



श्री लक्ष्मी नारायण मन्दिर



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### THE CONCEPT SACRIFICE IN THE BHAGAVAD GITA

#### Introduction

There are two separate passages in the Bhagavad Gita which reveal to the reader the Gita's theory of sacrifice. The first is to be found in Chapter 3, verses 9 to 16. The second passage is found in Chapter 4, verses 25 to 37. These two passages present two different ways in which the concept sacrifice can be understood.

The different kinds of sacrifice given in the Bhagavad Gita are referred to as yajña. According to Krishnananda (2011) the word yajña is not only significant throughout the Bhagavad Gita, but perhaps all scriptures of Sanathan Dharma. Yajña in fact is the very essence of the Vedas. In defining sacrifice or yajña Krishnananda (2011:2) says:

Sacrifice, no doubt, means giving something, but it does not mean losing something.

A yajña or sacrifice should be seen as a gain and not as a loss. In terms of the Bhagavad Gita the sacrifice that we make results in us getting to know the Self or attaining wisdom.

In this presentation, I will attempt to unpack the two different understandings of sacrifice as elaborated upon by Shri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita in chapters 3 and 4. This presentation will draw directly from the Bhagavad Gita as I am an ardent follower of Shri Krishna's wonderful advice in verse 24 of Chapter 16 (Parthasarathy, 2008:754):

तस्माच्छास्त्रं प्रमाणं ते कार्याकार्यव्यवस्थितौ ।

ज्ञात्वा शास्त्रविधानोक्तं कर्म कर्तुमिर्हासि ॥

tasmācchāstram pramāṇam te kāryākāryavyavasthitau |

jñātvā śāstravidhānoktaṁ karma kartumirhāsi ||

Therefore, the scripture is your authority in determining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, having known what is pronounced in scriptural ordinance you should perform action here.

The one way in which the concept yajña or sacrifice can be interpreted is referred to by Aurobindo as ceremonial sacrifice. I will refer to this as the yajña of action.

#### Yajña of Action

यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणो न्यत्र लोकोयं कर्मबन्धनः ।

तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्तसंगः समाचर ॥९॥

yajñārthātkarmaṇonyatra lokoyam karmabandhanah |

tadarthaṁ karma kaunteya muaktasaṅgaḥ samācara|9|

This world is bound by action other than those performed for the sake of yajña (sacrifice), O Kaunteya, perform action for that sake free from attachment. (3:9)

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः ।

अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोस्त्विष्टकामधुक् ।१० ।

sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ|

anena prasaviṣyadhvameṣa vostiṣṭakāmadhuk|10|

The Creator, having in the beginning created mankind together with yajña (sacrifice), said, "By this shall you propagate, let this be the milch-cow of your desired objects. (3:10)

Aurobindo (1970) refers to above understanding of yajña or sacrifice as the Vedist ideal. The Vedist ideal, according to Aurobindo (1970:108) is:

The active ideal of acquiring enjoyments here and the highest good beyond by sacrifice and the mutual dependence of the human being and divine powers.

The Vedas understood yajña (sacrifice) as the link between the human and Divine and a vehicle towards liberation.

In this regard, Sarbatoare (2011:1) states:

By such a link the human could access the Divine and fulfill the very purpose of the human existence, that being to worship the Divine as the Creator of all things.

Human beings are dependent on the Creator for their existence, more than they admit. The purpose of yajña (sacrifice) is to create harmony between nature and the place of human beings within the environment. But it was also the intention to create harmony within the body itself.

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः ।

परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ।११ ।

devānbhāvayatānena te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ|

parasparam bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ paramavāpsyatha|11|

Nourish the gods with this and may those gods nourish you; nourishing one another, you shall attain the supreme good. (3:11)

In this verse Shri Krishna talks about the devotee and the gods nourishing each other in order to attain the supreme state. The adoration of the gods as a sacrifice means "a parting of one's own self in some measure in the direction of the achievement of a larger Self" (Krishnananda, 2011:2). This verse points to an important master plan of Sanathan Dharma: the divinizing of everything in the world. Human beings are continuously attracted to worldly pleasures. With this ingenious plan all worldly pursuits remind people of the Supreme even as they are engaged in the objects of desire. Parthasarathy (2008:174) states in this regard:

Whatever you may pursue in this world, do so remembering God, do so in a spirit of yajña. Work then becomes worship. By divinizing your activities thus and working with dedication towards your cherished goals you will reach the ultimate goal of realization.

इष्टान्भोगान्हि वो देवा दास्यन्ते यज्ञभाविताः ।

तैर्दत्तानप्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः ।१२ ।

iṣṭānbhogānhi vo devā dāsyante yajñabhāvitāḥ|

tairdattānapradāyaibhyo yo bhuṅkte stena eva saḥ|12|

Verily, the gods, nourished by sacrifice, will give you the desired enjoyments. He who enjoys what is given by them without having offered to them, is indeed a thief. (3:12)

यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः ।

भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ।१३ ।

yajñāśiṣṭāśinaḥ santo mucyante sarvakilbiṣaiḥ|

bhuñjate te tvaghaṁ pāpā ye pacantyātmakāraṇāt|13|

The righteous who eat the remnants of sacrifice are freed from all sins, but those sinners, who cook for their own sake, eat sin. (3:13)

In the second line of verse 12, and in verse 13 Shri Krishna makes reference to three types of people according to their adherence to or abandonment of the divine principle of yajña. These are the sattvika or the serene and highest quality of humans, the rajasika or the agitated majority and the tamasika or the dull and lowest type. Tamasika people are those who take freely from society without giving anything back. Shri Krishna calls such a person a stena or thief. From a philosophical point of view each one of us is a debtor from birth. In the words of Parthasarathy (2008:176):

Develop awareness of all you receive and of the Providence that provides. Be grateful to the source of this benevolence and repay whenever and whatever you can. It is the spirit of repaying, not the actual compensation that matters.

In Chapter 17, verse 13, Shri Krishna further describes a tamasika yajña. Yajñas in which no food is distributed, no mantra is chanted, no dakshina is offered and no shraddha or faith is present is contrary to scriptural ordinance. Those engaged in tamasika yajña do not share wealth with others. Their actions or sacrifices are selfish and self-centred. However, we must also heed the advice of Shri Krishna when it comes to the kind of food that should be consumed and distributed. Foods that are stale, tasteless, putrid, rotten, refuse and impure are said to be tamasika and should be avoided. The point here is that one cannot distribute any kind of food and then claim to have performed a yajña or sacrifice. The purpose of mantra is to take a person to an ideal or to a goal. Any action that has no chanting of mantra becomes mundane, egocentric and selfish. It is a primary spiritual obligation to offer material and physical service as a token of gratitude for the invaluable knowledge imparted by the guru. Tamasika yajñas give no recognition nor gratitude to the guru. Any yajña or sacrifice that is devoid of shraddha is purposeless, meaningless and fruitless.

In verse 13, the description of sattvika and rajasika sacrifice or yajña is described. The rajasika person works ceaselessly to satisfy his/her self-centred desires. The rajasika person feels that the world cannot do without him/her. Such a person is not prepared to perform some useful action that will benefit society. Their only occupation in life is to accumulate material acquisitions and sensual pleasures. Hence in chapter 17, verse 12 the Lord states:

अभिसंधाय तु फलं दम्भार्थमपि चैव यत् ।

इज्यते भरतश्रेष्ठ तं यज्ञं विद्धि राजसम् ।१२ ।

abhisandhāya tu phalaṁ dambhārthamapi caiva yat |  
ijyate bhārataśreṣṭha taṁ yajñaṁ viddhi rājasam |12|

That sacrifice offered seeking indeed not only fruit but ostentation as well, know it to be rajasika O best of Bharatas.

The sattvika yajña or sacrifice on the other hand is a striking contrast to the tamasika and rajasika yajña. Such individuals act in the world in the true spirit of yajña. The sattvika person works for a high ideal that goes beyond his/her self-centred interest. Here again one can refer to verse 11 of chapter 17 wherein Lord Krishna says:

अफलाकांक्षभिर्यज्ञो विधिदृष्टो य इज्यते ।

यष्टव्यमेवेति मनः समाधाय स सात्त्विकः ।११ ।

aphalākāṅkṣabhiryajño vidhidṛṣṭo ya ijyate |  
yaṣṭavyameveti manaḥ samādhāya sa sāttvikaḥ |11|

The sacrifice offered by those desiring no fruit, as enjoined by ordinance, with the mind well resolved that they should merely sacrifice, that is sattvika.

Our discussion thus far has centred on the yajña as action. To conclude this discussion, I would like to look more closely at the verse 16 of chapter 3.

एवं प्रवर्तितं चक्रं नानुवर्तयतीह यः ।

अघायुरिन्द्रियारामो मोघं पार्थ स जीवति ।१६ ।

evaṁ pravartitaṁ cakraṁ nānuvartayatīha yaḥ |  
aghāyurindriyārāmo moghaṁ pārtha sa jīvati |16|

He who does not follow here the wheel thus set in motion, living in sin and rejoicing in the senses, he lives in vain, O Partha. (3:16).

We have seen in verses 9 to 16 that the emphasis has been on the importance of yajña or sacrificial action. Since yajña symbolizes welfare of the human race, it is important that we perform actions in a selfless spirit of surrender. When we do this, we set in motion the wheel of progress towards liberation or ultimate peace and bliss. The person who does not set this wheel in motion remains directionless or goalless and lives his/her life in vain. The wise individual realizes that sacrificial actions are unpleasant in the beginning; however those same actions bring infinite prosperity and peace later. The ignorant ones, however, do not have this knowledge and therefore stick to a path of sensuality.

I began this presentation with a reference to two different understandings of yajña or sacrifice. I have presented some verses from the Bhagavad Gita on the yajña of action. In the next part I want to look at the second interpretation which moves the understanding to a larger philosophical symbolism. This I will refer to as a yajña of knowledge.

### Yajña of Knowledge

In verse 26 of Chapter 4, Shri Krishna says:

श्रोत्रादीनीन्द्रियाण्यन्ये संयमाग्निषु जुह्वति ।

शब्दादीन्विषयानन्य इन्द्रियाग्निषु जुह्वति ।२६ ।

śrotrādīnīndriyāṅyanye saṁyamāgniṣu juhvati |

śabdādīnviṣayānanya indriyāgniṣu juhvati |26|

Others offer hearing and other senses as sacrifice into the fires of restraint; others offer sound and other sense objects as sacrifice in the fires of the senses.

In this verse the Lord talks of the yajña of perception and the yajña of self-restraint. Unlike ceremonial offerings, this verse emphasises that for spiritual evolution and realization of the Self, it is essential to keep the mind in constant remembrance of the Supreme Being. Parthasarathy (2008: 249) wonderfully explains this as follows:

Part-time prayers cannot take you to the ultimate. You must gradually evolve to full-time awareness of the Supreme God, the all pervading Reality.

The Lord progresses in verse 28 of chapter 4 to present four yajñas – the yajñas of wealth, austerity, yoga and Self-knowledge. The first yajña referred to as Dravya yajña or yajña of wealth denotes a gift of material wealth. Tapas yajña signifies sacrifice of the body and this is the second yajña. The third yajña called Yoga yajña means spiritual practice. The last yajña is called Svadhyaya Jnana yajña and it is the highest form of service and sacrifice. One notices in these four yajñas a graduation from the gross to subtle. That is to say that parting with physical needs and comforts is greater than parting with material wealth. But it is far greater to perform Yoga yajña which means rendering emotional and intellectual service for the promotion of another’s spiritual development. The greatest yajña or sacrifice or gift is one in which a person gives the Self to others. The Svadhyaya yajña kindles knowledge of Self or wisdom. The destruction of vasanas or desires gives rise to knowledge of the Self. Verses 31 to 37 of chapter 4 show how all yajñas culminate in wisdom. “The yajñas merely provide ingenious means to convert the routine activities into worship” (Parthasarathy, 2008:257). Ultimately in verse 33 of the fourth chapter Shri Krishna pronounces that all actions without exception culminate in wisdom. Shri Krishna has wonderfully conceived and established these four yajñas in ascending order of superiority in terms of service and sacrifice.

### Conclusion

The above presentation has attempted to show how the Bhagavad Gita has shifted the emphasis of yajña or sacrifice from the outer mode of offering towards the internalization of the ritual. The gods and their expressions in the outer form of yajña were found to be in the human body itself. According to Sarbatoare (2011:7):

Whatever manifests as Divine expression in the external world could be found in the internal world of a practitioner of yajña.

The above verses of the Bhagavad Gita have hopefully alerted us to the fact that perhaps yajña needs to evolve to be less ritualistic by a total mental attitude of surrender known as atmarpana – the offering of every action to the Divine.

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