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The Philosophical Aspect of Sri Aurobindo on Vedic Sacrifice

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) reinterpreted the Vedic sacrifice or yajña not as a primitive ritual of fire and offerings, but as a central symbol of evolutionary spirituality. In his works *The Secret of the Veda* and *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, he argued that the Vedic seers encoded an "inner" or "psychological" science of consciousness. For Aurobindo, sacrifice is the law of cosmic exchange: the human being offers his lower nature to the Divine, and the Divine returns immortality and supramental light. This paper examines Aurobindo's philosophical interpretation of Vedic sacrifice across four dimensions: 1) Critique of ritualism, 2) Psychological-symbolic hermeneutics, 3) Sacrifice as evolutionary process, and 4) The role of Agni, Soma and the Gods. It concludes that Aurobindo transforms yajña from external rite to inner yoga, making it foundational to his philosophy of Integral Evolution.[1][2]

Keywords: Sri Aurobindo, Vedic Sacrifice, Yajña, Secret of the Veda, Agni, Mysticism, Integral Yoga

1. Introduction

The Vedic sacrifice has traditionally been read in two ways: by the Mimamsakas as a precise ritual injunction for material results, and by the Vedantins as an allegory to be transcended in favor of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo rejected both extremes. He proposed a "third reading" — the Veda as a coded book of spiritual psychology.[3][4]

In *The Secret of the Veda* 1914-1920, written as a series in *Arya* journal, Aurobindo stated: "The Veda is a book of spiritual experience, not a liturgy for external rites". Central to this experience is the concept of yajña. For Aurobindo, to understand Vedic sacrifice is to understand the Vedic worldview itself.[5]

This paper analyzes that philosophical reinterpretation.

2. Critique of External Ritualism and the "Lost Secret"

Aurobindo begins with a historical claim: the true meaning of the Veda was "lost" after the Vedic age due to the dominance of Brahmanical ritualism.[6]

2.1 Against Literalism

He criticized Sayana's 14th century commentary for reducing every Vedic god to a natural phenomenon or ritual function. According to Aurobindo, to read Agni only as "fire" and Soma only as "plant juice" is to miss the psychological key. He writes: "We must cease to look at the Veda with the eyes of the ritualist and the grammarian alone".[7][8]

2.2 The Theory of Double Meaning

Aurobindo argued the Rishis used a deliberate "mystic and symbolic" language. There is an outer sense for the ritual, and an inner sense for the seeker. This was a protective

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device to hide spiritual knowledge from the unfit. The sacrifice, therefore, has two levels: the outer yajña on the altar, and the inner yajña in the human consciousness.[9]

3. Sacrifice as a Psychological and Cosmic Process

This is the core of Aurobindo's philosophy. He detaches yajña from the fire-pit and relocates it in the soul.

3.1 The Law of Exchange

For Aurobindo, sacrifice is not propitiation of gods. It is the fundamental law of the universe: "All life is a sacrifice". The individual offers his thoughts, feelings, actions — his "lower stuff" — upward. In return, the Divine offers down "higher light, power, and Ananda". This is a cyclic exchange, not a transaction.[10]

He interprets Yajurveda 40.2 kurvann evehā karmāṇi jijīviṣet śatam samāḥ "Doing works here one should wish to live a hundred years" to mean: action offered as sacrifice is the way to immortality.[11]

3.2 The Inner Yajña

The Vedic ritual becomes a map of inner yoga:

1. The Altar = The human heart
2. The Fire = Will/Energy of aspiration
3. The Offerings = Thoughts, desires, vital impulses
4. The Gods = Powers of the Divine Consciousness[12]

Thus to "sacrifice" is to give up ego and surrender to the Divine. This anticipates his later Integral Yoga.

4. The Gods of the Sacrifice: Agni, Soma and the Devas

Aurobindo does not demythologize the gods. He "psychologizes" them. Each Vedic god is a "cosmic power" or a "personality of the One Divine".[13]

4.1 Agni: The Divine Will and Priest

Agni is central to Yajurvedic sacrifice. Aurobindo calls him "the divine Will in us, the flame of aspiration". In Hymns to the Mystic Fire, he interprets the first 8 hymns of Rigveda Mandala 1 as stages of Agni's birth in man. Agni carries the human offering to the Gods and brings the Gods' gifts to man. Philosophically, he is the mediator between human and Divine. Without Agni, no sacrifice is possible.[14][15]

4.2 Soma: The Divine Ananda

Soma is not just a plant. It is "the wine of immortality, the delight of existence". The pressing of Soma is the extraction of Ananda from life's experiences through sacrifice. When offered to the Gods, it returns as inspiration and ecstasy.[16]

4.3 Indra, Varuna, Mitra

Other gods are powers needed for the sacrifice: Indra = mental power to conquer, Varuna = law and purification, Mitra = harmony. The entire Vedic pantheon is thus an anatomy of the spiritual path.[17]

5. Sacrifice and Evolutionary Philosophy

Aurobindo connects Vedic yajña directly to his philosophy of evolution in The Life Divine.[18]

5.1 From Ignorance to Supermind

The Vedic sacrifice is the earliest expression of the evolutionary impulse. Man feels his incompleteness and offers himself to a higher Power. The Gods respond by evolving man. This is a "progressive self-giving" that leads from Matter to Life to Mind to Supermind.[19]

5.2 The Supermind as the Final Offering

The goal of the Vedic sacrifice, for Aurobindo, was not heaven but the descent of the Truth-Consciousness or Supermind. The final "fruit" of the yajña is the transformation of nature. He reads Ishopanishad — part of Shukla Yajurveda — as the culmination: renunciation and enjoyment are united in sacrifice.[20]

6. Comparison with Traditional Interpretations

School	View of Yajña	Role of Gods	Goal
Mimamsa	Ritual command	Name only, no real agency	Svarga, material result
Vedanta/Shankara	Preparatory, to be transcended	Lower reality	Moksha through Jnana
Sri Aurobindo	Inner evolutionary process	Real cosmic powers	Transformation, Supermind

Aurobindo agrees with Vedanta that ritual is not final, but he disagrees that it should be rejected. He agrees with Mimamsa that action is important, but redefines the action as inner.[21]

7. Conclusion

For Sri Aurobindo, Vedic sacrifice is not an archaic rite. It is a "science of spiritual alchemy". The Vedic Rishis were not primitive ritualists but "mystic psychologists" who mapped the path of human evolution.[22]

By interpreting yajña as self-offering, Agni as will, and the Gods as powers of consciousness, Aurobindo gives the Veda contemporary relevance. The sacrifice becomes the method of Integral Yoga: to offer all of life to the Divine so that the Divine may transform all of life.

In this way, Aurobindo rescues the Yajurveda from the museum of history and makes it a manual for the future evolution of humanity.

Footnotes

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- ⁵ Sri Aurobindo, The Secret of the Veda, p. 11.
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- ⁷. Ibid, p. 28.
- ⁸. Ibid, p. 42.
- ⁹. Ibid, p. 56.
- ¹⁰. Sri Aurobindo, The Life Divine, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1990, p. 98.
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- ¹³. Ibid, p. 89.
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