

## YAJÑA IN THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

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THIS PAPER IS CONCERNED WITH THE STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF *yajña*, sacrificial worship, in the *Bhagavadgītā*. The concept is a very important one in pre-*Gītā* Hindu thought and keeps being mentioned right through the *Gītā*. Like the concept of *karma*<sup>1</sup> it is a very central one, and the treatment of the concept is most revealing as to the attitude of the *Gītā* towards traditional conceptions, and as to the character of its syncretism. Thus its study is bound to reveal something of the mainspring of this syncretism.

The division of the paper is both simple and logical, a simplicity and a logic of progression borrowed in general terms from the development of the *Gītā* itself. The first consideration is for the explicit reaction of the *Gītā* to brahmanic sacrifice, its power and the ethics of its performance. Then *yajña* is looked at from the very general point of view of *karma*, action in general. This leads to the study of the relationship of *yajña* with *brahman*, and thus with Upanishadic "knowledge." And finally the all-pervading *bhakti*-attitude is looked at in its relationship to sacrificial worship. These four sections cover all references to *yajña* in the *Gītā*, and lead up to concluding remarks on the treatment of *yajña* in the work.

### 1. THE VEDIC IDEA OF SACRIFICE INHERITED AND CRITICIZED

The starting point of the *Gītā* is the acceptance of much that belonged to the traditional Vedic idea of sacrifice and worship<sup>2</sup> "Prajāpati created the creatures together with the ritual worship" (3.10). This idea is repeated later, "The brahmins, the *Vedas* and the sacrifices were fashioned in the beginning by that (*brahman*)" (17.23). Ritual worship, therefore, is not a human institution,

<sup>1</sup> For a similar textstudy on the concept of *karma*, cf. J. T. F. Jordens, "Bhagavadgītā: Karma exorcised", *Millawa-Milla, The Australian Bulletin of Comparative Religion*, 4 (1964), pp. 22-30.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are our own. The figures between brackets throughout the paper refer to Chapter and verse of the *Gītā*.

but part and parcel of creation itself, it belongs to the order of creation, along with the *Vedas*. Its function in the cosmic order is further explained by Prajāpati himself after his creative act: "By this (sacrifice) you shall procreate, it shall be your cow-of-all-wishes. By this you must support the gods, and let the gods support you. Thanks to this mutual support you shall obtain the highest and the best. Because the gods, supported by your sacrificial worship, will give you the enjoyments you crave. He who enjoys their gifts without giving anything to them, he is nothing but a thief" (3.10-12). Sacrifice is thus the system that regulates the relationship between men and gods; their welfare depends on their mutual support by sacrifice. *Yajña*, therefore, represents power, effective in this world and also in the next. "The success that springs from ritual action comes quickly in this world of man" (4.12). "Not even this world is for him who abstains from sacrifice, how much less the other world" (4.31). "Those who knowing the three *Vedas*, drinking Soma, and worshipping me with sacrifices, purified from sin, seek the way to heaven, they attain the pure world of the great Indra, and taste in heaven the heavenly joys of the gods" (9.20).

No wonder, then, that sacrifice must not be abandoned. This is clearly affirmed in the *Gītā*, and it is significant that it is stressed even in its last chapters. "That is why the students of *brahman* always perform acts of worship, almsgiving, and austerity, according to Vedic injunctions after pronouncing the syllable OM" (17.24). In the last chapter Krishna speaks about the difference of opinion that exists between sages as to the performance or abandonment of worship, and he says to Arjuna, "hear my decision . . . Sacrificial worship, almsgiving, and austerity should not be abandoned, they should be performed. They are indeed means of purification for wise men" (18. 4-5).

So far we have listed those texts wherein the Vedic idea, or at least part of it, is accepted by the *Gītā*. This is not, however, the complete picture. We turn now to the criticism that is levelled against the Vedic sacrifice. The *Gītā* can be very severe on some aspects of Vedic religion, but it is notable that where the criticism is severest, it is directed against the gods and against the *Veda*<sup>3</sup>, but not against *yajña*. Its criticism of sacrifice is of two kinds. First of all, it is stressed that sacrifice to the deities is not the end and all of religion, or even of sacrifice. There is disapproval

<sup>3</sup> Cf *Bhagvadgītā* 2. 42-46; 2.52-53; 10. 2, 14.

of "those yogins that devote themselves only to sacrifice-to-the gods" (4.25) as if no other forms existed. After having affirmed that sacrifice to the gods brings life in heaven as its reward, Krishna continues, "When they have enjoyed that immense world of heaven, and their merit is exhausted, they come back to the world of men. That is how they come and go, those who follow Vedic religion, and are governed by desire" (9.21). The power of sacrifice is not denied, but it is clearly stated that its power is limited. This limitation comes in part from the spirit in which the worship is often performed. And this is the second criticism levelled against Vedic ritual: sacrifice is condemned if performed out of hypocrisy or out of selfish desire. In chapter sixteen that kind of sacrificial performance is stigmatized as being "of demoniac nature". "I shall sacrifice, they say, I shall give alms, I shall enjoy. They are deluded by ignorance . . . intent on indulging their desires, and they fall into foul hell" (16. 15-16). And, "Full of themselves, haughty, full with the pride and the intoxication of their wealth, they offer sacrifice in a nominal way only, hypocritically, against the rules" (16.17). In the seventeenth chapter the *Gītā* classifies a number of things according to the three *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. *Yajña* too is classified: "Whatever sacrifice is offered with the fruit in view and out of mere hypocrisy, know that as being of the nature of *rajas*. They say that sacrifice is of the nature of *tamas* which is not according to the rules, without offering of food, recitation, or sacrificial fee, and devoid of faith" (17. 12-13). It is thus made clear that the exact performance of a sacrifice according to Vedic injunctions is not enough, but that that worship can be vitiated by hypocrisy and selfish desire. "Sacrifice, or almsgiving, or austerity performed without faith is called *a-sat*. In fact it is nothing at all here or hereafter" (17.28). Already the *Gītā* has come a long way from the magical concept of sacrifice in the *Brāhmaṇas*, where exact ritual performance is the only and the total guarantee of success. And even if sacrifice is performed in the right spirit, it is not all-powerful according to the *Gītā*. Some things cannot be achieved by even the most perfect sacrifice, and are reserved to the work of Krishna's gratuitous grace (*prasāda*). "In this form I cannot be seen by any other man than you in this world, says Krishna to Arjuna; not by *Veda*-knowledge, not by sacrificial worship, nor by study, almsgiving, rites or austerities" (11.45).

Thus we see that the first attitude of the *Gītā* towards *yajña* is one of acceptance of its cosmic importance and power. This is

immediately qualified by a criticism of the brahmanic ideas that sacrifice is *all*-powerful, and that it works mechanically without reference to the spirit of the sacrifice. This first step represents a process of purification of the concept. This is carried further into one of assumption, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

## 2. YAJNA AND KARMA

"Worship originates in *karma*" (3.14). "Thus all kinds of sacrifice are spread out before *brahman*; know that all of them have their origin in *karma*" (4.32). The idea is that all sacrifice is in last instance a form of action. This may seem a very simple statement, but it has wide implications. One of the two principal themes, indeed, of the *Gītā* is its ethical philosophy of action. By saying that sacrifice is but a form of action, is rooted in action, the *Gītā* leads us to the conclusion that, therefore, the rules applying to action in general must also apply to this special action called *yajña*. *Yajña* is not something so special and different that it escapes the general rules that apply to action in general. The most important rule of action is that it must be performed in a spirit of detachment; and so must the sacrificial action. "Perform action for the sake of sacrifice in a spirit of detachment" (3.9). "Those who cook for their own sakes are evil and they eat sin" (3.13). We have seen before what kind of sacrifices are deemed to be of the nature of *rajas* and *tamas*. Here is the description of a *sāttvik* sacrifice: "That sacrifice is of the nature of *sattva*, which is offered without desire for its fruit, as prescribed in the rules, and with the thought that it is a duty that must be done" (17.11). Just like all other action, sacrifice must be offered in a spirit of detachment and in a spirit of duty. We are veering further from the Vedic attitude. Prajāpati gave sacrifice as man's "cow-of-wishes", whereas Krishna asks his followers to sacrifice out of a pure sense of duty, and without any desire at all.

What, now, is the result of the performance of "detached" worship, performed without desire for results, and purely as a duty? "Actions bind this world, except those actions that are performed for the sake of sacrifice" (3.9). Detached sacrificial action makes activity lose its binding aspect, just like any detached action is free from the power of bondage (4.19-22). Expressed in another way, "If one free from attachment, delivered (from things), and concentrated on knowledge, performs actions for the sake of

worship (only), then all his action melts into nothingness" (4.23). This is only a stronger expression of the same idea: that action thus performed loses its aspect of bondage and now is as if it were not at all, "even when one acts, yet in fact he does nothing whatsoever" (4.20). Sacrificial worship, originally created as a power that regulates cosmic continuation, must be done with detachment, so that it produces no results, melts away in the unselfish performance itself and does not perpetuate itself in its fruit.

In the last couple of texts we have noticed apart from detachment another element that is part of the "spirit" of action, namely knowledge. And this brings us to a consideration of *brahman*.

### 3. YAJÑA AND BRAHMAN

We have seen that *yajña* is said to originate in *karma*. That same text goes on to say that "action arises from *brahman*, and *brahman* from the imperishable" (3.15). Interpretation of this text, and specifically of the meaning of *brahman* here, is very varied, and this is not the place to go into long discussion. We feel that the only way of giving a satisfactory meaning to the word, and of making this meaning agree with the general and specific context, is to take *brahman* here as equivalent of *prakṛti*.<sup>4</sup> Action, therefore, is said to arise from *prakṛti*, an idea completely in harmony with the Sāṃkhya teaching of the *Ġītā*: "All actions are completely performed by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*" (3.27). This use of *brahman* as equivalent to *prakṛti* is a rather strange one, but not too surprising in the non-technical spirit in which the whole poem moves. Sacrifice as a form of action is here viewed from what we could call an ontological point of view, and put in its place in the scheme of Sāṃkhya cosmology. As such it does not have a very great importance for the ethical and religious consideration of sacrifice which is the main concern of the *Ġītā* in this regard.

That is the consideration that, after this short ontological interlude, takes over again in the fourth chapter, the crucial one for the relationship of *yajña* and *brahman*. It is mainly from verse 19 till verse 33 that this relationship is treated. And first of all it seems clear to us that the use of *brahman* here does not

<sup>4</sup> There is another passage in the *Ġītā* where *brahman* obviously has the meaning of *prakṛti*, namely 14. 3-4.

refer to *prakṛti*, but to the Upanishadic concept of the absolute. It seems impossible to give *brahman* anything but the Upanishadic meaning in the expression "*brahmaiva tena gantavyam*" (4.24). *Prakṛti*, indeed, does not figure anywhere in the eschatology of the *Bhagavadgītā*<sup>5</sup> Once it is established that *brahman* has that meaning in verse 23, it becomes impossible to change its meaning radically in the surrounding verses, especially since they are intelligible with the meaning of v. 23. The *Gītā* is admittedly not consistent in its terminology, but such blatant inconsistency within the scope of a few lines is not its practice either.

In verse 4.24 different aspects of the sacrificial act are identified with *brahman*: "The sacrificial action is *brahman*, the sacrificial gift is *brahman*: it is offered by *brahman* in the fire that is *brahman*" (4.24). The action, the gift, the agent and the fire are all said to be *brahman*. In other words, sacrifice in all its aspects is in some way identified with the absolute ground of all that exists. In fact this is only an application to the particular case of sacrifice of an idea quite prominent in the *Upanishads* and taken over by the *Gītā*: that *brahman* is ground and essence of all that is. By re-affirming this the *Gītā* wants to make the devotee look at sacrifice in a new way, as an expression of *brahman*. Various ways of sacrifice are enumerated, and it is said that "they are all spread out in the face of *brahman*" (4.32). Of the many interpretations of this expression, the one that seems to fit into the context best is that all these different forms of sacrifice are in last instance offered to *brahman* and therefore lead to *brahman*. They do this provided they become *jñānayajña* a sacrifice of knowledge (4.33).

The ideas proposed in chapter four are, therefore, although presented in an obscure fashion, rather simple in themselves, and fit easily into that general attitude of the *Gītā*, which consists in the assumption of Upanishadic speculation as a step to integrating it into her own *bhakti* attitude. Like everything else in this world, sacrifice in all its aspects has as its deepest essence *brahman*. Whatever form of sacrifice the devotee may perform, he must learn to see this presence of *brahman* in all sacrifice, and thus he will make all sacrifice into a sacrifice of knowledge, which will lead him to unity with *brahman*. Thus the knowledge of *brahman* becomes the fire that burns all action: "The sacrifice of knowledge

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. T. F. Jordens, "The Eschatological Doctrine of the *Bhagavadgītā*, *Bharatiya Vidyā* 24 (1964), pp. 1-8.

is better than just a sacrifice of things. All action without exception finds its utter fulfillment and termination in knowledge" (4.33).

#### 4. YAJÑA AND BHAKTI

While the early chapters of the *Gītā* move in the sphere of *karma* and *brahman*, there begins to appear a new movement from the fifth chapter onward, the trend of *bhakti*, which gathers speed, and erupts as it were in chapters seven and eight. After a discourse mainly on knowledge and *brahman*, chapter five ends on a new note, which for the first time introduces *bhakti* in connection with *yajña*: "He who has come to know that I am the recipient of sacrifice and austerities, the great Lord of the entire world, the friend of all beings, he goes to peace" (5.29). Chapter six concentrates on the discipline of meditation, but occasionally (6.15, 30, 47) Krishna refers again to that personal relationship to himself. Chapter seven is dominated by the revelation of himself by Krishna, and thus inaugurates the shift of emphasis to *bhakti*. It is in chapters eight and nine that we find then the most important references to *yajña* and *bhakti*.

"I myself am the highest *yajña* here in this body" (8.4). When Krishna the *avatar* thus identifies himself with sacrifice he is not really doing an extraordinary thing, but he is fulfilling a long tradition, started in the *Purusha-Sūkta*, and continued in the *Brāhmaṇas*, where it is centered around the figure of *Prajāpati*. In the *Purusha-Sūkta* the sacrificial act is the creative act, and the victim itself gives rise to the different parts of the cosmos. *Prajāpati* in the *Brāhmaṇas* is proclaimed lord of the sacrifice, identical with the sacrifice, and so is Vishnu.<sup>6</sup> To this tradition we must add the relationship between sacrifice and *brahman* we have spoken about earlier. Taken in that traditional context, it seems that what Krishna affirms is that he himself as *avatar* is the essence of the sacrifice. All sacrificial power is in last instance concentrated in him. This is further elaborated in 9.16: "I am the ritual act, I am the sacrificial act, I am the *mantra* and the sacrificial butter, I am the sacrificial fire, and I am the offer-gift itself." This identifies the different parts and aspects of the sac-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, Harvard, 1925, pp. 455-56.

rificial worship with Krishna, and necessarily recalls 4.24 where all these are said to be identical with *brahman*. Thus we have the clear implication of the identity of Krishna and *brahman*. This naturally puts the affirmation "I am the essence of sacrifice" somehow on an ontological level: Krishna, in the same way as *brahman*, is the very essence of sacrificial action and of sacrificial power. However, the primary concern of the *Gītā* here is not an ontological one, but an ethical and religious one. What Krishna wants to say is that since he is the very essence of sacrificial worship, this worship should be done with him in mind, "For I am the recipient and the lord of all acts of sacrificial worship" (9.24).<sup>7</sup> As Krishna is the essence of sacrifice, all sacrifice therefore is under his lordship, and all acts of worship, are in final instance directed to him, "Even those who are devoted to other gods and sacrifice to them full of faith, even they do in fact worship me, although it is not according to the injunctions" (9.23). On account of this lordship of Krishna over all sacrifice, and on account of the all-embracing importance of sacrifice, Krishna asks for everything to become a sacrifice. "Whatever you do, be it working, eating, or worshipping, almsgiving or austerity, do it all as an offering to me" (9.27).

The ideal devotee then is very concisely and very aptly described towards the end of chapter nine: "*Manmanā bhava mad-bhāktō madyajī*", "Your mind, your devotion, your worship should be concentrated on Me" (9.34). This is literally repeated right at the end, and then it is added that "So you shall come to me, in truth, that I promise you, because you are dear to me" (18.64).

Summarizing the doctrine on *yajña* and *bhakti*, we found that Krishna proclaims that he is the essence of the sacrifice, its lord and only recipient, and that all worship necessarily is directed towards him. Therefore he asks that man should make of every deed a sacrifice to Krishna, and become the perfect devotee whose whole life, mind, emotion, and work is dedicated to him.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Yajña* and the theory of sacrifice is a very important aspect of the theosophy of the *Brāhmaṇas*. It is at the very centre of their world vision, identified with the great sacrificial god *Prajāpati*, cosmic creative force, covenant between man and the gods,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also 5.29.



power in the hands of the ritualist. It is an immanent power that rules a cosmos enclosed on itself. Its ethical importance too is very great because it is the foundation of the social order of an essentially sacrificial community.

How, then, does the *Gītā* react to this important religious heritage? Its reaction is one of progressive assumption and integration of *yajña* into an entirely new world-view and new ethic. This integration is naturally accompanied by a process of purification.

First of all, *yajña* is integrated into the doctrine of *karma*. Ontologically, this means that, like all *karma*, *yajña* is relegated to the sphere of *prakṛti*. It belongs, we saw, to that realm of the three *guṇas*. Within this sphere sacrifice, just like action in general, keeps its old cosmic power. But this power is put in perspective, because the *Gītā* reminds one constantly that the sphere of *prakṛti* is but part of reality, and that salvation lies beyond it. Ethically, the integration of *yajña* into the *karma* doctrine requires of the sacrificer a completely new attitude of mind: complete detachment. While brahmanic sacrifice was a harnessing of power to achieve the fulfillment of desires, was in one word the cow-of-all-wishes, now it must be performed with complete disregard from its fruit, with a stoic sense of duty. The duty is towards the continuance of the intra-cosmic material and social processes. Detachment is required because there is immortality and fulfillment beyond the cosmic sphere.

This brings us to *brahman*. *Brahman* is the Upanishadic term for this transcendent sphere of immortality and fullness of being. *Yajña* is now said to be identical with *brahman*. Ontologically this means that, like everything else, *yajña* is pervaded by the immanence of the absolute *brahman*. And, ethically, the concept of sacrifice gets a completely new dimension: *jñānayajña*, the sacrifice of knowledge. This has no more to do with gifts or intracosmic effects, but it is an attitude of mind that complements the negative side of detachment. Detachment is penetrated by the knowledge of the all-pervading presence of *brahman* the absolute.

But even *brahman* is but a preliminary step in the integration process. Krishna, indeed, is *brahman*. This last integration is best expressed in *jñānayajñena yajanto mām* (9.15), "worshipping me with a sacrifice of knowledge". This expression combines both brahmanic *yajña* and Upanishadic knowledge with

*bhakti*. Yajña thus becomes penetrated by the fulness of *bhakti*-knowledge and love of the Lord. Detached knowledge becomes attached knowledge. The vacuum of intention left by detachment is filled with the positive intention of love of the Lord. And when Krishna calls the ideal man *manmāno, madbhakto madyajī*, it is evident that the *yajña* implied there has attained a meaning which is very far from the Vedic ritual the *Gītā* commenced by accepting.

The reaction of the *Gītā*, then, to the all-important Vedic concept of *yajña* is one of assumption and integration into a new philosophical and religious framework. In the process of this integration, the narrow concept undergoes a deepening and broadening. Chapter four gives the name of *yajña* to ascetic exercises yoga exercises of different types, and even to concentration and knowledge. Chapter seventeen classifies *yajña* according to the preponderance in it of *sattva, rajas, or tamas*. And finally the devotee is called to do *all* he does in a spirit of worship to Krishna, and thus all his acts become *bhakti-yajña*.

This integration has a profoundly ethical significance. It concentrates completely upon the authentic religious attitudes of *yajña*, and thus purifies Vedic and Brahmanic ritualism from its hypocrisy and its magic, infusing the worship with these three: detachment, discernment, devotion. However, there is another side to this process. By the time the *Bhagavadgītā* has finished with the concept of *yajña* this has been so broadened and distended that its ritual aspect seems to have become superfluous. In other words in the process of purifying brahmanic ritual and infusing it with a new spirit, the *Gītā* ends up by practically de-ritualizing *yajña*. The Vedic concept is now used to indicate something so different that one wonders how far the old wine-sack is really able to properly hold the young new wine.