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Human sacrifice, puruṣamedha, in the context of Indological studies – Western vs. Indian approach *

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Summary

In November 2000, a symbolic version of puruṣamedha was organized by the All World Gayatri Pariwar at Shantikunj, Haridwar, marking the completion of a 12-year religious practice of some of its members. The event was attended by four million devotees. Its performance raised once again an important question – the role and place of human sacrifice in the Vedic sacrificial system. The question whether there was symbolic rather than actual human sacrifice in Vedic times has been the subject of serious debate among the scholars, although it never received a satisfactory answer. Here I make an attempt to outline the historical development of this issue within the Vedic studies, by pointing out some of the tendencies, views and assessments of the Western and Indian scholars, and thus try to summarize the major reasons for the undervaluation and even the tabooization, at least in the Indological circles, of this often controversial and fervid topic.

Keywords: Human Sacrifice, Self-Sacrifice, Death, Ritual, Puruṣa, Brāhmaṇas, Śrautasūtras, Vedic civilization, Religion, Mythology

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Few practices indeed have caused greater moral detestation and controversy than human sacrifice. However, it seems that the practice comes from a deep place in the shared set of the ancient ritual archetypes as it underlines much of the world's religious thinking. The fascination which human sacrifice exercised over various peoples at a relatively high stage of culture suggests that as a phenomenon it must be a psychological reaction to some deep seated social or religious sentiment in human nature such as the mystery of life and death (Yankov 2019a).

It is a curious fact that the desire to remain ignorant of human sacrifice within the lineage of one's own tradition seems to be a common wish, as Mary Storm notices, almost as pervasive as the practice itself (Storm 2013: 57). Many people prefer to

look away rather than acknowledge that such controversial rites were once part of their own culture. Societies that have at one time practiced human sacrifice and then rejected it or devalued it often make great efforts to ignore, forget or even reconfigure history in order to obliterate any evidence of its former practice. The paradox is very evident in the words of Rajendralala Mitra, who is one of the first scholars together with Albrecht Weber and prof. Wilson, who spent more time and energy on the issue of human sacrifice in India. This is what he says: “As a Hindu writing on the actions of my ancestors – remote though they are - it would have been a source of great satisfaction to me if I could adopt this conclusion as true (that human sacrifice wasn’t authorised by the Veda and was introduced in later times) but I regret I cannot do so consistently with my allegiance to the cause of history” (Mitra 1881: 69).

Rajendralala Mitra is one of the scholars of the 19th century who tried to rise upon his own cultural frames and work without self-interest on this particular issue. If we take a brief look at the history of the problem we will see that its current state of indefiniteness is to some extent due to the signs of bias and prejudice which marked its examination.

1. Bias against the Brāhmaṇas

Undoubtedly, the 19th century was a special period in the history of Indology for it seems that some of the best minds of the West turned their attention to the Vedic texts. We are all indebted to the Indologists of the last two centuries and their remarkable legacy of vast critical editions, translations and analyses of the Vedic texts. Their work has become the foundation of modern Indological studies and even of history and religion as a whole.

The outstanding talent of these scholars, however, didn't make them immune to a certain narrowness of perspective. While their studies allowed us to enter into the realm of Vedic thought they shouldn't define the limits of our own views. Traces of biases are evident in the generally negative attitude that the fathers of Western Indology had against various religious texts, among which are the exegetic texts of the Brāhmaṇas. The obvious overvaluation of the poetry of the Ṛgveda and the philosophy of the Upaniṣads led to the undervaluation of other aspects of the Vedic tradition – such as the Brāhmaṇas and Śrautasūtras. In the words of the famous German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer: “The Upaniṣads were the only portion of the Veda which deserved our study, all the rest was priestly rubbish” (quoted by Tull 1989: 15).

But if Schopenhauer was a philosopher, and not an Indologist, which can be an excuse for his lack of deeper understanding of the subject, what can we say about those distinguished scholars, who disdained the Brahmanical texts as some mumbo-jumbo, sprouted from the imagination of the priests? Let's take a look at some of their statements:

> *Max Müller, the doyen of the nineteenth-century Indology says thus: "They are theological twaddle... No person could read more than ten pages without being disgusted" (quoted by Tull 1989: 7).*

Müller's legacy is clearly seen in Julius Eggeling's translation of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, a task on which he spent twenty years of his life. In the introduction section of the translation Eggeling warns the readers of the vapidity and absurdity they would encounter while going through the text: "[...] It is characterised by dogmatic assertion and flimsy symbolism rather than by serious reasoning [...] Nothing more absurd has probably ever been imagined by rational beings." (quoted by Tull 1989: 8).

The Vedologist Arthur MacDonnell dismisses the Brāhmaṇas as an "aggregate of shallow and pedantic discussions full of sacerdotal conceits and absurd identifications" (MacDonnell 1900: 32).

William Whitney, whose 1885 work *The Roots, Verb-forms and Primary Derivatives of the Sanskrit Language* is an indispensable resource for students of Sanskrit, wrote of them – "Their tedious inanity will soon satiate if it does not disgust the reader" (quoted by Collins 2014: 45).

Another eminent Sanskritist, Maurice Bloomfield states: "Both the performances and explanations are treated in such a way as to render these works on the whole monuments of tediousness and intrinsic stupidity" (Bloomfield 1908: 44).

The philosopher Albert Pike in his book, dedicated to the Indo-Aryan deities of the Ṛgveda, is also among the plenty of scholars who labeled the sacred texts **"**Brāhmanical stupidities" (Pike 1930: 614).

As we see the Brāhmaṇas were received with disgust and derision among the Western scholars. They were looked upon as the product of a period of degeneration, something not worthy to be examined in details or, if so, then only with the purpose to be distinguished from the sophisticated Vedas and Upaniṣads. This class of texts was associated with the rise of sacerdotal conceit, dominion and

religious fanaticism which “put to death” poetry and philosophy. According to the orientalists of that time, the religion of the early Veda was distorted at the hands of these sacerdotalists. As one scholar remarked: “The priests had lost the inspiration that came from action; they now made no new hymns; they only formulated new rules of sacrifice. They became intellectually debauched and altogether weakened in character” (Hopkins 1895: 199).

The Brāhmaṇic period, however, represents a crucial moment in the development of the Indian tradition, having put forward many of the patterns that later dominate both the ritual and philosophical spheres of Vedic culture. There is a very clear continuity in the literature of the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads. The last one actually draws upon much of the patterns established already in the Brāhmaṇas. It won't be wrong to say that they manage to elaborate, develop and strengthen the Vedic ideal, so it is not justified to draw the conclusion that the Brāhmaṇas are more primitive and unrefined than the Upaniṣads (Tull 1989: 17).

Having in mind this bias against the literary and theological value of certain texts, and the fact that exactly in the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Śrautasūtras* the rite of *puruṣamedha* is recognized[1], we shouldn't be surprised to observe the same attitude regarding the problem of human sacrifice in the Vedic system. A big part of the scholars gainsay its real life existence but don't give satisfying reasons for their rejection of it. Most of their arguments come down to the statement “It doesn't match.”

2. The debate on Vedic human sacrifice in Indological studies:

2.1 The Western point of view

The first study, or rather comment, on human sacrifice in the Vedas was done in 1805 by Henry Colebrooke, the then president of the Royal Asiatic Society. Citing the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*'s words that the human victims should be released in the culmination of the ritual, he concludes that: “human sacrifices were not authorized by the Vedas […]. Or they must have been introduced in later times on the authority of certain Puraṇas and Tantras [...]” (Colebrooke 1858: 35–36).

Like certain other orientalists of his day, Colebrooke admired the Vedas and tended to ascribe everything that contradicted his rationalist model of ancient Indian Vedic civilization either to savage prehistory or to the corrupting influences of the medieval Puraṇas and Tantras. The ethnocentrism based on racial supremacy, especially the European admiration towards all that could be called Aryan, played

an essential role in the formation of the notion that whatever was abominable and detestable was of Non-Aryan, tribal origin. This view was shared by many Western Indologists and some Indian scholars. Among them was A.P. Karmarkar who supported the idea that human sacrifice in India belonged exclusively to the Non-Aryans. He argued that it was first practiced by the Dravidians and from them it was imported into the Vedic paradigm. He insisted as well that the myth of Śunahśepa was a clear indication of the dislike which the Indo-Aryans had for such practices (Karmarkar 1944: 109–115). However, Wendy Doniger rightly observes that "to postulate a tribal origin is to some extent a way of passing the buck away from the major religions which must be explained; it is a scholarly way of saying "somewhere else" (Doniger 1980: xvii).

Not far from this notion is Karmarkar's colleague, Ganesh Thite, who argues that some Vedic rituals can be only theoretically possible. "We have to assume that there were some over-enthusiastic authors who were interested in making exaggerations and writing fictitious things." Thite believes rituals like *puruṣamedha* could not have been performed by the Indo-Aryans as "they were civilized people". He renders fictitious also rituals like *mahāvrata* which contains copulation between a brahman and a prostitute, *aśvamedha* which includes a symbolic intercourse between the queen and the horse and *gosava* because of the prescribed incest in it (Thite 1996: 253-257).

Quite a lot of scholars gather around the conclusion that Vedic human sacrifice was only a "priest's fantasy". In his outstanding work *The Religion and Philosophy of Vedas and Upanishads*, Arthur Keith states confidently that "puruṣamedha is a mere priestly invention to fill up the apparent gap". The gap he talks about is the fact that in many passages of the sacerdotal literature man is listed among the five sacred sacrificial animals and the most valued of all victims (ŚB 5.1.3.8; 5.2.1.6). At the same time, he assumes the possibility that the story about Śunahśepa in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa could be a distant recollection of infanticide – an old custom, spread among many Indo-European cultures (Hastings 2014). According to the ancient beliefs, in times of calamity the king would sacrifice his dearest possession – his son. Eventually, Keith admits that if human sacrifice ever existed in Vedic India, it was a rare offering. He also adds that even if human sacrifice were not a characteristic of the Vedic religion, it is invariably an important feature within Hinduism, which is confirmed by the Epic and Puranic literature (Keith 1989).

The story of Śunahśepa[2] is the subject of a debate between two famous sanskritists – Max Müller and H.Wilson. Wilson sees the story as a positive proof for the early

existence of human sacrifice, while Müller understands it only as an allegory. However, probably because of the heated debate, at some point Müller agrees with Wilson that the Śunahśepa story reveals that "the Brahmins were familiar with the idea of human sacrifice and seemingly they were ready to sell their sons for that purpose" (Müller 1859: 350).

Several other scholars put forward similar explanations. One of them is Paul-Emile Dumont, who has translated the human sacrifice description in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*. He gives in detail the procedure and the requirements for the practice, as described in the sūtras, then in the end he summarizes his views, stating that actual killing (prescribed in the sūtras) was never done and that it was only imagined as a complement to the theory of sacrifice**.** He is confident that the rite must have been purely symbolical for he doubts the Vedic priests were capable of "putting under the knife" such a considerable number of people – about 190 as stated in the the *Brāhmaṇas* (Dumont 1948). Other famous scholars who subscribe to the "priest's fantasy" argument regarding human sacrifice in the Vedic system are Bruce Lincoln, Dieter Schlingloff, Moritz Winternitz, Hermann Oldenberg.

2.2. The Indian point of view

It would be unwise to pretend that this topic does not inflame cultural protectionism. There is a strong reluctance on the part of modern societies to admit the history of such sacrificial practices. This reluctance is especially acute in cultures like India's, which have been fiercely distorted and humiliated by colonial or imperialist agendas.

Because of this distortion, the reaction of many former and contemporary Indian scholars was and still is to reject completely the existence of human sacrifice. Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, denied the presence of any real human or even animal sacrifices in the Vedic *yajñas* (Garg 1984: 326). This is explained with the inclination of some Indian scholars to additionally mystify the nature of Vedic rituals and Vedic religion as a whole. In order to justify the explicit descriptions of killing the animal victims in the *Brāhmaṇa* texts, Gopinath Mohapatra claims that the original texts of the Vedas were intentionally falsified and that the real knowledge was twisted with self-interested motives by the Western scholars. He argues, for example, that "medha" has only in its last meanings the idea of "sacrifice" while its primary sense is "intellect" and "love", so that *aśvamedha* should not be translated as "horse sacrifice", but as "a ritual in which the energy of the horse is unfolded" (1986: 464–465). Dharmdev Vidyamartand in

his essay “No violence in Vedic yajña” concludes that as the word “adhvra” is a synonym to yajña and its meaning is “non-violent, not injurious and harmful act”, then there were no bloody sacrifices in the Vedas[3]. Under the influence of Dayananda and Sri Aurobindo, who first propounded the thesis of the mystic character of Vedic rituals, authors such as Rekha Sinha or Madhav Pandaik Pandit interpret all the gods and demons of the Vedas as manifestations of abstract notions like Fear, Anger, Devotion, Love and Meditation. They postulate that the majority of the Vedic sacrifices took place within the human body (Sinha 1986; Pandit 1974). The general flaw of all these interpretations is that they don't take into account the overall historical line of development and project much later philosophical reflections, like those in the Upaniṣadic traditions, upon the early Vedic ideology which demonstrates more pragmatical concepts.

The past is a very important template for the present, which means that a Hindu devotee of today feels obliged to do what his ancestors did in the paradigmatic past. This is why the very notion of the existence of violence in the form of human and animal sacrifice within the Vedic tradition seems obnoxious to him. For many centuries all that was good and sublime was attested in the Vedas, the knowledge revealed to the wise men “at the dawn of time”. The word Veda for centuries has evoked images of divine beauty, mystery, wisdom, and because of its high status there has been explicit preference among Hindu devotees for neglecting what is obvious and for, let's say, “sweeping under the carpet” all that is inconsistent with contemporary values. This is particularly valid for the advocates of Hindu nationalism and chauvinism who are at the outpost of the revisionist and conspiracy-theory approach of history (Doniger 2013: 572-576).

History, however, is not well served by distortion, exaggeration, nationalism, ethnocentrism or mystification, neither is it clarified when practices that formed important symbolic and ideological functions within ancient societies are suppressed. Those sacrificial practices must be understood and acknowledged in the context of their historical appearance and purpose. Even if the actual occurrence of puruṣamedha at a specific place and time is difficult to prove from the archeological finds, which is easily explained with the very essence of the Indo-Aryan material culture (Elizarenkova 1999), what is of far greater importance is the acceptability and recognition it receives in the Vedic exegetic tradition. Considering the still unexamined source literature on this topic, I am inclined to believe that the claims that human sacrifice was just a “priest's fantasy”, or that the Vedic culture was too sophisticated and unmaterialistic to advocate such brutalities, seem to me rather premature and biased.

3. **The importance of the human victim**

For the ancient cultures in which religion and mythology played a dominant role and were embedded in the daily life of society, human sacrifice was not a foreign concept. Fundamental to these cultures was the conviction that the life of the community was dependent on the life of the individual. This idea was also valid for the Vedic tradition. The people of knowledge, the brahmans, perceived the other world (the divine one) as a realm of order, life and abundance. The priest's job was to search for access to this realm in order to renew human existence and potency. Key to the gates of this treasury was sacrifice. Sacrificing was the means by which power could flow from humans to gods (through offering) and from gods to humans (in the form of boons like rain, victory, assets, cattle, etc.). "In sacrifice, the priests found the road from lack to abundance, from darkness to light and from death to immortality" (Coomaraswamy 1941: 358).

In simple terms, one must sacrifice a cow to obtain a bunch of cows, which stand for abundance and prosperity, at least according to the Vedic beliefs. The community must dispense with something of great value, something it owns and praises so that it receives in exchange a multitude of boons. The form of sacrifice "cow for cows" doesn't seem to cause an ethical issue in the ancient sacrificial systems. In the same way, we can extend the principle of exchange to the level of "human life for human lives", that is to say, the sacrifice of the one, the individual, for the sake of the general, of the whole. The controlled death of one prevents chaotic, unrestrained destruction of the community. Life of society goes through the sacrifice of one of its members who in his sacred position not only is privileged to secure the social well-being for those who last out but also to seal his own immortality in the collective memory. The life-death relation is skillfully illustrated by the Dutch Indologist Jan Heesterman: „Sacrifice is, quite bluntly, an act of controlled death and destruction. This act purports to force access to the other world, the transcendent. The gap, the vacuum created by the sacrifice has to be filled by the other side with the opposite of death and destruction, that is the goods of life, in the most tangible sense of food and survival" (Heesterman 1978: 87).

Undoubtedly, if you want to achieve the best results and boons in life, you must dispense with something of considerable value which is why so many sūtras state that "man is to be sacrificed first, as man is the highest of all" (*puruṣaṃ prathamamālabhate | puruṣo hi prathamaḥ*) (ŚB 6.2.1.18; 7.5.2.6).

Moreover, man is praised as the most potent of all the sacrificial animals (*puruṣaḥ prathamaḥ paśūnāṃ vīryavattama iti* (ŚB 7.5.2.6). This is not surprising, taking into account the main paradigm, upon which the Soma rituals are based – the myth of the primordial sacrifice of Puruṣa or Prajāpati. Prajāpati is an absolute continuation of the image of Puruṣa which is easily proved by comparing their aspects, functions, epithets and mythology (Smith 1998; Tull 1989). They are virtually indiscernible if it weren't for the different names. Unlike Puruṣa, however, in the mythology of Prajāpati the God himself is the initiator of the dismemberment of his own body. This phrase *so 'kāmayata* or "He wished/caused himself to wish" is repeated regularly in the sūtras. Prajāpati, the primordial sacrificial victim, who is also the primal macrocosmic human, Puruṣa, wishes to procreate and becomes dismembered and recomposed in order to create the whole cosmos. The God here is like a late incarnation or an avatar of the cosmic substance, called Bràhman, which is continuously sacrificed, and continuously reborn through the mysterious agency of sacrifice. "To the Vedic thinker, Heesterman observes, the whole universe was constantly moving between the two poles—of birth and death, integration and disintegration, ascension and descent—which by their interaction occasion the cyclic rhythm of the cosmos" (Heesterman 1957: 6).

It is in this respect that human sacrifice underlies a great deal of the symbolism of the Vedic ritual system. In the same way as Puruṣa or Prajāpati are both the sacrifice and the victim, the subject and the object, the sacrificer (or *yajamāna*), being an earthly representation of the divine, is thought to be the real performer and the ultimate victim within the rite. The patron of the ceremony, helped by the priests, should visualize the original sacrifice and imitate it in such a manner as to achieve the same results which were evoked by the divine agent in the beginnings of time. We are constantly reminded of this within the textual scripts, which say "The sacrificer is by essence the victim" (*yajamāno va eṣa nidānena yat paśuh*, AB 2.2). "Now when he (the Sacrificer) enters on the fast, he thereby gives himself up to the gods, even as Prajāpati thereby gave himself up to the gods. Let him, therefore, endeavour to pass that night (with his mind) completely restrained, in the same way as he would proceed with an oblation, for he becomes an oblation to the gods" (SB 11.1.8.4).[4]

The goal of this homology is clear. As the demiurg creates and renews the world, so does the sacrificer as he imitates his acts. And at the beginning of the Brāhmaṇic period, when the institution of sacrifice was flourishing, the sacrificer (usually the ruler) was not merely an observer of the deity's creation act, nor was he a person who propitiated a fearsome elemental superhuman being, but within the ritual he

himself became a performer, a magician in the cycles of life and death, an actor and creator. “By identifying oneself with the mythical Puruṣa and by ritually repeating the mythical event and so reactivating its inherent power for the benefit of oneself and with view to one's own reintegration one believed oneself to achieve one's own rebirth” (Gonda 1970: 27).

Of course, the rebirth of the individual was extended outward to the rebirth of the territories and lands the patron was authorized to reign upon. In this manner, sacrifice guaranteed the renewal of both the king and the kingdom, i.e the known world. We can easily see this connection between the ruler and the land in the Sanskrit terms, denoting a king – *pārthiva, bhūmipaḥ, nṛpaḥ,* all signifying someone who protects and embodies the land and the people.

The sacrificer is identical with the sacrifice, because the sacrifice itself is identical with the original, archetypical sacrificer – Prajāpati (ŚB 3.2.2.4; 4.2.4.16; 5.2.1.2; 5.4.5.21; TB 3.2.3.1; KauB 10.1). And what Prajāpati did is to self-sacrifice. Thus, the imperative of the Vedic mythos obliges the patron of the rite to immolate himself because, theoretically, only the suicidal act could satisfy the Vedic ideology. The British indologist Arthur Keith confirms this by saying: “The sacrifice is essentially commensurate with men, and the conclusion is not doubtfully drawn that the sacrifice should be the sacrifice of man himself...the perfect form of sacrifice should be suicide” (Keith 1989: 459).

Keith admitted this logic but doubted this idea was ever materialized in real life during the Brāhmaṇa era. The famous comparativist and philologist Georges Dumézil, however, doesn't reject the reality of such practices:

> *“So in the spring and other big occasions an earthly Brahmin bled to make the universal sap rise in the world again and to restore the economic and political order of the world, like at the beginning a cosmic man, a Remède, a celestial Brahmin, gave his substance and his life force to make up the matter of the world itself. What is more frequent in religions than these transpositions of earth to heaven, ritual to myth, periodical to primordial, seasonal to cosmogonic” (Dumezil, cit. by Collins 2014:89).*

There are a couple of Vedic rites like *Sarvasvarastoma* and *Darṣadvatāyana* which do speak of such forms of voluntary death (Yankov 2019b). These two are in accordance with the self-sacrificial motif as they express the desire of the sacrificer to die on his own (*maraṇakāmasya*; KŚS 22.6.1-6). Another common feature they share is the blunt statement that the death of the performer virtually occurs within

the ritual (*svargaṁ lokaṁ gaꣳchati* HŚS 17.3.18–23; JB 2.300; *evaṃ mṛtaṃ yajamānaṃ* LŚS 8.8.6]] and that the dead body needs to be dealt with (LŚS 8.8.6]. We could add to this class another complex ceremony - *Sarvamedha* - which too complies with the motif of self-sacrifice. At the end of it, however, the sacrificer is prescribed not to enter the fire or sink into the water, as prescribed in the above mentioned rituals, but to undertake an ascetic mode of life and leave the world for good (*araṇyaṃ pravrajet*), which is a kind of symbolic death in respect to social status and power.

Given the myths about the Primordial sacrifice and the first victim, it wouldn't have been hard for a Vedic Indian to reach the conclusion that the perfect death would be a self-offering. This *actus voluntatis* was very much stimulated by the strong connection between reality and myth and by the awaiting award for heavenly immortality. However, the necessity for regular sacrifices made it impossible for any society to deprive itself from its most important members (king, priests) thus taking the risk to diminish in number, power and resources. This is where substitution came forward. Substitution was the key principle that spared the life of the original sacrificer and it is not surprising that every sacrificial system at some point reaches this logic. Compromise is crucial here. The paradox comes from the fact that within the Vedic values the realization in life and in the afterworld depends entirely on the number and quality of sacrifices you have performed throughout your lifetime. The sacred precepts remind us that premature death is a sin, an unwanted evil (Ruseva 2015: 37). The most honoured death is the one that comes naturally after fulfilling your obligations. The optimal human lifespan according to the texts was a centenary (ŚB10.2.6.7). Nevertheless, these precepts tell us something more – the mere fact that they contain warnings against suicide is a signal for a real threat of self-willed death.

The Vedic texts say unambiguously that the life of the sacrificer must be redeemed (TS 6.1.11.6; AB 2.9; ŚB 3.3.4.21; 9.7.1.3; 11.1.8). And this kind of redemption (*niṣkṛti*) could be of any kind – another man, (which is where *puruṣamedha* emerges) an animal, even a plant, as long as the principles of *sāmanya* and *nidānena* (identification with the original) and *pratimā* (replication) are maintained.

> *"Now, when he performs the animal offering, he thereby redeems himself – male by male, for the victim is a male, and the Sacrificer is a male. And this, indeed, to wit, flesh, is the best kind of food: he thus becomes an eater of the best kind of food. Let not a year pass by for him without his offering; for the year means life: it is thus immortal life he thereby confers upon himself" (ŚB 11.7.1.2-3).*

This is how any form can serve as redeemer for the prototype (the sacrificer) so that the paradigmatic model of self-sacrifice is maintained. “By offering up the victim, [the sacrificer] shows that it is himself that he wishes both to offer and [to] avoid offering. Victim and sacrificer are united *nidanena*, by esoteric identification” (Malamoud 1996: 171-172). The point here is that any substitute would do, but only the best substitute would achieve extraordinary results. This is why human victim is the preferred victim for crucial periods in a king's life. Malamoud argues that the identification must not be total, otherwise the sacrificer (most often the king) would die at the same time as the victim (Malamoud 1996: 171-2). However, with the introduction of the concept of the divine substitute this point ceases to be relevant. Identificitaion with the prototype could be sought to the maximum degree and the sacrificer's life still could be left intact. This is how human sacrifice as a substitute of the archetypical victim fits perfectly well in the Vedic ritual paradigm.

The majority of scholars agree that in theory the perfect Vedic sacrifice must look like a self-oblation, self-offering. This explains why all the important Śrauta rituals – *agnicāyana*, *sarvamedha*, *puruṣamedha*, *aśvamedha*, *paśubandha*, *iṣṭi* yajnas – follow the basic pattern of the Primordial self-sacrifice of Prajāpati. But within the tradition this concept stirs up a conflict. This is why the priests would equate the yajamāna with the offered oblation, whatever it may be – liquid substance, plant, animal or human victim. Metaphorically and on a symbolical level the victim was always the sacrificer himself but the right substitute – human or animal – would be determined according to the necessities and circumstances of the time and place.

Myths reveal to us not the historical facts, not the way things happened in reality but mainly the emotional world of the ancient man, his ideas, predispositions and propensities or as Doniger puts it “sentiments rather than events, motivations rather than movements” (2013:145). Ideas are facts too. If something is present as a metaphor in a sacred text, it is there for a reason, because the people believe in its symbolic power, in its truthfulness or falseness. Before one thing turns into metaphor it appears first as a reality because we know by history that real events produce symbols and that symbols too could lead to real events. The fact that human sacrifice underlines an extensive part of the Brāhmaṇical content; the presence of human sacrifice within the class of the Śrautasūtras, which deals with the instructions on the right performance of the rites; the frequent mentions of the human being as the highest victim; the equation of the sacrificer and the victim on the mythological level; plus the fact that certain rites speak unambiguously about the death of the sacrifice – all this reveal to us something equally important: the inclinations and the propensities the priestly class would have had at the time of the

compilation of the sacred texts. And these inclinations do make plausible the real and unmetaphorical side of *puruṣamedha,* especially in an earlier stage of the Vedic society.

Notes

1 Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (3.4.1.-3.4.19.); Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (13.6.1.1 – 13.6.1.11; 13.6.2.1-13.6.2.20); Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (7.13.-18); Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra (21.1-18); Āpastamba Śrautasūtra (20.24.1-16); Vaitāna Śrautasūtra (37.10-37.26; 38.1-9); Śāṅkhāyana Śrautasūtra (16.10.1-10; 16.11.1-33; 16.12.1-21; 16.13.1-13)

2 The story in short is the following: King Hariścandra of the Ikshvaku dynasty had 100 wives, but no son. On advice of the sage Narada, he prayed to the deity Varuna for a son. Varuna granted the boon, but on condition that the king would sacrifice him to the god in the future. As a result of this, a son named Rohita was born to the king. After his birth, Varuna came to Hariścandra and demanded that the child be sacrificed to him. The king postponed the sacrifice multiple times citing various reasons, but finally agreed to it when Rohita became an adult. Eventually Rohita purchased for one hundred cows Śunahśepa, the middle son of Ajīgarta as a substitute for himself to be offered to Varuṇa. But the boy praised Viṣṇu, Indra, and other deities, and escaped death.

3 Even if it bears the meaning of "not injurious", this may have something to do with the tabooization of death within the Vedic ritual. An act of neutralizing the unfavourable effects of chaos and destruction associated with death, which has no place in a ceremony, aiming for exactly the opposite (Gonda 1975: 80).

4 The excerpts from the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa are taken from the translation of Julias Eggeling. Śatapatha Brāhamaṇa, According to the Text of the Madhyandina School, (trans.) by Julius Eggeling, 5 volumes, Sacred books of the East, edited by Max Muller. Oxford: Clarendon, 1882–1900. www.sacred-texts.com

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AB – Aitareya Brāhmaṇa

HSS – Hiraṇyakeśi Śrautasūtra

KausB – Kauṣitaki Brāhmaṇa

KSS – Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra

LSS – Lātyāyana Śrautasūtra

TB – Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa

TS – Taittirīya Samhita

ŚB – Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa

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