

# **CHAPTER – I**

# General Introduction to Yajña and its importance

## Introduction:

The river of prayer and praise, as it is now, has been flowing naturally since the time the life of man can be traced back to. Prayer and praise propitiates the gods and enhance their vigour. The adorable Agni is glorified by the hymns, prayers, and praises of his worshippers.<sup>1</sup> Prayers were offered to gods for the accomplishment of basic necessities of life as well as of adversities. These prayers and praises offered in a childlike confidence so that the gods would accept them, for without faith or sraddha, offerings and prayers are in vain.<sup>2</sup> Prayers and praise are a spontaneous expression of the feelings of dependence upon and the moral relationship to god.

Thus, in this first chapter, I have focused the discussion on the origin and development of the concept of *Yajña*. I have also incorporated some views of the traditional Indian and western scholars thereon and tried to correlate them with those of the modern time.

## ❖ Sacrifice (Yajña) and its varieties:

*Yajña* is the hub and nexus of the entire world of thought of the ancient civilized man. It has a universal truth that mythological, philosophical and social thought centered round *Yajña*. Sacrifice (*Yajña*) is the soul of the Vedas. It is older than the hymns that were composed for its celebration. When primitive man saw that cooked food was more palatable and tastier than uncooked food, so the divine guest i.e. gods

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<sup>1</sup>*Rgveda* Vol. I, Tr. Wilson, H.H., Bangalore Printing & Publishing, Bangalore City, 1946, p. 137

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, X.151 & II.26.3, p. 213 & 104

of primitive men would be entertained and fed with fire prepared food. It may be the origin of the chief sacrificial use of fire.

There are two types of sacrifices found in the Vedas viz one fire-offering and second fireless offerings. Fire offerings are those which get consumed in fire and go up in flame and smoke to the gods. Fireless offerings are not consumed in fire, but are laid out for the gods to eat.

It is well known that Agni is the central deity and the central concept in the Vedic sacrificial rituals.<sup>3</sup> As the foremost product of Vedic theology, Agni is heat, light and life itself. The longer Vedic rituals were primarily dedicated to Agni and Soma. Agni is not only a god in his own right, but the divine messenger and intermediary. 'Vishnu and Indra made the spacious world for the sake of sacrifice'.<sup>4</sup> Sacrifice is the axle of the world's wheel and the fecundating power of all things. It is eternal and universal that has been offered by gods as well as by men. We observe, however, that the sacrifices of the earliest Vedic rituals were very much simpler than those of the later ceremonials. With the rise and growth of its products be considered, not only the chief means of propitiating and pleasing the deities, but the source of gods, man and universe. By sacrifice the gods created all things. By sacrifice they became immortal.<sup>5</sup>

Agni is the sacrificial fire of the Ārya ns and all the rituals of the sacrifice centered round the sacred fire. The benefit of light and warmth that fire gives and its service in preparing food are regarded as direct gifts from the gods. Agni is an immortal one who takes up his abode graciously among men. He is the most adorable of sacrifices,

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<sup>3</sup> Stall, Frits, *Agni, the Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, Vol.I, pp.73 & Smith, Frederick M., *The Adyar Library Bulletin*, Vol.51, 1986, p.81.

<sup>4</sup> *Op cit*, Wilson, H.H., VII.99.4., p. 150

<sup>5</sup> ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa, Tr. & Ed. Upadhyaya, G.P., *The Research Institute of Ancient Scientific Studies*, New Delhi, 1967, p. 345

divinest among sages, wise director and accomplisher of all sacrifices. He is 'father of sacrifices' a swift messenger between heaven and earth, conveying the hymns and offerings of the worshippers, calling the gods to the sacrifices, and he is sometimes described as the mouth through which gods and men participate in the sacrifice.

The household sacrifices were part of the earliest worship of the Ārya ns. The head of the family celebrated them and his wife assisted. They were simple and homely attempts to propitiate the heavenly powers. The sacred fire was kindled by the friction of two sticks in the central part of a new house, when it was first inhabited and the fire was never allowed to go out. Each morning and evening the householder and his family assembled round the sacred flame. The master of the house as agnihotri priest of the fire, fed the fire with offerings of wood and clarified these butter ghr̥ta. While Agni, the god present in the fire, carried these simple offering to the gods in the skies. Hymns were chanted and prayers ascended with the smoke. As the flame mounts higher and higher when fed by the butter the gods are said to have devoured the gift and thereby signified their pleasure and satisfaction at the burnt offerings. So fire is supposed to be the carrier of offerings to gods in heaven, thus playing an important role in both *śrauta* and *smārta* ceremonies, in which fire oblations are essential. Agni is a personification of the sacrificial fire.

Originally the sacrifices were simple rituals, magical rather than propitiatory. Keith has argued in connection with the sacrifices

“In the vast majority of these ashes the nature of the ritual can be solved at one of the application of the concept of sympathetic magic

and this is one of the most obvious and beginning to end full of magic element.”<sup>6</sup>

Macdonell observes,

“It is thus impossible to suppose that the sacrificial priests of the *R̥gveda*, the composers of the old hymns, should have occupied an isolated position, untouched by magical practices derived from a much earlier age and afterwards continued throughout the priestly literature of later times”.<sup>7</sup>

In fact a close examination of the belief in magical powers independently of the gods is to be found. So, Macdonell believed that the sacrifice was saturated with magic. But Potdar has different view that the R̥gvedic sacrifice was not magical in character.<sup>8</sup>

Primitive magic is an illusory technique. When they believed in magic practice, their capacity and self reliance increased. The means of production were scanty and insufficient in the earliest stages of human history. Thus, the original purpose of magic was economic. It was directly connected with food gathering or food production. The original purpose of the Vedic sacrifices was also the same for example the *Satrayāga* one of the earliest forms of the Vedic sacrifices and *Mahāvṛta* ritual is related with this sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> Since *Mahāvṛta* means *anna* or food, it may be assumed that the purpose of the *satrayāga* was originally connected with food. Another ancient Vedic sacrifice was called *Vājapeya*<sup>10</sup> which means food and

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<sup>6</sup> Keith, A.B., *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanisadas*, pp.258-59. Bergaigne, La Religion Vedique, Vol.I, pp.138-39.

<sup>7</sup> Macdonell, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol.VIII, London, 1951, p.312.

<sup>8</sup> Potder, K.R., *Sacrifice in the R̥gveda*, p.141.

<sup>9</sup> Keith, A.B., *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, London, 1914, p.cxxx.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp.cx-cxi.

drink. So it was originally an agricultural ritual. It is true that the purpose of sacrifice is magic.

In calls societies primitive magic transforms itself into the secret art of the ruling or privileged class. It survives as a part of religion in its changed a distorted form. In the primitive period the gods being conceived as the divine guests of men would be entertained and fed with fire prepared food. It is undoubtedly the psychological origin of the chief sacrificial use of fire.

Agni and *Yajña* are inseparable. Agni and Soma are friends in the *Yajña*. Agni creates the *Yajña* of individual and cosmic life, triune process with five courses and seven threads.<sup>11</sup> Agni is the ruler of sacrifice. In the *Ṛgveda* where the cosmos is conceived as expending outward from an original point, Sruti does not hesitate to conceive the sacrifice celebrated on earth as the ‘nabhi’ or ‘navel’ of the entire cosmos.

In some passages the aim of the sacrifice is the accumulation of merits. It is a fundamental Vedic idea that sacrifices and good works are stored in the form of merits in the highest heaven. The MuṇḍakaUpaniṣad<sup>12</sup> also says that oblations and sacrifices accumulate in the ‘*SukṛtasyaLoka*’. In certain passages they are even described as forming a glorious body for the sacrifice in the next world. The epithet ‘*stomatastasah*’ which the pitras receive in one passage of the *Ṛgveda* alludes perhaps already to this belief.<sup>13</sup> Sacrifice had come to be conceived as being essential for that good of the society. This is indicated in the *Ṛgveda*<sup>14</sup> where Agni is said to be

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<sup>11</sup> RV, X.52.4; X.124.1; V.S. Agrwala, *op cit.*, p.24.

<sup>12</sup> MuṇḍakaUpaniṣad - I.2.6, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2011, p. 24

<sup>13</sup> Aguliar, H., *The Sacrifice in the Ṛgveda*, London, 1976, p.44.

<sup>14</sup> *Op cit*, Wilson, H. H., p. 78

worshipped with sacrifices for the good of all. The Vedic conception of *Yajña* appears as the creator and redeemer.

### ❖ The purpose of sacrificial worshiping and significance of Agni

Aim of the sacrifice can be achieved by the rituals related with yajana. The rituals were nothing but acts of worshipping the gods. They were performed for the sake of pleasing the deity. The Vedas sometimes suggest that the sacrifice should be held as primary and the mention of the deity secondary. For it is clear that by offering food and prayers, the god is worshipped, being worshipped thus he is pleased; being pleased he offers the fruits or results of the worship. Agni is the lord of something particular; being worshiped in a particular thing by the worshipper. Gods and the sacrifice appear to be considered as dependent on each other right from very ancient days even as indicated in the Gita.

देवानभावयतानेनतेदेवाभावयन्तुवः।

परस्परं भावयन्तःश्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ॥III.11॥<sup>15</sup>

The position of Agni in the Rgvedic sacrifice is outstanding. A very great compliment is paid to those poets who compose hymns for sacrifice. Agni is the axis of the sacrifice, gods are said to be giving gifts through the sacrifices. The large numbers of hymns in the Rgvedic collection are written in honour of Agni. It also indicates the fact that throughout the whole period of the growth of sacrifice, whatever the worshipping or eulogies are made for other gods, the importance of Agni is never decreased. Since he takes the offerings of men to gods, he is said to be an oblation-bearer (Havyavāhan), and appointed by the gods and by men to be an oblation-bearer. The gods depended entirely on Agni, to receive their share in the sacrifice

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<sup>15</sup>*Śrimadbhagavadgita*, Gita press, Gorakhpur, 1960, p.54

and called him as *agnijivah*.<sup>16</sup> In another hymn of the *R̥gveda* the fact that the gods receive the oblations through Agni is more specifically mentioned.<sup>17</sup> His place in the sacrifices is quite unique. His relationship in sacrifice on one side with the gods and on the other with the human beings is vividly described in the *R̥gveda*.<sup>18</sup> Agni is asked to play glorious role in the sacrifice. Agni is said to be assisting both at the beginning as well as at the end of the sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> Sacrifice is said to be made perfect on account of Agni.<sup>20</sup>

Since the sacrificial fire was the centre of the Vedic ritual, Agni comes to be celebrated as the divine counterpart of the earthly priesthood. Macdonell observes:

‘Agni’s priesthood is the most salient feature of his character’.<sup>21</sup>

In Bergaigne’s view he is a priest, the first among the priest and is called the leader of all men.<sup>22</sup> Agni concentrates in himself the various functions of different classes of human priests, the most important of which are mentioned in a verse.<sup>23</sup> The classification of the priests and the description of their duties are given with variations by different authorities. The *Hotṛ* invokes the gods, the *Potṛ*, purifier is for the assistance of the *Brāhmaṇa* or praying priest who remedies any defect in the ritual, the *Netṛ* or leader leads forward the wife of the sacrifice, the *Agnidhā* or kindler lights of the sacrificial fire, the *Praśāstr* or Director is the assistant of the *Hotṛ*, and the *Adhvaryu* or ministering priest is the deacon who measures the ground, builds the altar and makes all the preparations necessary for the sacrifice. The duties

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<sup>16</sup>*Op cit*, Wilson, H. H., p. 82

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, p. 23

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*, p. 15 & pp. 89-90

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*, p. 84

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, p. 15 87 & pp. 98-99

<sup>21</sup> Macdonell, A.A., *A Vedic Reader for Students*, Motilal Banarasidass, 2001, p.2.

<sup>22</sup>Bergaigne, *La Religion Vedique* Vol.I., paris, 1878, p.44.

<sup>23</sup> *Op cit*, Wilson, H. H., p. 25



of the priests, however, varied at different times and according to the nature of the ceremony which they were engaged to perform.<sup>24</sup>

In the first hymn of the *Ṛgveda Samhitā* Agni is characterized by Rsi Madhucchandas Vaisvamitra as being a *rtvij*, a *hotr* and a *purohita*. There was division of labour among the Vedic priests, their work being distributed among different persons. But Agni knows and performs the functions of each priest. Agni's priesthood is essential and archetypical. Thus Agni is the great high priest of the Vedic period.

In the period of the *Ṛgveda*, we do not know much. But the most important functionary appears to have been the *purohita*. Mentioned in the beginning of the very first verse of the *Ṛgveda* god Agni is called a 'purohita'. The vedic *purohita* was doubtless the forerunner of the Brahman in later times. He was in all religious matters the alter ego of the king. When to battle the *purohita* took a leading part in his efforts.<sup>25</sup> *Purohita* is mentioned very frequently and the epithet is associated with Agni as being the foremost in the sacrifice. *Prathamahpurohita* has reference to Agni in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>26</sup>

As invoker of the gods in the earliest stage of sacrifice, he was the only priest. The offerings which were given to the gods by the *hotrs* were placed in fire and hence such offering appear to have come to be known as 'hotra'. As Agni knows the offerings as well as the hymns he is called 'hotravida' and 'hotravāha'.

*Praśāstr* is the name of one of the priests at the Vedic sacrifice. He is mentioned by name in the *Ṛgveda*. He is also called *upavaktr*.<sup>27</sup> He is the *Samhita* whose duty is

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<sup>24</sup> Griffith, R.T.H., *Hymns of the Ṛgveda*, Banaras, 1916, p.130.

<sup>25</sup> Bhargava, P.L., *India in the Vedic Age*, Venkatesvara press, Bombay, 1970, p.260.

<sup>26</sup> *Op cit*, Wilson, H. H., p. 68 & p 214

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp.177, 76 & 186

to direct the other priests what to do and when to perform their functions. Sometimes Agni is called Brahman also. Brahman means praying priest. He is in fact the great priest, as Indra is the great warrior. Agni is the wise god and he is able to correct mistakes in worship of the gods. He knows everything by his wisdom. He is a sage (Kavi) and a seer (Ṛṣi). Agni is the very embodiment of priestly wisdom. Agni is the ritualistic god, so he is interested in the production of prayers and hymns. He is the deviser of distinguished speech, the first deviser of prayer.<sup>28</sup> As the ruler of every thought he promotes the worshipper's meditation. Agni as the wise priest, is able to correct mistakes in worship.

Agni's association with a number of oblations, has given him the epithets like ghṛtannah (the food of Agni), ghṛtakeśaḥ, Sarpirannah, ghṛtayoniḥ, ghṛtaśnuḥ, etc.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that the Vedic sacrifices have continued to be celebrated not only centuries after the Vedic period but even up to the present day is an unquestionable proof of the persistence of the old religion, bearing in mind that the 'Yajña' constitutes its more important element. Bergaigne does not hesitate to consider the sacrifice as the origin of everything according to the Vedas. His words are

‘the sacrifice is to such an extent the principle par excellence that one ascribes to it not only the origin of men, but even that of the gods’.<sup>30</sup>

In the *Rgveda* the altar is the earth's extreme limit and sacrifice is the world's centre.<sup>31</sup> Sacrifice and hymns are vitally and almost inextricably connected with each

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, p. 74

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*, p. 66

<sup>30</sup>*op cit*, Bergaigne, A., pp.138-39.

<sup>31</sup>*op cit*, Wilson, H.H., 58

other. In one hymn of the *Ṛgveda* a poet asked Indra to create a new hymn within the sacrifices, a deed which remains undone by him.

Agni is described as instrumental in bringing the gods to the sacrifice. The number of hymns gives an indication of the importance of a divinity in the sacrificial system. In the Viśvedeva group, Agni appears to have retained his place of importance, being essential for sacrifices. This Viśvedeva gods' worship was centered round Agni, as can be inferred from the description in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>32</sup> Agni having been elected oblation bearer, asks the gods to instruct him in his duties. The first line is spoken by some god who doubts Agni's competence. The second verse is the answer of another god. It is like - He (Agni) springs to life each month, each day that passes: so gods have made him their oblation – bearer. So Viśvedeva gods knew the ability and importance of Agni.

In other place where Śūnasapha's pray to the gods, Prajāpati said 'Agni is the nearest of gods. Varuṇa said to him, 'Agni is the mouth of the gods, the kindest god, praise him'. Being common to all men he (Agni) is called Vaiśvānara.<sup>33</sup> As a protector of his worshippers he consumes with iron teeth the magicians as well as the demons. So he received the epithet Rakṣohana.<sup>34</sup>

The first two hymns of the first book of the *Ṛgveda* are ascribed to the ṚsiMadhucchandāVaiśvāmitra. The deity to whom this hymn is addressed is Agni, the god of fire, the prominent of the deities of the *Ṛgveda*. Agni is the messenger and mediator between earth and heaven, and conveying to them the oblations of their worshippers, inviting them with the sound of his cracking flames and bringing them

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<sup>32</sup>*Ibid*, p. 216-17

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid*, p. 87

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid*, p. 265

down to the place of sacrifice as concentrating in him the various sacrificial duties of different classes of human priests. Agni is the king, superintendent and sovereign of rites and sacrifices and of sacrificial times and seasons.

## ❖ History of fire and Fire Sacrifice

The discovery of fire constitutes a significant landmark in the history of human civilization. The use of fire is the definite difference between man and other animals. Fire was the first source of power discovered by man, which was useful in many ways, e.g. keeping ferocious beasts away from human habitations at night, providing light and warmth etc. It was also used in cooking. It is natural that fire should have been held in great fear and respect from very early times. The importance of fire in early man's life build up a precious symbol in family life and religious rituals. Fire was worshipped both for light as well as heat giving prosperities. While discussing religious ideas regarding fire, Mircea Eliadesays that

“the first technological discoveries, the mastery over fire not only insured the survival and development of the human species; it also produced a universe of mythico-religious values and inspired and fed the creative imagination”<sup>35</sup>

It is true that the control of fire was one of the first and most important achievements of human history. It may well be that the earliest keeper of fire, may not have made fire but only kept it. The first fire was obtained either from forest fires or from volcanoes or some other natural source.

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<sup>35</sup> Eliade, Mircea, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. I, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1975, p.6

In different parts of the world, there are many myths related about how first fire was Stolen? The eminent scholar J.G. Frazer has done immense work on these myths. When we study these myths, we find the origin of fire as a natural phenomenon. Another myth relates from India,<sup>36</sup> some years ago the Oranos at the village of Haril of Chota Nagpur in India, an Orano cultivator had stacked his straw which was struck by lightning and the tree caught fire. Thereupon all the Oranos of the village assembled and decided that since God had sent this 'lightning fire', all existing fire in the village should be extinguished and a portion of this 'Heaven sent fire' should be taken and carefully preserved in every house and should be used for all purposes, and this was accordingly done. These Oranos has long been familiar with fire and they used to produce it by the fire-drill. This has thus been a natural phenomenon from which man have frequently got fire and have a long association with it.

### ❖ **Origin of fire as a natural phenomenon**

Different primitive ways of kindling fire are used by savages even today. Now a day, the use of matches has so improved to use the savagery methods can guess how difficult it is to make fire. So many people carry coal with them in a journey, and try that once fire has been started, it should not be allowed to die out. That is why many people attribute ritual significance to the hearth stone and religious symbolism to an undying fire.

The vedic sages 'Ārya ' without any racial implications but only in the sense of a people who followed the fire cult as opposed to the fireless cult. It is true that the fire cult played a significant role in the pre-Vedic religion. But a recent excavation of the Proto-historic period belonging to the Indus civilization suggests the existence of fire-cult in various forms. Indus civilization's founding was no doubt conclusive

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<sup>36</sup> Roy, Sarat Chandra, *The Oranos of Chotanagpur*, Ranchi, 1915, p.170.

in setting the new religious ideas. Cult practices developed an elaborate ritual system based on fire-sacrifices. At Kalibangan and Lothal were found some new religious features including the fire-altars and kuṇḍas. It means that proto-historic men maintained their relations with the gods and the universe through ritual sacrifice.

In Mohanjodaro,<sup>37</sup> the eastern wall lined with bricks and with an empty space in its centre may have been used as a fire place, the fuel used being either charcoal or wood of which the white ash still remains. S.R.Rao, while discussing the Lothal site, came to opinion that fire-altars must have existed at Harappa and Mohanjodaro also, but they have been missed by the excavators owing to mass digging. One fire-altar was found at Amri and another at Rangpur.<sup>38</sup>

Among these sites Lothal has brought some constructive religious rites observed by the Harappans in Kathiawar. Some of the houses of the lower town had rectangular and circular pits cut into the floor and lined with mud-plaster, while in other rectangular enclosures were built on mud-brick altars. These shallow pits and enclosures are found to contain ash, burnt earth and occasionally a few potsherds. The absence of any opening for supply of fuel and their unusual size and shape suggest that they could not have served as ovens. Some altars are enclosed by burnt brick walls built on a raised platform of mud bricks. A large earthen jar is beautifully painted in the Indus style with peacocks, plant motifs, was found close to the altar, perhaps it was meant for offerings. The burnt brick altars contained terracotta spheroid and avoid balls, triangular cakes and burnt clay lumps besides

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<sup>37</sup> Mackay, E.J.H. *Further excavation at Mohenjodaro*, Vol, I, Report, Delhi, p.23.

<sup>38</sup> Rao, S.R. Lothal, *A Harappan port Town* (1955-62), Vol.I, Delhi, Report, 1979, p.218.

ash and potsherds. Obviously, the circular and rectangular altars must have been built for ritualistic worship of fire.

The earliest evidence of domestic fire-worship is found in Lothal. However, a fire-altar of burnt bricks was built in a public place. One such altar built has been used for communal fire-worship. Two fire-altars with rectangular walls of mud bricks were found along with two sturdy water-pots.<sup>39</sup> The hall of altars in the said house may represent the Agniśālā Referred to in the Atharvaveda.<sup>40</sup>

Among these sites Kalibangan appeared to be of potential importance. The excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India at Kalibangan are for more informative. At the site, there was in the southern square of the citadel mound a series of brick platforms raised to a considerable height and crowned with “fire-altars”, a well and bathing places, and bathing places, and brick lined pits containing ash or animal bones. This complex must be representing a civic ritual centre where animal sacrifice, ritual bathing and some sort of fire ritual featured. The excavators have found that in the houses of lower town apart from the normal domestic hearths and ovens, one room was set aside for a similar fire altar, a feature which is strikingly suggestive of the “fire-room” (agni-śālā) of late Vedic and later Indian tradition. This therefore, one may interpret as representing a domestic fire ritual or worship.

There was however a third context in which these fire-altars were found at Kalibangan in a small brick-walled courtyard outside the lower town towards the east.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>op.cit., Rao, S.R., pp.216-18

<sup>40</sup>*Atharvopcit, Griffith, R.T.H., eda, Ed. & Tr., Whitney, W.D., Motilal Banarasidass, 1971, p. 67*

<sup>41</sup> Allchin R. and Bridget, *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan* p.216; Thapar, B.K., *Ancient Cities of the Indus*, p.200. Excopcit, Griffith, R.T.H., ated the Kalibangan site and writes the op cit, Griffith, R.T.H., ailable remains do indicate that some of these might hop cit, Griffith, R.T.H., e been used for religious or ritual purposes.

In Vedic Mythology, Agni and Soma, the two gods form a dual deity i.e. Agnisoma. According to Sāyana, Matariśvān from Svarga has brought Agni or fire and the Falcon bird brought Soma from the mountain. There are representations of the eagle or the falcon on the Indus seals and pottery. It may be suggested that the eagle or falcon of the proto-historic India may be related with fire-god.

In the Vedic mythology it is said that through Agni, the diving bird, man goes to the highest place of the Sun, to the highest heaven. The rite of cremation connected therefore the mythology of the future life. Agni takes the corpse of the other world, the fathers and the god.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the beginning of fire-worship in India may be traced back in the pre-Vedic time. In view of the representations of the Fire in various forms on the protohistoric seals, potteries combined with the non-Ārya n primitive tribes of India, it is suggested that the Fire was worshipped by the chalcolithic people of India. Not only has this but the evidences of fire-altars or Agni kuṇḍa from Navdatoli, Lothal and Kalibangan suggested the existence of fire- worship. It would appear that the rituals, connected with these fire altars played a dominant role in the religious life of the Harappans and others.

### ❖ Early Vedic Fire Worship

The Hindu tradition affirms Rgvedic literature as the foundation of Hinduism. The sacred source of Indian religion is the *R̥gveda* the oldest and most important Vedic text. It is a collection of mantras or hymns praising the deities or divine powers. The

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<sup>42</sup>op.cit., Wilson. H.H., pp 230-40



early Vedic religion starts with nature worship because nature provides never ending puzzle to his powers of understanding. Rgvedic sage tried to establish a correlation between man's activities and the activities of nature. He also tried to read natural phenomena in terms of his own behavior. When there was thunder or some other kind of disturbance he thought the gods were angry and when everything was peaceful, he thought that the gods were pleased. But the Vedic gods were not only nature gods, they were also functional gods. The Vedic deities are nearer to the physical phenomenon which they represented. It is clear that a few deities dominated in the Rgvedic religion and one of them is Agni, a male deity who is praised repeatedly throughout the *Rgveda*. Agni indeed is the central vision of reality in the *Rgveda*.

The Vedic religion is an Indian creation. If some material was borrowed, all its elements were brought together in a new system which bears the powerful impress of the Brahmanic spirit.<sup>43</sup> There can be no doubt that the Indo-Europeans, before they separated into different parts, had a religion. The essential feature of the religion of the Indo-European Ārya ns is the personification and worship of bright powers of nature,<sup>44</sup> whose chief sources were Agni, sun etc. The worship of the fire is one of the common features of the religious lives of the Indo-Europeans, Indo-Iranians and the Indo-Āryans.

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<sup>43</sup>Renou, L., Vedic India, p.57.

<sup>44</sup> The concept of the *deivos* derived from the root *div* – to shine is Indo-European. A few variants of it are – *deva* (Sanskrit), *deus* (Latin) *dieva* (Lithuanian), *dia* (Irish), *diev* (Latvian, Griffith, R.T.H., 1927). See Buck, C.D., A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages, p-1464; Griswold, H.D., The Religion of the *Rgveda*, Oxford, 1923, p.4.

The common word used for the fire by the different Indo-European people proves the existence of a common form of worship.<sup>45</sup> The original linguistic identity of all these words is witness to a common language and thought which prove identity of origin. They worshipped fire and other natural forces. People worshipped in primitive times the mysterious powers, the part of the infinitive, the divine anima, which manifested itself to mankind in the phenomena of the sky, of the fire etc. but not as yet a god who was regarded as a person or who exerted influence outside his own sphere.<sup>46</sup>

The Indo-European family is grouped around the hearth. The hearth makes its unity and dominates its worship. The fire is like the father or the head of the village. Because during the long cold winters of their own northern home the hearth fire must have been the centre of the domestic life of the Indo-European clans and as such must have been a place connected with religious rites. It is highly probable that the hearth fire itself received offerings in connection with the custom of making gifts to the gods in fire. It is a formidable power and a friend of man, the heat which gives life, the hearth which cooks his food and presides over all the acts of his life. The distinct holiness of the housefire was adopted by Indo-Āryans from their ancestors. After separation, the different races developed their own cult and normally at every place had an important role of the Fire worship.

### ❖ Agni (the fire-god): the chief terrestrial deity of the *R̥gveda*

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<sup>45</sup> Linguistic evidence of Agni are as follows – Agni (Sanskrit), Ignis (Latin), Ugnis (Lithuanian), Ognī (Slovak), Griffith, R.T.H., onic), Agni (Iranian). See Buck, C.D., A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages, Chicago, 1964, p.54

<sup>46</sup> *Op cit*, Hastings, J., E.R.E., Vol.II, p.35.

Shrinivasan Iyengar<sup>47</sup> believes that the Ṛṣis of the Vedas used the word Ārya without any racial implications, but only in the sense of a people who followed the fire-cult as opposed to the fireless cult. In Vedic times both cults prevailed in India. First that was followed by the Āryans, who made offerings to the gods through Agni because they believed Agni to be the mouth of the gods. Second the Dasyus whom the Āryans described as anagni, the fireless. The cult of fire has been maintained in India down to the present time i.e. for about 3000 years.<sup>48</sup> The most dignified, however, of all the divinities which grow from the element of fire is the Vedic Agni, the wise and great priest of mankind. The prominent Vedic god Agni is a powerful benefactor of his worshippers, giving them the prosperity of domestic welfare, healthy offspring and consuming their enemies and overcoming the malevolent. No wonder that the very first Vedas and a great number about 200 hymns are addressed to him. With the exception of the VIIIth and IXth all other Books begin with a hymn in praise of Agni. Of all the deities of the *Ṛgveda*, Agni, the god of fire, is the most important next only to Indra.<sup>49</sup> In the Nirukta, Yāska tells us that earlier mythology of the *Ṛgveda* had resolved all the deities into three classes according to their position Sun in the sky, Indra (storm) or Vayu (wind) in the atmosphere and fire (Agni) on the earth.<sup>50</sup> The classification of the Vedic deities is on the natural bases, which they represent. The various phenomena have been grouped to the triple division, suggested by the *Ṛgveda* itself and adhered to by its oldest commentator.<sup>51</sup>

From the text itself it would be seen that Indra, Agni and Soma are by far the greatest gods.<sup>52</sup> Agni's importance is in no way less in human life than that of the Sun and

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<sup>47</sup> Iyengar, Shrinivas, P.T., Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture, Journal of Indian History, Madras, Vol.II, part I, 1928, p.63.

<sup>48</sup> Griswold, H.D., *The Religion of the Ṛgveda*, Oxford, 1923, p.151.

<sup>49</sup> Tripathi, Gaya Charan, *Vedic Devata*, Vol.II, Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, Varanasi, 1982, p.411

<sup>50</sup> Yaska, Nirukta, 7/2/5; RV.X.158.1; X.88.10; 164.46; Brihad-devata, 1/5, 1/69

<sup>51</sup> Macdonell, A.A., *Vedic Mythology*, Motilal Banarsidass, Varanasi, 1963, p.20-21.

<sup>52</sup> Keith, A.B., *The Mythology of all Races*, Oxford, 1909, Vol.VI, pp. 20-21.

lightning because as evening drew on and the darkness deepened, Agni was the only divinity left on earth to dispel the terrors of the night, which is not possible with lightning or the Sun. That's why the Rgvedic sages tell us that three hundred, three thousand, thirty nine gods have worshipped Agni.<sup>53</sup> He can be prayed for purification from sin and protection from enemies and on the positive side for obtaining wealth, good homes, cattle, glory and happiness indeed for all that man finds valuable in his own life and for society also. The *Rgveda* is full of hymns to Agni to this effect. Agni is the deity of fire, which lights up the universe. The religion of the Aryans is the worship of the elements and activities of nature like Agni, Sun etc. These deities contained matter and spirit both, the substances and the hidden powers behind them.

The study of philosophy began in India at a very early period. There are some hymns in the *Rgveda* and *Atharvaveda* of a deeply speculative character, which indicate a long period of profound reflection on the origin and nature of things. It is evident that the Rgvedic sages were conscious of higher influences, of divine help and dependence on some superior power or powers. According to Hindu tradition there is a correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm and forces which generate gods in men's minds who also represent powers and potencies that regulate the world outside. Agni is a god because fire as the source of heat and light is a thing of great human value that adorns every home. Man's valuation of heat and light may be a subjective thing but Agni is also a suitable symbol for moral purity, one of the functions of fire being purification. Agni as a god is, so to say, the spiritual illumination dear to man. So god making is not a purely imaginary process. If the godhood of Agni consists in his function of acting as a symbol for heat and light, purity and illumination, that men may come to value and consider as sacred.

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<sup>53</sup>op.cit., Wilson. H.H., p. 51

Another qualification of the Vedic gods is that they are constantly taking over one another's functions-without any diminution of his divinity, for example, Agni, when he stands for the Sun, can take on the function of giving men heat and light. Agni is the symbol of the wonder of life itself<sup>54</sup> and Agni Vaiśvānara is identified with the divine itself in man and outside man.<sup>55</sup> According to the Vedantic view of the text, the light is Brahma, seated spontaneously in the heart as the means of true knowledge to which all the senses, together with the mind and consciousness, refer as to the one cause of creation.<sup>56</sup>

Agni is the god most often conjoined with him as a dual divinity. In *Ṛgveda*, Agni assures Indra that he would grant strength to Indra if the latter offers him a portion of the sacrifice. Indra agrees to this. He thought that Agni would become his friend and destroy the enemies. Agni is considered as being a 'chaplain'. A purohita is not ordinary priest but the purohita is a kind of military priest. Agni used 'spiritual' weapon in the battle. Indra is a warrior god and the god Agni's particular office is to slay (kill) the foes of the community. Both are intimate friends. Macdonell<sup>57</sup> has already drawn attention to the fact that the association of the couple Indra-Agni is very intimate. The fact is remarkable as we have examples exhibiting a common activity of both gods in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>58</sup> Indra slew and Agni burned the Dasyus. In the *Ṛgveda* the god of fire is said to be on the same chariot with Indra.<sup>59</sup> Macdonell opines that it is doubtless from his lightning aspect that Agni is so often joined with Indra in his conflicts against the demons.<sup>60</sup> It cannot be denied that both gods fight the dasyus and other hostile powers. That's why Indra constitutes with him a dual

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<sup>54</sup>*op.cit.*, Wilson. H.H., p. 96

<sup>55</sup>*op.cit.*, Wilson. H.H., p. 101

<sup>56</sup>*Op cit*, Griffith, R.T.H, p.288, fn.5.

<sup>57</sup>*op.cit.*, Macdonell, A.A., Vedic Mythology, p.127;

<sup>58</sup>*op.cit.*, Wilson, p. 67

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid*, p. 56 & 234

<sup>60</sup> Macdonell, A.A., *Mythological Studies in the Ṛgveda*, II, in J.R.A.S., 1895, p.175.

deity in more hymns than with any other deity. Agni is moreover the only deity who receives the epithet Vṛtrahan ‘slayer of Vṛtra’ which is the chief and specific characterization of Indra. The god of fire is in seven passages, conjointly with Indra, called ‘Vṛtra’. Macdonell’s<sup>61</sup> opinion seems to carry weight that this is also due to Agni’s frequent association with Indra as a dual divinity.

### ❖ Similes used for the God Agni in the Ṛgveda

Agni has three heads, and three tongues.<sup>62</sup> Agni’s personification is very rudimentary. His nature as fire is so obvious that Agni is called butter-backed butter-faced and flame haired, burning jawed, thousand eyed, thousand horned with reference to his flames.<sup>63</sup> Agni is said to be dressed in many coloured garments. He has hundred thousands of eyes, with which to behold the deeds of men. Agni with his sharpened teeth consumed those people who break Varuṇa’s commandments. Agni has a golden chariot with which he travels the mid air by straightest paths, seeks the gods directly and brings them to the sacrifice. The physical phenomenon of fire being always present before the poets, anthropomorphism in the case of Agni is not much developed, his body parts being various aspects of the sacrificial fire itself. He is likened to a bull, or house or bird, an eagle or haṁsa.<sup>64</sup>

He is also invited to drink the soma, and in one hymn he is called soma gopa, a guardian of soma. He is borne on a luminous car drawn by two or more horses in which he brings the gods to receive the offerings of men.<sup>65</sup> Agni’s brightness is often

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<sup>61</sup> Macdonell, A.A., op.cit., J.R.A.S., 1895, p.195.

<sup>62</sup> Banerjea, J.N., The Development of Hindu Iconography, Calcutta, Bibliotheca Indica, 1974, p.44.

<sup>63</sup> op.cit., Wilson. H.H., p.48

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, RV, I.58.5., I.149.3; VI.12.6, VII.15.4 & I.65.9

<sup>65</sup> op.cit., Wilson. H.H., p. 23-29

described. He is bright flamed and bright coloured. Since all these references are found in the *Ṛgveda* it may be said that the anthropomorphic traits came to be attached with Agni. But there is no full development of Agni as individual divine being due to the constant presence of the physical Agni. Agni's case exemplifies the trend of anthropomorphism so prominently found in the *Ṛgveda*. The rational view is that *Ṛgveda* is a human document, the gods are man-made, and they have human characteristics. Therefore, it is true that the gods and their lives have primarily to be looked at from the standpoint of human values and human behavior. Agni, the god of fire is the centre of domestic life and has an intimate relation with men. That is why when the ṛṣhis of the *Ṛgveda* described the functions and characters of Agni, they used similes quite often.

In four hundred eighty nine hymns of the *Ṛgvedic* Agni suktas about six hundred and sixty two similes have been used. These similes are related with divine, social, natural and emotional subjects.

## ❖ Social aspect of fire worship

The worship of fire, due to its sacrificial importance, forms an essential theme of almost all the social and religious rites and ceremonies of the Ṛgvedic society. It is a sign of the popularity of fire worship in the early Vedic period. In that period Agni has the dignity of a great god because he represented some dominant aspects of nature and was equally important for the purposes of rituals. Agni was the centre of domestic life and produced an intimate relation such as is not easily found in the worship of other gods. Agni's function as a cosmic force was vitally connected with the growth of animal and vegetable life and so the cause of food, wealth and prosperity. Fire was essential for social life. Thus, fire became the chief domestic deity and a constant source of help in secular, as well as, sacred life of the householder. The family hearth was the first 'holy of the holies'. The fire that was kept burning in every house became a perpetual sign for all influences that bound men with family and social relations and became the centre of all domestic rites and ceremonies.

Agni's role in different ceremonies was essential because he was believed to be a great protector against illness, demons and hostile spirits. Not only this Agni's another role was that of the priest and in that capacity he supervised the ceremonies. Every rite was performed in his presence and contract and bond executed by Agni.<sup>66</sup>

It was an eternal witness around which, during the *upanayana* and marriage ceremonies, the student and the husband and wife made circumambulations, so that their ties may be valid and permanent.

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<sup>66</sup>*op.cit.*, Wilson. H.H., pp.89-95



The earliest references to the institution of marriage in India are in the *R̥gveda*. In the Vedic age marriage was regarded a social and religious duty and a necessity. The *R̥gveda* proves the presence of a sacred fire at the marriage ceremony. O Agni, give (us) husbands our wives back again, with offspring'. Agani in the tenth mandal of the *R̥gveda*, Agni had given the bride again with splendor and with ample life.

Other social aspect of the fire worship is *pitṛyajñā* or ancestor worship. After a man died, it was thought necessary to send his body to heaven. This could be only done by consigning it to Agni. After the body was consumed by it and reduced to ashes, the dead could receive a new body in the world of yama and join the pitaras and his ancestord'. The respect for the spirits of the departed ancestors was other social dutifulness ever present in the minds of the early Āryans. The *Śrāddha* ceremony of modern Hinduism has become a very important part of the religious and social life. So, immediately after a man had died offerings were made to provide for him. So the presentation of offerings ceased to be merely dutiful service and became religious worship, the spirit of the ancestors thus became gods in the families of their descendants.<sup>67</sup>

The daily *pitṛyajñā* or ancestor worship is one of the fire sacrifices, which every married man ought to perform. In the Vedas, the pitaras are very often invoked along with Agni. Agni is supposed to convey the souls of the righteous dead to their abode. The pitaras are classed as higher, lower and middle, as eaelier and later. Who though not always known to their descendants, are known to Agni. So people worshipped Agni to please their ancestors.

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<sup>67</sup> Clayton, A.C., The *R̥gveda* and Vedic Religion, Motilal Bnarasidass, Delhi, 1982, pp.98-101

Not only this, five hymns of the tenth book of the *Ṛgveda* throw some light on the funeral rites and the conception of future life. Cremation was the usual method of disposing the dead. The ideas of future life are specially connected with it.

### ❖ Position of Agni in Later Vedic age:

In the later vedic age, Agni occupies the foremost position in the scriptures and the society. The worship of Agni and his various aspects continued in the later Vedic age. In the Yajurveda, the worshipper prayed to Agni to keep himself away from sin.<sup>68</sup> Another request is made to Agni by the worshipper to keep him away from sin and follow righteousness so that he (worshipper) may enjoy the pleasure of blessings by leading a long and virtuous life.<sup>69</sup> These hymns represent the friendly and beneficent nature of fire that was given divine status to be adored in the Vedic literature. The belief in these powers may take the form of gods like Agni, which is implored by devotees to favour them with prosperity of wealth, cows, horses etc. by means of offering sacrifice along with the recitation of prayers. According to the Sāmaveda, the gods who occupy important positions in *Ārcikas* include god Agni, with 134 stanzas addressed to him. The *Uttarārcika* of Sāmaveda has 21 sections and the entire book XV is addressed to Agni,<sup>70</sup> because Agni has a prominent place in any sacrifice.

The Yajurveda is concerned with sacrificial formulae and sacrifices became more detailed and established rituals were set up. In the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda we have the first

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<sup>68</sup>*Yajurveda*, Tr., Griffith R.T.H., Banarasa, 1957, p. 95

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid*, p. 82

<sup>70</sup>Bhattacharji, Sukumari, *Literature in the Vedic Age*, vol I, Calcutta, 1972, p.163.

hint of what sacrifices meant to the community and why they were offered. At the time of the Yajurveda the sacrificial lore was established elaborately.

The god Agni in the Atharvaveda has many more functions and names. Agni's name finds mention in the Atharvaveda approximately 650 times. Agni obviously occupies the foremost place in the Atharvaveda too. He is addressed in his various forms. A prayer is offered to him to protect a house against fire. As lightning Agni springs from the clouds. He is repeatedly invoked as the sun. In the Atharvaveda Agni Vaisvanara is prayed to protect the people.<sup>71</sup>

### ❖ Brāhmaṇas

The Brāhmaṇas are generally supposed to be the works mainly dealing with the cult of sacrifice, in which the god Agni played an important role. In the earliest reflections of the Brāhmaṇas all the gods are said to be the different aspects of Agni.<sup>72</sup> When we study the ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa, the kaṇḍas from 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> mainly deal with the sacrificial fire and construction of the fire altar which is symbolic of Prajāpati, Agni called Agni-rahasya or Agni-vidyā occurs in this Brāhmaṇa also. The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa elaborately discusses the origin and nature of the god Agni. According to this Brāhmaṇa, He (prajāpati) generated him first (agre) of all the gods and therefore he is called Agni, for Agni (they say) is the same as agri. He being generated went forth as the first (pūrva), for him who goes first; they say that he goes at the head (agre). Such then is the origin and nature of that Agni.

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<sup>71</sup>*op cit*, Ed. & Tr., Whitney, W.D., p. 37

<sup>72</sup> Sharma, T.R., *Studies in the Sectarian Upanisads*, Motilal Banarasiidass, 1967, p.79.

ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa says that the functions of the Upaniṣads is to formulate – Agni is the wind. Agni is the sun, Agni is the year. The devotee thus praise god Agni in the Īśaupaniṣad,

“O Agni lead us by the good path that we may enjoy the wealth (the fruits of the good deed we have done) Thou knowest all our deeds, Lord destroy the deceitful sin in us.”<sup>73</sup>

The later Vedic literature contains a number of references which give an idea of the image of god Agni. A critical study of the features of Vedic gods will reveal that the nature background is a marked feature of Vedic mythology but at the same time anthropomorphic concept of the gods has also been developed. The Vedic gods were conceived in their morphic and feteistic forms also. It is true that the Vedic Āryans thought are beyond the crude material stage in the evolution of the concept of Agni. No doubt the idea of heat and lightning predominates in him, yet he is a god beyond and above it. In the *Ṛgveda* we find anthropomorphic traits and this tendency of anthropomorphism is continued in the later Vedic period also. In the *Atharvaveda*, Agni is the overlord of forest trees, from where may be first time man found fire.<sup>74</sup> The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa points out that Prajāpati creates Agni from his mouth. Prajāpati is Agni's father and sometimes he is Agni's son.<sup>75</sup> *Atharvaveda* points out Agni's birth from water. According to ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa *śadhya* (medicines) are considered as the mother of Agni. *Dyaus* is the father of Agni. In the lightning form he (Agni) moved between the earth and sky. Among the terrestrial gods the central figure is that of Agni. In ancient times gods and asuras both were mortals except the god Agni who was immortal. The *Taittiriya Samhitā* points out that Agni

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<sup>73</sup>*Īśopaniṣad*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 1943, p. 32

<sup>74</sup>*op cit*, Ed. & Tr., Whitney, W.D., p. 72

<sup>75</sup>*op cit*, Upadhyaya, G.P., 98

has only one brother that is Jātavedas. Elsewhere the same *Samhitā* mentions that Agni has three elder brothers. Agni has seven tongues. We find an element of mystery regarding numbers and metres as produced by repetitions. Thus ‘O Agni, are four faggots, seven tongues, seven sages, seven dear stations, seven hotṛ priests offer to you in seven (different) ways’<sup>76</sup>. The seven flames of Agni are given seven different names that are Kali, Karāli, Manojava, Sudhūmavarṇa, Sphuliṅgani, and Viśvaruchi.

### ❖ Connection between Agni and sacrifice

No doubt sacrifice occupies a very important position in the religious system of the Vedas and the Brāhmaṇas. It is used by means of both propitiation and compels the deities for securing prosperity, for removing undesirable elements such as enemies, evil spirits, demons, as well as, securing the seat of heaven also. There is not much difference in the Ṛgvedic, Yajurvedic and Atharvavedic sacrifices. The extract of the sacrifice is enkindling the fire and offering oblations in it while recitation *ṛcās* for the achievement of prosperity, happiness and ultimate goal of heaven. After the Vedas, we come to the Brāhmaṇas as the source of our information. Sacrifice is highly praised and highly recommended in the Brāhmaṇas. They are quite formal in the rituals. The Brāhmaṇas give rules for the performance of the śrauta sacrifices and the explanation of the purpose and meaning of the sacrificial acts. The Brāhmaṇas are continuing the tradition of Yajurveda, and mostly occupied with the śrauta sacrifices.

In the Brāhmaṇa literature the sage Vasiṣṭha’s contributions to the sacrificial cult is unique and elaborate. The Aranyakas and the Upaniṣads are mainly philosophical and regard the rituals as inferior. But the Vedic sacrifices and rituals were still very

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<sup>76</sup>*op cit*, Keith, A.B., p. 35

popular in their times and they have found frequent mention, here and there, in them. *Yajña* or sacrifice is often described as a boat that carries the sacrifice to heaven. In the Brāhmaṇas the daily sacrifice known as agnihotra is compared to a ship and that ship sails heavenwards. The āhavaniya and gārhapatya fire are the two sides of that heaven bound ship and the offerer of milk is its steersman. He who goes to the sea without a ship does never come out of it.

### ❖ Classification of sacrifice

We observe however, that the sacrifices of the earliest Vedic period were very much simpler than those of the later ceremonial. In the later period consists in the performance of multifarious sacrifices. Sacrifices may be classified under two broad categories:

1. *Nitya* or obligatory
2. *Naimittika* or occasional.

The first should be performed daily. The performance of these rites may not produce any tangible results (karaṇephalaśrutināsti) but their non-performance brings disaster (akaraṇepatyāvāya). Sacrifices like agnihotra are performed daily. In the agnihotra two principal oblations are offered in the evening, the first being offered to Agni and the second to Prajāpati. Similarly, two main offerings are made in the morning of which the first belongs to Sūrya (the form of Agni) and second to Prajāpati. According to the Atharvaveda the three libations of Soma during the day that is morning, evening and mid-day. In the morning libation Agni is the deity, and the mantra is gāyatrī. Agni makes the sacrifice prosperous.

The second category i.e. naimittika or occasional constitutes many types of sacrifices. The kāmya or wish yielding sacrifice comes under the occasional type. These

sacrifices are performed for the fulfillment of various desires such as possession of wealth, cows, the birth of sons and the ultimate purpose is to achieve heavenly blessings. Some sacrifices have purely political value, such as, the *Rājasūya*, *Vājapeya*, *Aśvamedha*, *Bṛhaspatisava*, *Sautrāmaṇi*, *Purūsamedha*. These sacrifices are connected with kingship and paramount sovereignty. According to the *Atharvaveda* such sacrifices are 22 in number. Every morning, evening and night offerings are made to the Agni of the assembly to protect the assembly, councillors and those who sit in the assembly.<sup>77</sup> In these sacrifices Agni is not only the oblation bearer but he is invoked with oblations, in each one of them.

### ❖ Development and change in the form of sacrifice

It may be observed, however, that the earliest Vedic rituals were simpler than those of the later period. The Yajurveda represents an advanced stage in the progress of rituals. During this period, the functions of different priests were specialized. During the time of the Atharvaveda sacrificial terminology is fully developed, what we come across in the Brāhmaṇas is that the Vedic rituals have become thoroughly formal. The Brāhmaṇas give rules for the performance of the śrauta sacrifices and the Atharvaveda offers explanation of the purpose and meaning of the sacrificial acts. In the Ṛgvedic period, the number of priests was small. In fact originally the father of a family was the priest who offered sacrifice for his own household fire was called yajamāna, which means the sacrificer. But as the rituals expanded in bulk and the sacrifice increased in number considerably and became complicated in form the number of priests also increased. For the purpose of sacrifice priests are indispensable.

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<sup>77</sup>op cit, Whitney, W.D., p. 298

Priesthood was essential not only to gods and men but also to the asuras and demons. The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa mentions the names of Kilata and Ākuli as priest of asuras. As a rule four priests are necessary for performing a sacrifice that is hota, adhvaryu, udgāta and Brahmā. The fourth priest is the superintending priest of the sacrifice called Brahmā. Brahmā is responsible for smooth management and safe completion of the sacrifice. The AitareyaBrāhmaṇa<sup>78</sup> says, he is called the physician of the sacrifice as he mends the flaws of the rites to make the function flawless. The whole sacrifice is established in the performing priests.

The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa identifies the fire-altar with the prime *puruṣa* called Prajāpati, the lord of creation.<sup>79</sup> That same person became Prajāpati, and that person which became Prajāpati is this very Agni (Fire alter), who is now being built. This fire altar stands for a symbol of the reconstruction of the universe, in the shape of Prajāpati. In this mystic symbolism the human sacrificer or yajamāna is equated with Agni which is the divine counterpart of the human sacrifice; Agni, the god of fire again is equated with the lord of creation Prajāpati. Thus, the human sacrificer is identified with Prajāpati through his identification with Agni.

The fire altar is a great symbol of mysterious power. The whole lay out of the construction and the brick structure of which is soaked, as it were in the Agni Prajāpati mystery. This mystery of the sacrificial ritual consists mainly in the creation of the fire altar and the ceremonies connected with the fire-pan, which fell almost entirely within the province of the adhvaryu priest.

In both the *Rgveda* and the *Atharvaveda* we find that sacrifices are performed not only to please gods but also to destroy enemies and to achieve various worldly ends.

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<sup>78</sup>AitareyaBrāhmaṇa, Haug, Martin, Bombay, 1863, p. 67

<sup>79</sup>op cit, Upadhyaya, G.P., p. 123



Thus, the element of magic is noticeable in such sacrificial rites. The discomfiture and destruction of hostile persons are some of the objects of magical practices. It is true that in the *Ṛgveda*, there are so many references to sorcerers, but in the Atharvaveda they are much more numerous.

In the Brāhmaṇa literature we find the association of magic with sacrifice. The AitareyaBrāhmaṇa describes the magical power of the fire and the importance of the purohita in wielding these powers for the destruction of enemies of a king. The witchcraft and sacrifice are the two main weapons of the Atharvadic priests. Both can be used for good and bad purposes. The magical sacrifice is offered to the demons with chaff, which is devoid of any substance.

### ❖ Secret of fire worship

Agni when offered with ghee and fuel make a hole in the eyes, heart, tongue and teeth of the piśācas, who then becoming helpless leave his body. The man then becomes highly spirited, holy and free from phthisis. Sacrifice destroys piśācas and demons. In the magical sacrifice a channel is dug round the sacrificial fire. It is filled in with hot water. Cake is offered in it. In the magical sacrifice to kill rivals (saptas), niggards (arayas), piśācas and howling female evil spirits, sadanvā, the fuel of aśvatha, krkatasa, eranda, slesmantika, khadira and reeds are offered in the fire.

The two things required in magical rite are fire and water. In the ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa water and fire are said to be able to drive away evil spirits. The sacrificial spoons are used to burn the rākṣasas. Kravyada (carnivorous) fire is used in certain magical rites. This fire is magically kindled and the fire is supposed to manifest the demons, goblins, and various other evil spirits. Fire, pleased by sacrifices connected with

abhicāra, is supposed to depute for the benefit of the sacrificer, a female oppressive demon, having teeth to destroy evil forces.

This magic and demonology is related with superstition also. Such superstitions increased in the period of the Atharvaveda and Yajurveda. There are ample examples of such superstitions in the Atharvaveda. The married couple desired to first have the birth of a son. Sāyana and Kauśika prescribes that Agni churned by rubbing aśvattha and śami sticks is to be thrown in ghee. This mixture is to be treated as paidha (to be put in the right nostrils of the pregnant women with the right thumb). This is thus a symbolic rite. The birth of Agni and son are thus identical.<sup>80</sup> In the same way a certain woman, who desires that her rival should not have a male child, according to Kauśika, resorts to the hymn in an appeal to Agni to drive off the rival's born or unborn child.

Magical rites are used for various purposes like that for securing sovereignty and stability which prescribe that the king should offer oblations to Indra in a sacrifice for securing supremacy. The priest action on behalf of the king makes offerings in Agni, so that the king should be the sole ruler, absolute ruler and sovereign ruler of the asuras. To make the king firm, the offering of firmness (dūrvahavis) is offered in Agni. Varuṇa, Indra and Agni maintain fixed royalty on him. Not only is this, the diseases like takman or fever driven away by the god Agni.

## ❖ Philosophical aspect of Fire worship

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<sup>80</sup>*Ibid*, p. 35

We do not notice a systematic philosophical thought in the Yajurveda and Atharvaveda, but they are scattered here and there in the hymns. During the time of the Yajurveda entire words, formula passages and rituals were known as *yajus*. The Upaniṣadic doctrines about the universality and indestructibility of the Brāhmaṇa are also found in the Atharvaveda. It is true that in the later Vedic literature sacrifice has a prominent place and it has a close relation with philosophical, ethical, universal and other moral values. There is also a close relationship between penance and sacrifice. The sacrifice is connected with Agni which has heat for the performance. The production of heat (tapas) as the original idea in the performance of penance was transferred to the body and mind. The Brāhmaṇas are generally supposed to be the works mainly dealing with the cult of sacrifice but they have also made their contribution towards the development of the ethical ideas. In the AitareyaBrāhmaṇa, the gods do not accept the oblations from a person of this Brāhmaṇa. All the gods are the different aspects of Agni. According to the ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa the idea of *Yajña* (sacrifice) is said to be the origin of *Ṛta* or cosmic order.<sup>81</sup>

The idea of *vrata* meant an attempt to develop divine qualities. Truth is the most important of these qualities. A man who tells a lie becomes impure and has no right to perform a sacrifice. In the view of the TaittirīyaBrāhmaṇa, that helps in the functioning of the cosmic principle, called *Ṛtam* in the Veda which also means truth.

“Yajñovaibhuvanasyanabhiḥ”<sup>82</sup>

The sacrifice is the source or *Ṛtam*, the principle underlying the creation which is equivalent to truth and moral order. Agni the principal form of religion is the sacrifice. It is also termed the foundation of good deeds, acts of piety. The devotee

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<sup>81</sup>*op cit*, Upadhyaya G.P., p. 21

<sup>82</sup>*TaittirīyaBrāhmaṇa*, Ed. Apte, H.N., Poona, 1898, p. 67

of the Īśo-Upaniṣad is satya dharma, devoted to truth. He prays to god, conceived as Agni, cosmic divine energy. The last verse of the Upaniṣad says

‘O Agni, lead us by the good path that we may enjoy the wealth (the fruits of the good deeds we have done). Thou knowest all our deeds. Lord destroys the deceitful sin in us’.<sup>83</sup>

Sacrifice also achieves union with god and the sacrifice. As the gods are immortal, the sacrifice imports immortality to the sacrifice through his union with the gods. All the Brāhmaṇas state in identical language ‘yajnovaiviṣṇuḥ’- the sacrifice is Viṣṇu, Similarly we have the statements - The sacrifice is Agni, Prajāpati is the sacrifice. In the BrāhmaṇasYajmāna’s identification with the sacrifice is mentioned in clear terms. The Avyaktopaniṣad<sup>84</sup> treats dhyāna as a *Yajñā* and recommends that one should offer one’s ownself as an oblation into the fire in form of Brāhmaṇa.

Such a man attains Brahman having conquered all the worlds. The philosopher DadhyacAtharvan’s famous principle is ‘madhu-vidya’. He seems to have held the doctrine of the mutual inter-dependence of things, because all of them are indissolubly connected in the through the self. All things are related to one another because they are bound together by the same basic bond, namely the self. The earth, fire, wind, sun, Space, moon, lightning, ether, law (Dharma).

Agni’s function can be taken over by other gods. The sun can take on the function of giving men heat and light, Varuṇa may confer moral purity or spiritual illumination. So Vedic gods constantly take over one another’s function without any diminution of his divinity, for his divinity is his function and this remains no matter

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<sup>83</sup> Swami Ranganathananda, *The Message of the Upaniṣad*, Vighneshvara Publication, Bangalore, 1952, p.164

<sup>84</sup> Op cit, Griffith, R.T.H., yaktopaniṣad, 3.2 and 4.3; Sharma, T.R., *Studies in the Sectarian Upanisads*, Vighneshvara Publication, Bangalore, p.123

what the name under which it is performed. Agni is both physical heat that sustains the body and spiritual illumination that sustains the mind. So worship of Agni is adoration of values of life as well as of mind. Not only this, Agni has symbolic character also, which is used in specific sense. Agni is the symbol of the wonder of life itself and Agni Vaiśvānara (universal) is identified with the divine itself in man and outside man.<sup>85</sup> Once the symbolic character of Agni is recognized, he can be preyed to for anything, for conquest in assembly, for purification from sin, protection from enemies, good homes, wealth, progeny, glory and certainly bliss, indeed for all that man finds valuable in his individual and social existence and the Vedas are full of hymns to Agni to this effect.

At last Agni has been associated with the Ātman, though only analogically. He (Agni) is compared to the Ātman in regard to is blissfulness.<sup>86</sup> According to the ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa fire is taken to symbolize the Ātman, while soma-juice the prāṇa. When the juice is poured into the fire, it is taken to amount to placing of the prāṇa in the Ātman.

आत्मावैअग्निः प्राणः सोमआत्मँस्तुप्राणं...प्राणोमध्यतः |<sup>87</sup>

Accordingly, the gods are said to be centered around fire as their Ātman. Due to the universality of fire, the Ātman also being identified with it, come to assume universality. Thus there emerges a two fold Ātman, the individual and the divine. The āhavaniya fire is the divine Ātman and the offering is the individual Ātman, which is regarded as mortal. When offered to the divine Ātman, the individual

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<sup>85</sup>*op.cit.*, Wilson. H.H., p.110

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>87</sup>*op cit*, Upadhyay, G.P., p. 88

Ātman, according to it, is destined to be immortalized. The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa regards sacrifice as the Ātman of god, as well as, of the sacrifice.

यदग्नेस्यामहंत्वं त्वं वाधास्यामहम्सस्याइहाशिषः ।<sup>88</sup>

This identification establishes oneness between the human and the divine Ātman. The same Brāhmaṇa suggests elsewhere the offering of the total organic being including prāṇa, apāna, udāna, ear, speech, mind, eye, the central prāṇa etc. to the fire. Thus, the Ātman receives the sense of immortality and universality when conceived as embodied in fire. Fire also has been used as a symbol of the Ātman by the Upaniṣads. The illuminating and heating power of fire must have impressed the human mind deeply. This process of bringing fire closer and closer to himself by man reaches a decisive stage in the *Rgveda* where not only the gods are asked to sit around fire but an earnest desire is expressed to exchange oneself with it.<sup>89</sup>

The KaṭhaUpaniṣad says that just as the embryo remains hidden in the womb and is born in the form of the child in course of time.<sup>90</sup> So the fire remains concealed in fire sticks and is brought out by rubbing them with each other. That is what happens with the Ātman. They however, have to be spiritually vigilant in the same way as sacrificers have to keep awake, work hard and be reverent for producing fire out of sticks.

The Vedic divinity used as a symbol of the Ātman in the Upaniṣads is Agni. In the *Rgveda*, Agni is described as one who keeps awake among the immortals.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the wakefulness tended to symbolize spiritual alertness while Agni tended to symbolize the self. This tendency reached its consummation in the Upaniṣads where

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<sup>88</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>90</sup>*Kaṭha.Upaniṣad*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 1962, p. 28

<sup>91</sup>*op cit*, Wilson, H.H., p. 43

Agni is obviously used as symbol of the Ātman, while awakefulness has become symbolic of the state of spiritual alertness. The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa calls the sacrifice the soul (Ātman) of all beings and all gods. The TaittirīyaBrāhmaṇa regards the sacrifice as ‘the unvanquished person of the gods’.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the sacrifice is the source of creation; the whole universe sprang from the sacrifice. The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇasaya, ‘All beings are born of the sacrifice’.

*Yajñādvaiprajāhprajāyante*<sup>93</sup>

The first sacrifice is termed *puruṣa-Yajña*, the *puruṣa* performed this sacrifice; he was the sacrificer, yajamana; secondly, because he was also the victim (pasu) of this sacrifice. Thus in the hymn of creation the *puruṣa* sacrificed his own self and out of his self sacrifice the universe, the whole creation came into being. *Puruṣa* who was one and undivided before the sacrifice became many afterwards. The one supreme god, one ultimate principle has become many. ‘His one form has become every form’. This one supreme principle is termed Brahma in the upaniṣads. Man springs from Brahman, live, move and has his being by the grace of Brahman and returns to Brahma after leaving the world. This basic principle of the Upaniṣads is also applicable to the theory of the sacrifice performed by the *puruṣa*, that man springs along with the universe from the body of the *puruṣa*.

One more reference will show the manner of progress in the development of the conception of Brahman which had now been reached, namely that, it is one great reality present both in objective phenomena and in the self activities. One should reverse the mind as Brahman, Brahman has four quarters. One quarter is the speech, one quarter is the ear. Now with reference to the divinities, one quarter is Agni (Fire),

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<sup>92</sup>*op cit*, Apte, H.N., p. 32

<sup>93</sup>*op cit*, Upadhyay, G.P., p. 48

one quarter is Vāyu (wind), one quarter is Āditya (the sun), and one quarter is the quarter of heaven. This is the twofold instruction with reference to the self and with reference to the divinities. In the Atharveda, the earth is the base of the highest Brahman and fire his mouth.<sup>94</sup> This is the development of the conception of the Ātman and its union with Brahman.

The Kāṭha Upaniṣad reveals the Vedantic vision of the unity of all the energies in the universe.<sup>95</sup> Agni in ordinary parlance means fire. Its most obvious manifestation is what obtains in every household, invisible, tangible and serviceable to the ancient Indo-Āryans through friction between two aranis or fire sticks. The Upaniṣadic sages discovered the unity of this domestic fire with all energy system of the cosmos and even with the spiritual energy within man himself. The domestic fire worshipped by the performers of sacrifices and the spiritual fire generated within themselves by the awakened ones through meditation are but different forms of Brāhmaṇa or Ātman – etatvaitat – this is verily that.

In the Vedic religious philosophy fire worship played an important role. In spite of the fact that fire represents his physical aspect which is seen by the eyes but the Vedic seers refer to the power behind this material form. To them, he is a great spiritual force in the universe. In some hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, the fire god appears to have helped the rise of monotheism. One hymn of the *Ṛgveda* says that the learned priests call that one, which is the celestial, well winged (garutmat), by many names as Agni, Yama and Matarisvan etc.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *op cit*, Whitney, W.D., p. 238

<sup>95</sup> KU., p. 34

<sup>96</sup> *op cit*, Wilson, H.H., I, 164, 46 –



There is in the hymn the bird suparna related with the fire alter which assumes the shape of a huge bird with outstretched wings facing the east. The sacrificial fire is ultimate reality. Yāska thinks that this hymn is addressed to Agni.<sup>97</sup> In the Vedic literature, especially in the Brāhmaṇas, tendency of grouping the gods increased. All the gods came to be included into three groups according to three spheres – terrestrial, atmospheric and heavenly headed by Agni, Indra and Surya respectively. In view of the fact that the cult of fire was of prime importance in the Vedas and the Brāhmaṇas, because Agni is three fold (trividhaagnih). He is the god who divided himself three fold that is the sun, lightning and fire. According to the *R̥gveda*, we know, O Agni, thy threefold that is Agni, Vayu and Aditya.<sup>98</sup> We know locations (places of manifestation) spread over many places. When Agni passed over from the gods to men, he laid down his three bodies in the three provinces of the universe, his body which is being purified (pavamāna) on the earth, the purifying (pāvaka) body in the atmosphere and the bright (śuci) one in the sky.<sup>99</sup> Elsewhere, however, these forms are placed in the waters, wind and the Sun. In the light of such ideas it was natural to believe that Agni is the supreme god.

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Ekamsadviprabahudavadantyagnim

YamamMatariśvanmahuh.

<sup>97</sup> Roth, Rudolph, *Introduction to the Nirukta and the Literature related to it*, University of Bombay, Bombay, 1919, p. 56

<sup>98</sup> *op cit*, Griffith, R.T.H., p. 348

<sup>99</sup> *op cit*, Upadhyay G.P., p. 25



## ❖ Significance and Form of Fire Worship in the Vedic Era

The worship of fire forms an important and essential part of almost all the social and religious rites and ceremonies of the Vedic society. It is a sign of the popularity of fire-worship in the Vedic period. The order of social life depends on right conduct and friendliness between men and the god. So Agni, Varuṇa and Mitra (the gods of friendly compact) are prayed to ensure that men keep to the right path. It is a Vedic idea that the fire was born of the waters and bore the first germ of all life.<sup>100</sup> That is why Agni is significant and every householder should at all times maintain the sacred fire in his house and offer oblation to it three times a day. The master of the house enters the new house with a jar of water which is free from disease and with the immortal Agni. The sacrifice is offered in a new house to make a master prosperous. According to the Atharvaveda offering is made to Agni to pacify him, to keep the house unharmed and to keep the cows safe.

The five great sacrifices are enjoined to be performed daily. These sacrifices are termed as *Bhūta-Yajña*, *Manuśya-Yajña*, *Pitṛ-Yajña*, *Deva-Yajña* and *Brahma-Yajña*. The rites connected with these sacrifices were simple and short. These sacrifices are connected with men's day to day life. The Atharvaveda and the Brāhmaṇas contain many charms for various *saṃskāras*, the religious rites formed an important aspect of the *gṛhya dharma*, the domestic religion. In these *saṃskāras* Agni has been given the highest position, by virtue of his services he assumes the role of *gṛhpati*, 'the lord of the house'. During the Indo-Iranian period also he was worshipped as a chief domestic deity. He is called the 'house-lord' in *Ṛgveda*, so also atar is called 'the house lord of all houses' in the Avesta. The first and the most permanent constituent of the *saṃskāras* was Agni or fire which was always kindled

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<sup>100</sup>*Ibid*

in the beginning of every *saṃskāras*. Another important constituent of the *saṃskāras* was sacrifice. People believed that gods like men, were propitiated by praise and prayer.<sup>101</sup>

In the Ṛgvedic hymns we do not find the rules and details of the *saṃskāras*. But the Atharvaveda is rich in information about popular rites and ceremonies. The Atharvadic priest elaborately described the upanayana *saṃskāras*, when the boy is initiated into sacred learning. The boy is seated in front of fire to make offerings. He then begs food, and before himself eating, he offers one third of the begged food in the fire. He prays Agni to make auspicious the varied food he eats. The ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa deals in details about the rites and duties of student life. The period of brahmacharya was like a prolonged sacrifice (dirghasatra), he had to study the Vedas. This was called *Brahma-yajña*. He was supposed to tend the preceptor's sacred fire everyday by feeding it with fuel (samidha). There he kindles his mind with fire, with holy luster. On the day of his admission the student used to place the first log of wood or samidha and on the day of samāvartana the last log of wood in the teacher's fire pit, calls the former prayanlya and the later udayanlya.

In the description of marriage ceremony the worship of fire is prescribed at different occasions. According to the Atharvaveda<sup>102</sup> while the marriage procession goes around the guardians of unmarried girl are prayed to release the bride, who is first the wife of Soma, then Gandharva, then of Agni and thereafter give her to the bridegroom. The bride enters the house, sits with her husband before the house hold fire and worships Agni with her husband.

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<sup>101</sup> Pandey, R.B., Hindu *Samskārass*, Vikram Publications, Banarasa, 1949, pp.59 & 69.

<sup>102</sup> op cit, Griffith, R.T.H., p. 245

The last sacrament in the life of a Hindu is the antesti or funeral with which marks the closure of his worldly career. The *R̥gveda* and the *Atharvaveda* mention details of the funeral ceremonies. In the *Yajurveda* all the thirteen verses of chapter 39 are related to cremation. They are recited at the time of cremating the dead body. Cremation or burning of the dead body is the most recognized, scientific and refined mode of disposal of corpse among the Hindus. According to the *Yajurveda* by burning the body, people should send in all directions, its parts through fire. After death, the soul goes to the sun on the first day, and to Agni on the second day. *Upaniṣads* also pray to fire gods for a passage to heaven. *Agneyasupatharaye* – ‘O Agni, lead me by the good path to reap the fruit of my actions’.<sup>103</sup> Agni is here used in the sense of primordial divine energy that sustains this universe.

There was another religious belief that the evil spirits mostly originated from the wicked souls of the dead persons buried in the earth. So they thought it necessary to restrict their number in the terrestrial region by the custom of cremation and thus sending the dead to the region of Yama. The pure sacrificial fire was lighted up in the house to remove the impure fire. On the completion of the funeral rites the corpse eating fire (*kravyada*) had to be sent out of the house.<sup>104</sup>

The Hindus regarded Agni as the director of rites and guardian of morality. Every rite was performed and contract and bond executed by Agni. It was an eternal witness around which during the *upanayana* and the *vivaha* ceremonies, the student and the husband and wife made circumambulations, so that their rites may be valid and permanent. Not only on such occasions but also in their day to day life the Vedic people, with a desire to go through smoothly, worshipped the god Agni. When a merchant or trader starts a journey for business trip, he propitiates Agni to commit

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<sup>103</sup>op.cit., Swami Ranganathananda, p.167

<sup>104</sup>op cit, Griffith, R.T.H., p. 238

the care of his children and cattle. For securing success in the trade, he prays to Agni Vaiśvānara, the divine Hotṛ. He offers daily oblations to him, for success, prosperity, and protection. Agni is prayed for securing wisdom, learning and splendor. For the destruction of enemies, prayed to Agni Vaisvanara, burn them up, him who would pain and injure us, him who would treat us as a foe.

### ❖ Myths related with Fire- God Agni

The Brāhmaṇas mention four castes of society not only among human beings but also among gods. Commenting on AitareyaBrāhmaṇa, Sayanācārya observes –

‘There are four castes among gods as well. Among them Agni and Bṛhaspati are Brāhmaṇa. Indra, Varuṇa, Soma, Rudra, Yama are Kṣatriyas. Vasus, Ādityas and Maruts are Vaiśyas while Puṣaṇa is Śūdra. According to the AitareyaBrāhmaṇa cast system distinction is met in the animal world also – here the goat is Brāhmaṇa. The Brāhmaṇa was produced from the mouth of the supreme lord or creator so he was regarded as superior to all other castes. AitareyaBrāhmaṇa says that Brāhmaṇa is prior to kṣatra. Brāhmaṇa is related to the god Agni, so he has the supreme position and is the spiritual guide. Agni as the purohita of gods is the supreme guide and advisor.

A myth is a statement of the state of affairs that something which happens at the beginning of time with cosmic or minor etiological creation subsumed under it. The concern and obligation of the socially responsible man is to preserve creation by reenacting through prescribed sacraments that which the gods performed for creation and preservation<sup>105</sup>. Myths told men that even in the primeval mythical time life on

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<sup>105</sup>*op.cit.*, Bhattacharji, Sukumari, *op.cit.*, p.128

earth was threatened in many ways and the gods warded off the evils by various sacrifices. The acts of the gods themselves are not fully described in the *Samhitās* but assumed to be well known, hence they are only briefly alluded to.

Myths commonly begin with formulae like in the Yajurveda – *aghirdevebhyonitayata* or *apkramat* Agni fled and hid himself from the gods. This phrase is used when the fire would suddenly go out and rekindling it was a strenuous task. Such phrase as the frame work of a myth was effective in focusing the community's attention. In the Yajurveda there is a myth about Agni.<sup>106</sup> They offered Agni as a sacrifice to Agni, for they found nothing else to offer, thence indeed these creatures were born. In that he casts the fire on the fire after producing it, it serves for the propagation of offspring. The myth succeeds in ascribing supreme cosmic and procreative role to fire. Fire is the one god most directly concerned with man's progress in material life, his safety and his ascendancy over nature. It is also the only natural element directly associated with man's first religious activity that is sacrifice. Incidentally, the myth raises fire to the status of *puruṣa* who sacrifices himself for an etiological purpose.

A short myth is based on equation like Rudra is Agni, the fire on the altar is asleeping loin, the *catvala* (pit) is the womb of the sacrifice, and the place of the sacrifice is the head of the earth. It is clear that the need for such equations is pre-eminently mythical and only indirectly ritual. They help explain not so much ritual practices as such but the beliefs which underlie or promote such practices. It is useless to seek a degree of firmness in myths.

In the ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa we find a myth which is related with fire altar. The fire altar is also a symbol of the universe on a small scale, the universe being a

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<sup>106</sup>*op.cit.*, Keith, A.B., p. 67

macrocosm of the altar. Hence the fire altar also symbolizes the creation of the universe from the sacrifice. Prajāpati created Agni and in this respect Prajāpati is Agni's father. The fire altar is the body of Agni through which the lord of creation is revived. The lotus leaf that is placed at the bottom of the fire altar is symbolic of the cosmic waters and the womb where from Agni, Prajāpati and the human sacrifice are to emerge. The gold plate over the lotus leaf represents the sun gods and the gold image of a man lying on the gold plate symbolizes the creator Prajāpati, Agni and the sacrifice jointly. The beginnings of image worship may be traced in the creation of this symbolic gold image representing the two deities, Prajāpati and Agni.

Thus, the study of the vedic texts like Saṁhitā, Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads and other scriptures makes it clear that fire worship or Yajna has very significant role in early vedic texts and in the society. We cannot imagine any ancient civilization without fire. That is why Agni or fire god is highly worshipped and had a very elevated position amidst the ancient gods.