



# Vedic Ritual Texts as a Source of Human Values

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## Abstract:

In India the Vedas are regarded as the reflections of intellectuals. The Vedic literature is a store house of materials for ancient Indian culture. Its ritual texts while dealing with sacrificial performances contain many discussions on morality and ethics from which one can easily collect elements of human values.

## Key Words:

Human values, Indian culture, rituals, sacrificer, *Yajña*, *devatā*, *tyāga*, *āhitāgni*, *Gītā*, *kṣatriya*

## Introduction:

The *Brāhmaṇa* texts are rich in various descriptions of human values through descriptions. It is through numerous stories and legends, discussions on mythical events and ethical discourses etc. one finds a great number of teachings or values in human life to be followed in different aspects such as religious, social, professional and political etc. It is a common sense that values help man to rise above the animal instincts and maintain a superior status than other living beings of the creation. Being a man one can aspire and afford to reach up to the status of divine beings provided one does not relinquish these values and strictly follows Vedic instructions. This the theologians promise through the *Brāhmaṇa* texts. In the following lines some points on value based teachings are going to be discussed from the ritual texts along with respective ritual contexts.

## I.

There is a frequent emphasis on truthfulness to be maintained by every individual. Theologians find a fundamental difference between man and god. Man is impure because of his speaking untruth *amedhyovaipurūṣoyadhr̥tamvadati*,<sup>1</sup> whereas gods are truthful (*satyamevadevāḥ*) and become glorious by keeping truth as their vow (*ŚB* 1.1.1.5). The sacrificer in the New and Full Moon sacrifice should only speak truth so also the man who established his sacred fires (*āhitāgniḥ*) (*ŚB* 1.1.1.5 and 2.2.2.19-20). Truthfulness is identified with worship (*satyamevopacāraḥ ŚB* 2.2.2.20) when the *āhitāgni* speaks untruth it becomes as if he sprinkles water on his fire and causes it to be extinguished. But his speaking truth is like his sprinkling ghee on his fires thereby causing them to flare up<sup>2</sup>. Glory of truthfulness is highlighted in the *Brāhmaṇa* texts several times. The theologians know the fact that common men are very often tempted towards falsehood. But keeping the vow to speak truth is neither impossible nor impracticable. One comes across a story in a context of using a *sāman* called *aurṇāyava*<sup>3</sup> narrated in the TMB 12.11.9. Kalyana, one of the Āṅgīrasīs was away from home for his studies while other Āṅgīrasīs perform a sacrificial session in order to go to heaven but they did not know the path leading to the gods.

Once, while moving, Kalyana met a Gandharva called Ūrṇāyu who was enjoying the company of Apsarās. The latter could recognize Kalyana as one of the Āngirasis who are unsuccessfully performing the sacrificial session. He taught the above *sāman* to Kalyana and advised him to help his fellows by chanting the *sāman* at their sacrifice. He also cautioned Kalyana that the latter should never say that he himself has seen this *sāman*. Then Kalyana chanted the same and helped them to complete their sacrifice but being asked by them from whom he got this *sāman*, he told falsely that he himself has seen this. Thereby, when all Angirasis went to heaven by knowing the path of gods this Kalyana was left behind in this earth being a leper (*Śvitra*) (*TMB* 12.11.10-11). Even at awkward situations also the ritualists advise to speak out only truth without hiding the fact or resorting to falsehood. For example, during the performance of the *Varuṇapraghāsaparvan* of the *Cāturmāsya* sacrifices, after the priests produce fire and offerings of the *āghāra* libations are over the priest namely Pratiprasthātṛ has to lead the wife of the sacrificer away from the sacrifice. While leading her away he asks her to reveal the name of her paramour (s) if any, with whom she had intercourse. This confession by the wife can reduce her burden of sin and make her free from secret pangs in her mind. Simultaneously, the paramour (s) named by her would suppose to be caught by the snares of Varuṇa, if she does not speak out truth and she would cause her close relatives to suffer<sup>4</sup>.

## II.

Faith or *Śraddhā* is another human value that makes man meritorious. Faith in the merit of sacred performance is highlighted in the ritual texts. Performance of sacrifices is the best activity (*Yajñovaiśreṣṭhatamakarma*, *ŚB* 1.7.1.5). Keeping faith in the performance is to promote welfare in the society and the individuals as well. According to a legend narrated in the *ŚB* 1.2.5. 24-26, in old days some people were performing sacrifices and committed some mistakes. Thereby they were called unrighteous. Those who were not performing sacrifices remained righteous. Then *āsraddhā* or lack of faith occupied the mind of the performers who stopped performing sacrifices due to which the gods started suffering from scarcity of food, they complained to Prajāpati who after enquiring about the problem advised men to perform the sacrifices in correct manner and not to allow *āsraddhā* to occupy their mind at all. Then the performers following correct methods in their sacrifices became glorious. Hence there is a general advice in the text that no one should allow disbelief or lack of faith to overcome any body's mind especially with regard to any sacred activity. It is worthwhile to point out that *āsraddhā* invites inactivity and inactivity leads one to self-ruin.

These two above human values, i.e., truth and faith constitute two of the three ideal and basic elements of *Yajña* or sacrifices namely *dravya*, *devatā* and *tyāga*. Elsewhere the fire god is identified with faith and ghee with truth.<sup>5</sup> The third element, *tyāga*, or 'the action of offering' is only motivated through the other two. There is a theological discussion narrated in the *ŚB* 11.3.1.2-4, between two well known seers, Janaka of Videha and Yājñavalkya on the correct identification of the most essential elements of Agnihotra, a daily ritual of offering. The material objects like milk, barley, rice, herbs, fruits and water are one by one declared disqualified for their occasional nonavailability. But both the seers agree on the inexhaustible faith and unending truth in the heart of a devoted sacrificer to be real essential elements to perform Agnihotra. Truth can be offered in the faith uninterruptedly. Therefore, it is advisable for human beings to keep faith in their heart and follow truth in their activities.

## III.

A common vice of man is pride or arrogance. The ritualists want to advise against this vice in their own method, i.e., connecting the same with some discussions on ritual at hand. After the soma plants are purchased in a soma-sacrifice these are to be brought forward inside the *mahāvedi*. At that action of the *Adhvaryu* priest the Hots priest recites eight verses from the *Ṛgveda*, one of which contains the term *Kilviṣaspr̥t̥*<sup>6</sup> meaning 'saving from sin' an adjective of Soma plant reverentially regarded as the king. In the *AB* 1.13(3.2) the term is explained in this way: 'Soma indeed is a savior of sin, he who is successful, who attains preeminence, becomes sinful, let them not have sin to requite.' Keith remarks on the statement - the idea is that in too great prosperity danger of sin is near at hand<sup>12</sup>. It is a fact that mundane prosperity gives way to arrogance and prides, worldly people easily falls prey to this vice and commit mistakes. To be aware

of such vices is valuable for common men. There is a story showing vanity of pride. Gods and demons both being created by Prajāpati strove for preeminence. The gods being humble, rule-abiding went on sacrificing to each other. Being pleased with them Prajāpati gave himself to the gods and thereby sacrifice belonged to them. The demons being arrogant could not find any other superior or revered one to whom they could have offered, because they thought themselves to be very great. They went on offering on their own mouths and came to ruin. Therefore, the text advises “Let no one be arrogant, for arrogance is cause of ruin”.<sup>8</sup>

Obedience towards one's elders especially towards the father is traditionally looked upon as a good quality. The words of a father whether agreeable or disagreeable is supposed to be only beneficial for the son who should comply with the same unconditionally. The story of Nābhānediṣṭha teaches this quality. A seer namely Nābhānediṣṭha in his young days was deprived of his parental property by his brothers. When asked by him they gave their old father to him whom they considered as a judgment giver and a decider. The father advised Nābhānediṣṭha to keep patience and help the Āṅgīrasi seers at their performance of a sacrificial session by reciting two hymns from the *R̥gveda* (10.61 and 10.62) as a part of the *vaiśvadeva śāstra*.<sup>9</sup>

The young seer did the same and drew the favor of the performance who in return gave him everything of their worldly possession before leaving for their heavenly world. While he was taking stock of the wealth, one man with black garments approached him claiming his ownership over the entire possession saying that the Āṅgīrasi had given the wealth as a gift to him instead of the seer. Failed to take any decision on the dispute the man told the seer to ask his father to decide which would be final and accepted by both. When the seer asked his father, the decider, he told his son that the wealth was actually given to that man with black garments by the Āṅgīrasi, Nābhānediṣṭha coming back to the man, told his father's decision faithfully and truly that the wealth actually belongs to the latter. Then that man being over pleased with the honesty of the seer gave him the entire wealth and left. Thus, Nābhānediṣṭha could ultimately get all the wealth because of his cherishing the value of obedience to his father ungrudgingly (AB.5.14. 22.9).

There is a provision in the *Rājasūya* sacrifice of a king to narrate the story of a Brahmin boy called Śūnaḥsepa to the consecrated king by his *Hotṛ* priest (AB 7.13. (33.1)).<sup>10</sup> In this story the plight of a poor, helpless son caused by his cruel, greedy and careless father is narrated highlighting the boy's complete surrender to various divine powers seeking protection from them. He succeeded finally in protecting his life from being scarified for the sake of a prince. King Hariścandra promised to sacrifice his son Rohita to the god Varuṇa to which the prince did not comply with. He left the sacrifice started by his father and went on roaming at different places and the king started suffering from disease due to the anger of god Varuṇa. Rohita met a poor Brahmin called Ajigarta who was ready to sell his middle son namely Śūnaḥsepa to be sacrificed in place of the prince. When nobody was available to bind the Brahmin boy to the sacrificial post and no one was willing to kill the boy, his father became ready to perform both the priestly duties taking extra money from the prince. Seeing the heartless behavior of the father Śūnaḥsepa, extremely grief-stricken, prayed to Varuṇa and other gods for protection. All the gods approved of his prayer and Varuṇa made the king free from the diseases. Viśvāmitra who was officiating as a priest in the sacrifice was touched with the plight of the boy and his unfailing devotion to the gods. He declared to accept the boy as his adopted son to which the boy agreed and the seer made Śūnaḥsepa his spiritual inheritor in later days. The story reassures the virtue of complete surrender before divine powers capable of creating wonders on this earth. This, for the Vedic theologians is one of the best human values the mankind has ever realized.

So far the discussion is on the human values what the ritualist theologians consider to be and describe in connection with various rituals. One is also tempted to go into the rituals performed by them and how far they follow the values of life by performing the rituals but not simply describing the same. In other words there should be discussions on some Vedic rituals to find out their underlying human values, if any. There is a small rite called *tānunaptra* to be performed on the second day, i.e., the first *upasad* day of a normal Soma sacrifice in which sixteen priests and the sacrificer touch the ghee collected by them earlier in a ladle called *jūhu* or in a cup (*camasa*). By touching the same each one of them pledges to co-operate with all other participants and not to show treachery to any one among the fellows till the end of the sacrifice. This rite seems to be a measure taken together by the officiating priests and the sacrificer to prevent any

undesirable discord to take place among them so that the sacred performance can go smoothly without any disturbance. This is called 'bodily covenant' which the gods performed in order to ensure full co-operation among themselves in their sacrificial performances<sup>11</sup>. All Vedic sacrifices and especially the Soma sacrifices are complicated rituals requiring full co-operation and a complete mutual understanding among all the participants. According to SB 1.5.2.19, it is expected from all of the participants to act with a perfect understanding with each other. But whimsical attitudes of individuals are difficult to be controlled by others and more difficult to predict the same in course of the activities involving collective responsibilities such as a Soma sacrifice. There is every possibility the ritualists feel, on the part of the individual performer to go against each other or against the sacrificer and thereby spoil the sanctity of the sacrificer. Anticipating such unpleasant happenings the performers decide to come together to a covenant not to break their mutual trust. This rite is certainly the product of a matured human brain to safeguard the sacrificial institution from the danger of the selfish motivation of internal participants and it is found in all important ritual texts (TS 6.2.2.1; MS 3.7.10; AB 1.24 (4-7); ŚB 3.4.2.1-14 and 3.4.3.1; GB 7.2; ĀpŚS. 11.1-2; KŚS 8.1.18-21 etc).

#### IV.

Sacrificial performance includes some rites which the ritualists do not, otherwise, find decent or worth practicing. But they do the same for their duty's sake. Such rituals go against their moral dignity and they feel bound to give explanation on their remedial measures through some connected ritual procedures. For example, in *Haviryajñas*, when they thresh and grind the grains and rice by means of mortar, pestle and grinding stones, in order to prepare *caru* etc. they feel as if they are killing the sacrifice itself. But the formula which they utter at the time of grinding<sup>12</sup> takes care to bring back life to the sacrifice (ŚB 1.2.1.20-21). Similarly in Soma sacrifices when they thresh the Soma plants with the pressing stones they supposed to kill the king-Soma and express that since the stones are made of rock which once upon a time was the body of soma in its Vṛtra incarnation, the priests incur hardly any sin (SB 3.9.4-2; 8.17). But there is an actual ritual remedy, one finds, in context of cutting a tree for preparing sacrificial post out of its trunk. After cutting the tree the *Adhvaryu* priest offers a libation of ghee over the cut part of the tree standing on the ground uttering a formula from<sup>13</sup>. This offering is known as *āvraścānahoma*. Through the accompanying formula the priest wishes and ensures verbally that the tree should grow again with hundred shoots. In this context it can be said that the performers feel morally responsible for the destruction of the plant life and causing harm to nature's property but for their priestly duty's sake. Not doing something as a measure of remedy or at least for appeasement, would be unwise on their part which amounts to carelessness towards maintaining values in life. Therefore the *āvraścānahoma* stands for the human side of the ritualist.

The most objectionable activity the ritualists carry out by killing animal victims in an Animal sacrifice or any Soma-sacrifice. It would be interesting to mark their psychological reactions while carrying out the same. The priests namely *Adhvaryu* *Pratiprasthātṛ*, *Āgnīdhra* and the sacrificer accompany the *Śamitā* (who actually strangles the animal) who drags the animal from the sacrificial post to the *Śāmitraśālā* (a shed built outside the altar in which actual strangling takes place). Just before the actual strangling they all come back from the shed leaving the *Samitā* alone to carry out his duty and sit on their respective seats inside the altar. They hesitate to be eye witness to or visualize the act of immolation (*nedasyasamjñāpyamānasyādhyakṣāsāmeti*) (TS 6.3.8.3; MS 3.10.1; ŚB 3.8.2.1 1-9; BŚS 7.17. 4-7 and 7.18.1.7; KĀS 6.6.1-7). The priest instructs the *Samitā* to immolate the animal without allowing it to cry out loudly.<sup>14</sup>

Ritualists strongly refuse to accept sacrificial killing of animals as killing in ordinary sense. According to them the ordinary killing involves *himsā* or violence while the sacrificial immolation does not. They point out some difference between these two. Ritualists do not slay a victim by striking violently on the forehead or behind the ears of the animal which are some of the usual methods followed by common men. Ritualists prefer to choke the victim by closing its mouth and nostrils or throttling its neck by means of a halter. Similarly, they never say "slay" (*jahi*) or "kill" (*māraya*) in the manner of worldly people but use the terms like *samjñāpaya* (quiet it) and '*anvagan*' (it has passed away). Because for them the victim, being immolated is supposed to go to heaven following the gods (ŚB 3.8.1.15). The term '*Samjñāpanam*' literally means "the act of causing someone to give consent", which suggests that the immolator simply causes the

animal to give consent for its own death.<sup>15</sup> Similarly the term '*śamitā*' is derived from the verbal root *Śam* meaning to be quiet or calm (4.P.) And stands for a causal agent who simply causes the victim to be quiet or calm by extinguishing its fiery life energy.

## V.

At the same time, they consider the activities of immolation and dissection of the animal body, cooking its flesh etc. as something alien or inferior to other sacrificial activities like pressing Soma plants, threshing, and grinding rice grains, baking of sacrificial cakes and cooking *caru* etc. While the latter activities are carried out inside the altar in front of all the participants, the former activities are done outside the altar and sometimes in the enclosed shed. No established sacred fire place is used for cooking the flesh. The latter activities, it seems, are not very much agreeable to the psychology of the participants. After the offering of momentum (*vapāhoma*), all the direct and indirect participants go to the pit called *cātvāla* and sprinkle water on them to purify. According to SB 3.8.2.30, by doing or approving the activities, in connection with the victim they performed some cruel activities (*krurovāetatkurvantiyatsamiñāpayantiyatviśāsati*). As this effect their mind adversely they need to appease themselves with the help of soothing water. They do not allow the victim to cry loudly so that the pious atmosphere at the sacrifice should not be polluted by causing discomfort to the listeners. When they hesitate to see the action of immolation, or do not allow the victim to cry out or do not accept a violent manner to kill the animal they simply intend that the peaceful sacred sacrificial atmosphere as well as their pious motive behind the religious performance do not get violated more or become increasingly brutal to send a wrong message to the society against the sacrificial institution.

In such controversial situations the ritualists are, it seems, caught between two opposite psychological directions. Prescribed rituals are inevitable for them since they accepted their respective rituals as sacred duties. Even if some of these are indecent or not agreeable they cannot abandon the same. They cannot be fully involved in such activities and enjoy the pleasure of their performance because their respect for human values does not allow the same. In order to justify both, i.e., their manual activity and moral stand, one has to apply one's subtle discriminative power and understand that they remain physically engaged in these cruel activities only to ensure the human value that none should give up one's worldly duties even if these include disagreeableness. Because these are required for the maintenance of the world, they also mentally remain detached from these and keep their morality high above such performances to take care of another value in life that man should never turn away from spirituality, an essential factor for his existence. Perhaps the ritualists want to maintain both these values simultaneously and they face no dilemma at all. Thus, their position can be equated with that of Arjuna at the end of *Gītā* who being a *kṣatriya* was advised to slay his kins and elders in the sacred war against the evil doers only for his duty's sake and to remain happy by not considering himself as a real killer.

## Conclusion:

Vedic ritualist theologians are fully aware of human values and try to apply these in their ritual activities whenever it is possible. They use to either express or suggest the same in the ritual discourses so that their followers can extract benefit out of these. One also marked that they have thorough knowledge of human weakness that enables them to highlight the values in life appropriate to the contexts. Certain values in life are not to be compromised at all such as truthfulness and dutifulness. Some other values like nonviolence etc. can be followed or given up after an important study on a given situation. Because, they feel, it would be unwise on their part to sacrifice a greater value of life involving maximum welfare to the society as a whole, for the sake of a lesser value standing to safeguard qualitatively a lesser benefit. Therefore, a proper and unbiased understanding of a situation that helps deciding a correct course of action can also lead a healthy tradition and value in life. The Vedas are thus the store house of human values. We can always depend on those for a happy and prosper life.

## References

1. ŚB 1.1.1.1
2. ŚB 2.2.2. 19-20.
3. The *sāman* is in *Gr̥Gā* 13.1.38 on SV 1.476, to be applied in the *ārbhavapamānastotra* of the fourth day inside the six day-session called *pr̥ṣṭhyaṣaḍaha* that forms a part of a *dvādaśāha* sacrifice.
4. TS. 1.6.5.2, ŚB. 2.5.3.20, KSS. 5.5. 6-9.
5. ŚB 11.3.1.1.
6. ṚV. 10.71.10.
7. Cf. Keith, A.B., *The ṚgvedaBrāhmaṇas*, Delhi, 1971, p. 116, f.ñ. 4, to his translation on AB.
8. ŚB 5.1.1. 1-2
9. These two hymns are to be recited in the *Vaiśvadevaśāstra* at the third pressing of the sixth day of *ap̥ṣṭhyaṣaḍah* session inside the twelve days soma sacrifice.
10. In the *Rājasūya* sacrifice there is an one day soma sacrifice called *Abhiṣecanīya* which is an *ukthya* type of soma sacrifice. In its mid-day service, after the recitation of the *maruttvatīyaśāstra* the Hotṛ priest has to narrate this story to the consecrated king.
11. AB 1.24 (4-7; SB 3.4.2.13,8-9.
12. VS 1.20.
13. TS 1.3.5 and VS 5.43.
14. Āp̥ŚS 7.16.6; KŚS 6.5.17.
15. Rudradatta in his commentary to the Āp̥ŚS 7.16.5 explains that *samjñāpanam* means 'killing without causing wound' (*akṣatasyamāraṇam*).

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