the sacrifice, many eloquent disputants articulated their logic, wishing to defeat each other. Joy of the Kurus, the kings observed that this sacrifice, organized by Bhīma, adhered to the highest standards, as if it were for the king of the gods himself. They saw its golden archways, and many couches, seats, and luxury items ornamented with gems. These princes saw water and storage pots, eating vessels, and saucepans with handles, lids, and covers, none of them not made of gold. They saw sacrificial posts carved from wood and ornamented with gold, as described in the learned texts. These wonderfully beautiful posts were arranged in the prescribed way and at the proper time. Lord, these kings saw many animals born on land and in water, all brought together there. They saw cows and buffalos, including females and those put

out to pasture, aquatic animals, predatory animals, birds, those born from embryos, egg-born creatures, sweat-born creatures, those produced from digging the earth, and animals from the mountains, shores, and forests. Seeing the entire sacrificial area decked out gaily with animals, herds of cattle, and grain, the princes entered into a state of complete amazement. A rich setting of much fine, delicate food was prepared for the Brahmans and commoners. After a hundred thousand Brahmans had completed their meal, drums were beaten over and over, like thunder in the clouds. This thundering was repeated day after day. In this way the sacrifice of the wise Dharmarāja [Yudhiṣṭhira] proceeded. The people saw gifts of food comparable to mountains, O king, rivulets of yogurt and lakes of melted ghee. O king, at the great sacrifice of that king, the entirety of Jambūdvīpa [India], including its many townships was seen gathered in one place. People from thousands of community backgrounds came, bringing wealth, O bull of the Bharatas. Kings decked out in garlands and bright, well-polished earrings served the foremost of the twice-born by the hundreds and thousands. The men who were their attendants also gave these Brahmans various kinds of food and drink that were worthy of being consumed by these kings.¹²

This idealized opulence, in which nature itself was transformed by the promise of the sacrifice (or by the confirmation of Yudhiṣṭhira's kingship), is followed by a brief description of the perfection of the performance itself and passing references to a few of its most noteworthy rites.¹³ This grandeur and magnificence, however, is soon belied by a detailed narration of a miraculous event at the close of the sacrifice: a massive half gold mongoose with a voice booming through the heavens, akin to that of Indra, the king of the gods, enters the sacrificial arena and condemns the performance itself for its wastefulness, narrating a counter example of frugality, virtue, and soteriological attainment. It was the polar opposite of the *asvamedha* in the realm of dharma.

Briefly, the story is as follows: The mongoose claims the stage and urges his high status listeners to hear the story of a Brahman whose close-knit family lived on the gleanings from cultivated fields. Once upon a time there was a severe famine, and no food could be found anywhere. In spite of the heat, dryness, and hunger, the Brahman was always observant of his rituals. One evening, as the family was about to eat its ounce of coarsely milled gleaned barley grain, a stranger appears at the door. After initial greetings and exchanges of identification and pedigree, the father of the family, which consists of himself, his wife, his son, and his pregnant daughter-in-law, offers the guest his own share of coarse barley grain as food. The guest gratefully eats it, but is not satisfied. So, the Brahman's wife, also half-starved and possessing an ascetic nature, offers him her share of the evening repast of coarse grain. After a good deal of discussion the guest accepts this grain. Still he is not satisfied.¹⁴ The son of the Brahman then offers the guest his share. After further discussion the guest accepts this grain as well. But he remains unsatisfied. Finally the pregnant daughter-in-law offers her share of the grain. After internal family debate on the value of sons and grandsons, and of the father-in-law's guilt over taking her grain to feed the guest, they finally agree to offer it to the guest.

At last, the guest is satisfied. He praises the virtue of the Brahman, particularly noting that his acts of hospitality and selflessness were salvific for his ancestors and descendants, and reveals himself to be Dharma incarnate. He then delivers a lecture on the virtue of generosity and the overcoming of negative emotions, noting many examples of generosity, purity, selflessness, and sincerity. He announces to this poor righteous family that an aerial chariot is waiting outside to take them all, fully embodied, to the heavenly world. The mongoose then tells his audience that half his body turned to gold from consuming dust and remnants of this family's gleanings, and that he had come to this great sacrifice in order to gather its remnants, thus turning the remainder of its body into gold. But this failed, proving the inadequacy of the *āśvamedha*. The moral of the story, as told by Vaiśampāyana, the epic's main narrator, is that actions or gifts not fully in accord with dharma are destined to fail, but that those whose actions are virtuous and borne of asceticism, performed with material legitimately earned, ascend to heaven.

The tension in this account is between the ideology of the village and the ideology of the forest, between the state and the individual, between order and disorder (ANGOT 2009), between householder expansion and ascetic contraction, between safety and danger, and between the demands of verdant prosperity and arid decline. The unquestioned direction in most of the world's recorded cultures since the Neolithic period is for cultivated land to encroach on and absorb forest land, for the domesticated to absorb the wild. This is no less the case in ancient and classical India (MALAMOUD 1989; ZIMMERMANN 1987), nor should this dynamic be unfamiliar to those who follow the travails of globalization in the modern world, in which the local and the global press against each other (albeit with an eerie reversal, in which the global is viewed as expansive and attractive and the local as inhibiting, isolating, and contracting). In this morality tale we see first a magnificent city constructed on pastureland that probably served as a buffer zone between the domestic and the wild. The wealth poured into the sacrificial arena on this site facilitated the presence, and ultimate offering, of animals from all realms—domestic, wild, and aquatic.¹⁵ On the other hand, the drought-afflicted family of the poor righteous Brahman survived just on the other side of the buffer zone between domestic and wild. Like birds, they subsisted on grain left on harvested fields, the drought had turned the land to the functional equivalent of the wilderness, and the Brahman and his family had become the functional equivalents of renunciates, whose spiritual freedom is often depicted as inversely proportional to their exposure to (and preparation for) the dangers of the wilderness. In the final analysis, this story depicts the challenges of living with both a surfeit of responsibility for domestication and the gifts of nature and a paucity of it. They converge in a liminal zone of encroaching domestication and encroaching wildness. But, which is a superior moral state? In the story, the poor family ascends bodily to the heavenly world for their unflagging dedication to generosity and hospitality. However, at the end of the epic, farther along in the story that we have recorded here, the Pāṇḍavas and their common wife, Draupadī, approach the heavenly world. One by one they expire due to the weight of their personal faults, their entrance into

heaven limited to their celestial bodies. But there is one exception to this, namely Yudhiṣṭhira, the final member of the clan to reach the gates of heaven. Due to his adherence to dharma, indeed his manifestation of it, he is allowed to enter heaven in his physical body, like the poor starving Brahman family. This, it appears, represents a standoff between the forces of domesticity and asceticism, the conventional sense of the security of the settlement, and the chaos of nature.

PRESCRIPTION, SUBSTITUTION, AND THE
ENVIRONMENT IN MODERN INDIAN VEDIC RITUAL

Let us briefly return to an examination of prescribed substances in Vedic ritual, specifically to frequent substitutions for them employed in modern performances, in order to comment on what this might say about environmental contingency.¹⁶ As the forces of history on all levels—political, social, literary, religious, technological, environmental—advanced with startling rapidity through the last three millennia, the distance between prototypical ritual forms and their modern representations grew proportionally. In order to resolve this tension between dedication to inherited tradition and the requirements of different modernities, the ritual texts were updated with new commentaries and handbooks every few generations. This literature of modernized ritual (SMITH 1987) reflected the pressures of changing patronage systems, ecosystems, and a growing sense of the incomprehensibility of ancient texts that were barely (if at all) understood by the performers themselves. They were, therefore, regularly reinterpreted through the prism of fashionable religious doctrines and lifestyle changes. To call this simply an effect of the transition from Vedic to Hindu ritual might be an oversimplification, but it is nevertheless a convenient lens through which to measure it.¹⁷

Through three decades of regularly documenting modern performances of classical Vedic sacrificial ritual, I have accumulated a substantial archive of expense ledgers, records of debates and disagreements, and a photo and audio record. I will highlight only two issues here, the substitution for the prescribed sacrificial fee (*dakṣiṇā*) and the substitution for the animal sacrifices. To take the latter first, the Vedas are unambiguous about this, but it has been contested for more than a thousand years, largely by people who cite the authority of post-Vedic texts but have little to no firsthand experience with either the rituals or the texts on which they are based.¹⁸ Nevertheless, this has led to a good deal of secretiveness, even stealth, by many of the remaining practitioners of Vedic ritual who continue to perform the classical animal sacrifice (probably less than fifty in all of India now, most of them in Tamilnadu). The following account is drawn from my notes on a Vedic soma sacrifice performed by Tamil Brahmans in Palghat, Kerala, in May 1995. For the sake of clarity I have edited out the technical details and language.

There was never any question in the minds of the officiants about the use of actual animals. It was a long-established part of their ritual tradition, and no one felt decisive pressure to deviate from it here, in spite of a natural wariness surrounding the issue.¹⁹ After numerous consultations regarding procedure, including with

me, they decided to perform it at the prescribed time, but to inform other casual observers that the ritual action was finished for the moment, and they should go home. The chief organizer of the sacrifice (who was not identical with the chief patron) spent about four hours the previous day searching for the proper animals, two goats with certain ideal markings. This fortuitously coincided with the Indian festival of Bakri-Id, a Muslim day of sacrificing goats (*bakrī*) to celebrate faith in Islam and commemorate the anniversary of the completion of the Qur'an. Thus, the purchase, and eventual sacrifice, of two goats (even by Brahmans) hardly raised an eyebrow. The organizer was able to locate two male goats, one black, the other brown, each costing Rs 700. In addition, the patron rented a taxi for Rs 300 per day to deliver them stealthily into the driveway of the urban house behind which the sacrificial arena was located. In fact, they were able to bring the goats directly to the door of the special room, approximately five meters square, constructed of hanging cloth reserved specifically for slaughtering the animals (*śāmitrasālā*, "pacification room"). This was on the west end of the ritual area, rather than on the north side, the location for it prescribed in the classical texts.

On the afternoon of the fourth day of this six-day soma sacrifice, at the proper time for the animal sacrifice (*agnīṣomīya-paśuyāga*), a white Ambassador, a classic Indian car often used as taxis, drove to the "pacification room," where the gentleman selling the animals, a Muslim wearing a new white shirt and pyjamas, unloaded the victims. What followed was quite unusual; the Tamil ritualists themselves admitted as much. Instead of carrying out the ritual killing themselves, as is customary, they paid the Muslim an unspecified amount to do this. Only the chief officiant and two observers were present for this, including the chief organizer, who described to me what transpired. Consistent with Vedic injunction the mouth and nose of the animals were held tightly closed by the Muslim, and within three minutes, with hardly a tremor of complaint, the goats had suffocated. This is what the Vedas regard as bloodless sacrifice, which they carefully distinguish from decapitation and other forms of animal sacrifice that one may easily see in Hindu and Muslim festivals in many parts of India. After about ten minutes the chief patron's wife entered the pacification chamber and, according to prescription, sprinkled the dead goats with water. Then the remaining Brahmans entered and the Muslim departed. One of the Tamil Brahmans, a boy who could not have been more than twenty, skillfully made the incision below the sternum, and the appropriate organs and other body parts were removed, to be stored in a refrigerator and offered later. The carcasses were then wrapped up and taken away in the taxi, also as partial payment to the Muslim "pacifier."²⁰ The officiants correctly presumed that the observers had no idea what was being offered. Some of the animal parts were offered before the crowd of approximately two hundred onlookers reconvened, but most of the parts were offered publicly, to the knowledge of almost nobody. The parts consumed by the chief patron and some of the officiants were miniscule.

That these ancient rituals are preformed at all today with more than passing knowledge of the classical Vedic literature is the most remarkable fact about them.



FIGURE I. Paying the ritualists. Dodamarg, Maharashtra, March 2007. Photo by the author.

Beyond that, what is most noticeable is how the modern performers work hard to keep their deviations to a justifiable minimum.²¹ In many cases of these once-exalted performances, the primary objective has become to maintain the mantra recitations, the major offerings, even if they all are substitutions consisting of rice flour balls (*puroḍāśa*) and ghee, with a pressed out local succulent, mixed with water and milk, sufficing for the soma. I have documented what can go wrong (nearly everything) in my account of a soma sacrifice performed in a public park in London in 1996 (SMITH 2000). This was followed four years later by a fragmented performance of a *vājapeya*, an exceptionally complicated ritual, in the Gujarati Samaj (viz. “Association”) in New York, with the chariot race, reduced to a few toys, performed on a back street just beneath the Queens-Long Island Expressway. But I want here to follow up on a few observations made in the *Mūlyādhyāyaparīṣṭa* cited above, by providing a sampling of data on substitutions for sacrificial fees in a few of the large soma sacrifices I have documented over the years.

It is axiomatic that the performance of a soma sacrifice is extremely expensive, no matter how massive the cutbacks and substitutions. Practical modifications in the performance are the norm, and have been for centuries, perhaps for a millennium. Much of this is due to the easy availability of ready made materials, rather than creating materials from forests and gathering the rice and other required grains from local cultivation (SMITH 1987, 314). Certainly the present system is much more conducive to accurate bookkeeping. Most of the figures given here are from the 1980s and 1990s. The cost of all these materials might be ten times more today. The *dakṣiṇā* has also, on the whole, risen proportionally.

In the 1980s and 1990s the standard *dakṣiṇā* in the Vedic ritual traditions in Maharashtra and Karnataka was calculated at Rs 75 per cow. A “normal” soma sacrifice (*agniṣṭoma*) required 112 cows to be divided up disproportionately between the officiants. This, then, totaled Rs 8400 for (at least this part of) the *dakṣiṇā*. This was more than a nominal amount at the time, but is a completely insignificant number today. Since then the figure has gone up stratospherically, reflecting not just inflation, but an increased demand on the part of the Brahman ritualists to gain respect in the world and make a competitive income.²² In FIGURE 1, photographed at the time of a ritual of paying the officiants (*dakṣiṇādāna*), which occurs about three quarters of the way through the proceedings, a black leather briefcase was incongruously placed on a brass offering dish. I was told that the amount in the brief case was more than Rs 100,000, but was not told the exact figure.

In another Vedic sacrifice performed in Solapur, Maharashtra, in 1981, which required four “soma pressing” days, the total *dakṣiṇā* paid was Rs 47,040. This included Rs 5040 (Rs 1008 x 5 days) to the overseer (*sadasya*), who is supposed to be an expert in all the Vedas. Although this sacrifice had four pressing days, all were paid for an extra day (in fact it was much more work than that). A group of four officiants who served as the chief choreographers was paid Rs 20,160 (Rs 1008 x 4 officiants x 5 days). A group of four responsible for reciting the text from the *R̥gveda* received Rs 10,080 (Rs 504 x 4 officiants x 5 days). A group of four *Sāmaveda* reciters received Rs 6720 (Rs. 336 x 4 officiants x 5 days). Finally, a group of four supplementary officiants received Rs 5040 (Rs 252 x 4 officiants x 5 days). This, I must repeat, was only part of their payment. The total expenses on this grand sacrifice came to several hundred thousand rupees, a figure that would be incalculably higher today. It is not irrelevant to mention that on the final day of this sacrifice, during the payment ritual (*dakṣiṇādāna*), the patron (*yajamāna*) was unable to come up with the proper *dakṣiṇā*. He had literally bankrupted himself performing this. The entire officiating crew, who worked very hard for weeks, probably for months, preparing for this, decided to go on strike. Rather than do what the patron wanted, which was to honorably complete the sacrifice then worry about payment, which he promised to procure, the crew lay down in the sacrificial arena and took a long, well-deserved nap until the patron was able to run around town, pawn a good deal of family jewelry, and borrow more than Rs 100,000 (an exorbitant amount then) from a local bank. Of course, to do this, he was forced to break all manner of rules regarding ritual purity. In all likelihood he miscalculated. The cost of cow’s ghee (rather than the less preferred buffalo’s ghee) was over Rs 100 per liter, and the amount of ghee required was more than 300 liters. Then there was firewood, food costs, and a good deal more. This is not the place to record the entire expense account; rather, the point is that the preparations for a modern Vedic ritual cuts out the processes very carefully described in the classical ritual texts in which the sacrificer and the officiating crew prepare the offering materials themselves from what is locally grown and available. The classical texts assume a lived relationship between settlement, forest, and borderland that predicated ritual performance. This is what is lost today.

CONCLUSIONS

Do any of the foregoing discussions contribute to further understanding the relationship between ritual performance and the environment? Today this question has become superfluous to most practitioners of Vedic ritual, as the inherited rituals continue to be performed, if by very few people, in modified but structurally recognizable shape.²³ Most of the Vedic recitation remains intact, but the performers have little or no recognition of environmental presences or absences that are implicit in the Vedic prescriptive and narrative literature. The primary environmental ethic, visible in discussions of sacrificial payment regimes at various points in history, in cultural pressure on Vedic animal sacrifice, and in tensions between ritual and dharma in the *Mahābhārata*, is that a specified environment was necessary for the production and performance of these rituals. Eventually, the rituals became isolated from their environmental context, indeed largely irrelevant to it, for a host of reasons. Urbanization eliminated the sense of a balance or of countervailing forces between settlement and forest (or savannah),²⁴ with safe buffer zones of cultivation and fertile river valleys. Furthermore, means of production changed as a result of increasingly sophisticated technology, and internal migrations gave rise to more national forms of knowledge and sociocultural ideologies. The result for ritual production was ready availability and wide distribution of ritually useful items that had formerly functioned in a symbiotic relationship with larger cultural formations such as highly specified ritual. What may be regarded as environmentally sound consumption in premodern India became marginalized in the modern period, especially in post-independence India. The morality tale that closes the description of the horse sacrifice in the *Mahābhārata* best exemplifies this process. In moments of prosperity the physical and psychological buffer zones work in favor of an ideal status quo. In times of hardship these zones contribute to suffering, but also to the expansion of inward areas of virtue. It is no accident that the horse sacrifice was a legitimization of the hard won but prevailing political, social, and natural order, confirming the virtues of prosperity, development, and the strength of community (and communal) dharma. This is true even if it is inconceivable that a horse sacrifice was ever actually performed with the ostentation described in the Sanskrit epic. Finally, we might ask, what do our sources tell us of the environment of India two or three thousand years ago? The ritual and narrative literature, as well as the medical texts, which we did not have occasion to examine here, depict internal regions of the Indian subcontinent, not coastal areas.²⁵ It is in these areas of less extreme and more salubrious climate (for example, cyclones are mentioned but rarely described as major transformative events) that the village or town and the forest or savannah existed in constant communication with each other, with Vedic ritual as an organic part of that contact. But as culture change left this relationship distanced and frayed, substitutions became a natural part of the ritual landscape and ideologies reaching to the very core of human purposefulness filtered upwards.

NOTES

1. I studied on and off with him for about twenty years. He died aged 102 in 2009.
2. Āṇḍapiḷḷai, otherwise known as Tālavṛntanivāsin, was from the village of Tiruppanandal in Tamilnadu, probably dating to the fourteenth century. He wrote a series of lengthy *vṛttis* or performance commentaries on the ritual as prescribed and performed by the followers of the Āpastamba sutra of the Taittirīya *śākhā* or branch of the Kṛṣṇa- (Black) Yajurveda. Historically, this has been widely followed among Brahmanical ritualists in Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, and elsewhere in South India (on the geography of Vedic ritual, see KASHIKAR 1968; KASHIKAR and PARPOLA 1983; SMITH 1987, 2000, 2001).
3. On the structure of Vedic ritual, see STAAL 1983; TACHIKAWA 1993. In the last few decades many scholars have remarked on the symmetry, the embedded nature of rites, framing devices, and other structural features of Vedic ritual.
4. A soma sacrifice has seventeen formally employed ritualists who receive specified payment (*dakṣiṇā*), but the support staff is at least that number.
5. See SMITH 1988 for this text with an annotated translation. The present article has enabled me to revisit this material, albeit briefly, in the light of a great deal of rethinking of the issues surrounding this text and the subgenre of noncanonical late first millennium and second millennium Indian ritual textuality.
6. On this, see WEBER 1892. I have observed several performances of this in the last three decades, all of them modified and attenuated greatly from the original. But that report remains forthcoming.
7. My notes on this are too cumbersome to unpack in detail here.
8. I have seen all of this, and more, which might be regarded as ritual error were it not for Humphrey and Laidlaw's corrective observation. This is obvious to anyone who studies ritual in South Asia, but, as HUMPHREY and LAIDLAW state succinctly, the messy parts don't count. Messiness is normal; it is not failed ritual. They state that "most prestigious, elaborate, and, it is believed, most efficacious form of *pūja*, most people never become proficient and their correct enactment always emerges out of a sea of delay, debate, and halting, faltering action" (1994, 115). I am much more generous regarding the proficiency of the Vedic officiants than Humphrey and Laidlaw were in their observations, even if I agree about the delay, debate, and so on. In many cases delay, debate, and halting are due to the expertise of the ritualists, not to their ineptitude.
9. See SMITH (forthcoming) for a complete translation of this book. Meanwhile, see the excellent summaries and (very) partial translations by John SMITH 2009, 703–33; SIMSON 2011, 498–523; and BIARDEAU 2002 (vol. 2), 565–645; see KOSKIKALLIO 1995 and SWENNEN 2007 for further descriptions.
10. See FITZGERALD 2004, introduction to the *Śāntiparvan* for this. The dating of the epic has been debated by scholars for a century and a half. The dating given here, although not conclusive, is widely if not uniformly accepted (also see FITZGERALD 2004 for this). See FITZGERALD 2010 for a summation of his views, expressed in a number of essays over the last two decades, on the mythologizing process. I would not go so far as to label it a fictionalizing of history.
11. Some of the key dilemmas are explored by HILTEBEITEL (2011), who illustrates the ambiguous character of dharma displayed in the actions of some of the primary figures in the epic. This is only the most recent lengthy account of a striking and vexing feature of the *Mahābhārata* that makes it such a fascinating sourcebook for Indian culture; in fact, scholars have remarked on this for generations.
12. Translation by the author, to appear in SMITH (forthcoming).
13. For example, the occasion in which the chief wife of the patron (who must, of course, be a victorious king) should engage in sexual relations with the horse just after it was ritually slaughtered (*Āśvamedhika-parvan* 91.1–6; JAMISON 1996, 65–72).

14. This is a variant on an old story from the Vedas; see JAMISON 1996.
15. The texts note that animals from the wild that are to be sacrificed are first tied to the sacrificial posts marked for them, around which they are herded, but are then released back into the wild. The only animals actually slaughtered, then, are the domestic ones.
16. I dealt at length with the issue of substitutions in my earlier book (SMITH 1987). However, my reflections on this have changed considerably in the last quarter of a century. What I state here represents only a small part of this movement in thinking.
17. The standard for examining this remains RENOU 1960; see also STAAL 1983, SMITH 1987, 2000, 2001.
18. See SMITH 1987, 73–75 and 255–58, for alternatives selected by different sectarian traditions; HOUBEN 1999 for philosophical arguments on the ethics of Vedic animal sacrifice; and GUNE 1994 for the history of its debate in Sanskrit commentarial literature.
19. The animal sacrifices that were a prescribed part of the large (and very public) Vedic sacrifice (*agnicayana*) that Frits Staal documented in 1975 (see STAAL 1983) were canceled due to public protests. This was no more than 50 kms from Palghat, and the memory of that cancellation was strongly etched in the minds of the ritualists. My presence, an interested foreign scholar, was not deemed a threat to their secrecy. HUMPHREY and LAIDLAW note the decreasing frequency of the controversial animal sacrifice in Hinduism: “In order both to conform to reformist pressure and so claim a high religious status, and yet at the same time to propitiate a deity who is believed to demand sacrifice, priests in Brahmanical temples carry out ‘sacrifice’ (*bali*) using vegetarian surrogates such as pumpkins or melons. But debate continues about whether the rites are ‘really’ *bali*, whether they are the same archetypal act, regardless of apparent surface differences, as the bloody slaughter of a buffalo” (1994, 149 [after FULLER 1992, 83–105]).
20. I saw one other Vedic animal sacrifice, in 1981 in Bangalore, but that would be much too long to describe adequately here.
21. See SMITH 1987 for this. I am indebted for some of my present observations to an unpublished paper from the late 1980s by Harold F. Arnold called “The Hinduization of Vedic Ritual.” Mr. Arnold, then a PhD student at UC Berkeley, accompanied me in many of my site visits in the early 1980s.
22. Of course, several ritual communities still operate on the old closed system of resorting only to their own members as officiants. In such cases the payment is nominal. But increasingly, officiants are called from outside because of a scarcity of trained personnel within their communities. In these cases, the ritualists demand very high amounts, sometimes not linking their charges to classical numbers, such as 112 cows. Presiding over these rituals requires decades of training and experience, and is a profession that has almost completely disappeared in India.
23. Occasional revivalist tendencies are clearly present, however, in which large scale publicly funded sacrifices (almost always without animal sacrifice) attempt creative reconstructions of classical Vedic ritual. But this is a topic for a different article.
24. See ZIMMERMANN 1987 for an account of the ecology of early Ayurveda as a relationship between forest and savannah.
25. Although there is decisive evidence for sea trade as early as the mid-third millennium BCE between the Arabian peninsula, particularly present-day Yemen and the United Arab Emirates, and the region on the west coast of India that corresponds to present-day Gujarat, most of the archaeological and literary record refers to the area stretching from the mountains in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan spreading in a southeasterly direction beyond the Indus river, which approximately bisects Pakistan in a north-south direction, all the way to the flatlands of northern India between the Ganges and the Yamuna river, the Doab or “two rivers” region. There is a good deal of diversity of terrain in this area, from dry land savannah, to marshlands, to mountains, to fertile valleys ripe for agriculture.

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