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## Ritual Violence and Non-violence

ABSTRACT: Current paper looks at the vicissitudes of thought on violence and non-violence in India, from Vedic period to the present. The early Vedic people lived a nomadic life and practiced customary animal sacrifice. Gradually, however, they started using euphemisms in connection with ritualistic violence and switched subsequently to non-violent rituals. Possibly, because there was a lot of opposition to ritualistic violence, mainly from the Buddhist and the Jaina thinkers, even the later Hinduism ultimately accepted the principle of *ahimsā* (non-violence). Although at present most followers of Vedic rituals do not practice violence when performing Vedic rituals, some others still partly accept it and act accordingly. Also, there is some ritualistic violence outside the Vedic ritual, but there is definitely a change in outlook.

KEYWORDS: *Weltanschauung*, ritual, violence, *ṛṣi*, *muni*, euphemism, doctrine of *ahimsā*, violent and non-violent idol worship, black magic

Before entering into details on the subject, it would be proper to understand the geographical conditions in which Vedic people must have lived and their general *Weltanschauung* which must have been formulated by these very conditions. Of course there is a kind of vicious circle here. We have to resort to guesswork regarding the geographical

conditions on the basis of the *Weltanschauung* and guess about the *Weltanschauung* on the basis of geographical conditions. Since no one, including the archaeologists, has any definite and decisive evidence about the *Urheimat* and about the date(s) of Vedic people and their literature, I, too, am putting before the readers my views while keeping in mind my limitations and uncertainty on the matter of violence and non-violence in India in the field of ritual.

Thus, it seems that Vedic people must have lived in a region of extreme temperatures where there were hot summers, very cold winters, and little rain. So, they were forced to be nomadic, without any definite, stable territory to call their own. Naturally, they must not have been able to cultivate land and had to depend more on hunting than on agriculture. They were constantly attacking other people or being attacked by other people. Their motto was “live or die.” There were many tribes among them and they must have been fighting with each other as is evident from the references to *dāśarājña*, “the fight with ten kings,” a war described in the *Rgveda*. Because of the cold weather, preservation of fire was their primary concern and Fire-worship was a part of their religion. Moreover, animal sacrifice was an essential feature of their daily life and their religious beliefs. In short, the Vedic people were prone to violence on account of their land’s geographical conditions, and their worldview and their religion were subsequently grounded in violence. Naturally, a war-hero and demon-killer Indra was their highest god at the time of battles, and Varuṇa, a ruthless punisher-god was their god at the time of peace. Agni, Fire god, was also very important for them because he was the mystic protector of their domestic life. Appropriately, he was called Gṛhpati, “the master of the house.”

However, when Vedic people settled in the Saptasindhu region,<sup>1</sup> they found more suitable conditions for a kind of steady/sedentary life: ample water-supply, fertile land, and comparatively favourable geographical environment for permanent settlements, regular life, and agricultural

<sup>1</sup> The term *saptasindhu* or “seven rivers” refers to a number of rivers that were mentioned in the *Rgveda* (see, for example, RV I.35.8) and are located in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent, from Gandhāra to Kurukṣetra. See, for example, Sontakke and Kashikar 1933–1951.

prosperity. These changes brought a lot of development in the details of their rituals. The more they moved towards the east, the more they could develop/evolve their thinking about compassion, non-violence, and love. While earlier their main aim was worldly happiness and the highest worldly pleasure was symbolised by the idea of heaven, now, they wanted something more than immediate pleasure, and that aspiration was embodied in the concept of salvation, i.e., *mokṣa* or release from worldly existence. It is significant to note that the non-violent ways of thinking (like those associated with Buddhism and Jainism) originated in the Gangetic regions. The later Hinduism adopted the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) from these two ways of thinking.<sup>2</sup>

There were two types of intellectual leaders among the Vedic people and they represented two types of Vedic thought: based respectively on violence and non-violence. The thinkers belonging to the first group were called *ṛṣis* and the thinkers belonging to the second were called *munis*. While the *ṛṣis* used to be married men, *munis* were celibates or those who voluntarily renounced the world and became monks. In Yāska's *Nirukta*, a treatise on the semantic exegesis of a collection of Vedic words including hundreds para-etymologies, the word *ṛṣi* is derived from the root *ḍṛś-* "to see" (II.11 *ṛṣir darśanāt*), and thus, traditionally, this word denotes "a seer."<sup>3</sup> It is, however, better to derive the word *ṛṣi* from the root *ṛṣ-*, "to rush," and thus, it may be taken in the sense of "the one who rushes forward," i.e. "a leader," or "an intellectual leader." The word *muni*, however, is rather difficult to derive. I propose my own etymology of this word. In my understanding, this word has some connection with the Dravidian word *muṇ* which means "the front." So, ultimately, the word *muni* could denote "someone in front," "a leader," or "an intellectual leader." *Ṛṣis* were the performers of Vedic rituals seeking ultimate pleasure and trying to reach heaven through the performance of sacrifices. They were non-vegetarians, used to killing animals, at times even taking part in

<sup>2</sup> For historical perspective on this choice of the "non-violence" culture, see, e.g., Schmidt 1968; Heesterman 1984; Bodewitz 1999; Schmithausen 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See Bhadkamkar and Bhadkamkar 1985.

the battles through ritual performances and invocations of the deities, and thus, they were persons not averse to violence. On the other hand, *munis* practiced silence (*mauna*), observed fasts, performed penance and self-restraint, thus trying to follow the doctrine of *yoga*, and ultimately achieve freedom from birth and death, called *mokṣa*, “liberation.” Vedic priests such as Vasiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra, etc., are traditionally called *ṛṣis*; the sages like Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, Patañjali, Nārada, Durvāsas, Buddha, Mahāvīra, etc., are well-known as *munis*. It is noteworthy that traditionally Patañjali is associated with grammar, medicine and *yoga*. Vyāsa and Vālmīki are also called *munis*.

While the early Vedic sages were violent men killing animals (including cows and bulls), in the Brāhmaṇa texts the attitude towards animal-slaughter and towards violence in general appears to be ambivalent. In the smallest *soma* sacrifice (*somayajña* or *sōmayāga*) minimum three animal sacrifices take place. A he-goat is sacrificed on the day called *upavasatha*, immediately preceding the day of the proper *soma* sacrifice (technically called *sutyā*); one animal sacrifice takes place on the *sutyā* day, and one at the end of the sacrificial period. In each of the first two animal sacrifices one he-goat is killed but in the last one it is supposed to be a cow. However, in the Brāhmaṇa period, this last animal sacrifice was optional and because of the growing attitude against killing of cows (or bulls), it had become obsolete. Nevertheless, there is the possibility of at least two he-goats being killed in the course of each *somayajña*.

In the Brāhmaṇa texts, in the fragments dealing with the details of animal sacrifice, we find that there is an euphemistic sophistication of violence. It is possible that some of the ritualists might have perceived the act of killing to be rather troublesome to their sensitive minds. We already know that *puruṣamedha*, the human sacrifice, was only meant to be symbolic and the actual act of killing men in the ritualistic manner was banned by the ritual texts (see, for instance, *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* XIII.6.2.12–13, cp. *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa* III.9.8.3).<sup>4</sup> In fact,

<sup>4</sup> For *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* see Weber 1964. See also Dumont 1948 and Houben 1999; 2001. For *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa* see *s.e.* 1999.

the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* became very important in Buddhism, Jainism, and later Hinduism. It has its roots in the descriptions of animal sacrifices in the Brāhmaṇa texts. Thus, water is sprinkled on the animal in order to pacify whatever is “cruel” in the act of killing it (see ŚB III.8.2.8ff). The Brāhmaṇa texts also try to convey that the animal is not going to “death” but rather to the “sacrifice” (ŚB II.81.10). In later period, the Mīmāṃsā exponents also advocate a theory according to which the violence in the Vedic ritual is no violence at all (see, for instance, *yajñīyā hiṃsā hiṃsā na bhavati*, a famous saying from the oral tradition).<sup>5</sup> This is a kind of practical compromise because the Mīmāṃsakas do not deny the authority of the *Vedas*, prescribing ritual violence on one hand, while also trying to accommodate the changing forces of Hinduism and treating *ahiṃsā* as the most essential principle of religion, on the other.

Further, we see that the officiating priests do not even want to see the actual process of animal-killing; at the crucial moment, they step back to the altar from the place of the sacrifice and sit down, turning their faces to the *āhavanīya* fire. “Lest we should not be the eyewitnesses of the act of animal being killed” (ŚB III.8.1.15: *nedasya saṃjapyamānasya adhyakṣā asāma*), they say. When the animal is dead, it is declared so with the performative utterance *saṃjñaptaḥ paśuḥ*, “the animal is sacrificed,” and the priests who have avoided the act of seeing the deed may now proceed to do further actions in the ritual.

Even in connection with the use of words, there is some euphemism employed by the authors who refer to the matters of Vedic sacrifices. Thus, the Brāhmaṇa texts prescribe that one should not use words which directly denote the act of killing, but rather some mild alternatives or indirect expressions. The imperative forms of verbs which mean “slay!” (*jahi*) or “kill!” (*māraya*) should not be used, “for it is a human way of expression.” One should rather say “make [the animal] known [to the gods]” (*saṃjñapaya*), or “it has gone near the gods” (*anvagan*). Efforts are made to ritualistically put life in the animal. When the animal is being killed, some oblations are offered with the

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Abhyankar and Joṣī 1971–1980.

formulae from *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* XIII.18 and thereby, mystically, the life is put in the animal (ŚB III.7.4.4). It is also said that the animal which is killed for the gods becomes immortal (cf. ŚB III.8.3.26).<sup>6</sup>

In this way, we find a kind of transition in the case of Brāhmaṇa literature regarding animal sacrifice: even though the violence was impossible to avoid, the efforts to incorporate the non-violence are also visible. It is important to note that from the mediaeval period onwards the tendency to perform animal sacrifice in a symbolical manner started to be increasingly popular. This way of performance was introduced mainly by such followers of the Vedic religion who did not like to go against the *Vedas* but still did not like any type of violence in the ritual. They came up with some substitutes for the animal sacrifice, like making an “animal” out of rice flour dough and offering it instead of a living being. Some others used to offer clarified butter instead of animal body parts. There are, however, some others who are very strong supporters of animal sacrifice in the literal sense. Indeed, the priests and performers of Vedic rituals, even though very limited in number (the total number will not go beyond two hundred approximately) are divided into two classes: those who perform proper animal sacrifices (they use the term *prayakṣapaśu* to refer to the sacrificial animals) and those who perform the sacrifice in a symbolic manner (they use the terms *piṣṭa-paśu*, “flour-animal” or *ghṛta-paśu*, “clarified-butter-animal” to denote the objects of sacrifice). As only natural, both groups dislike and criticize each other, even though otherwise they are the followers of the same religious practices and doctrines, full vegetarians and of similar nature in other respects as well. Most of them are economically backward; politically, socially, and physically weak; and marginalized in every respect. But their religious convictions are strong and they follow them zealously. When the artificial, substitute “animal” is “killed,” those who are of the opinion that the animal should be killed literally shout in the manner, as if they have conquered and killed their enemy. Some of these people claim that for them the animal sacrifice is a source of mystic experience.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Weber 1972.

Such an opinion is especially common in Andhra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. In Maharashtra, however, on account of a spiritual leader named Gajanan Maharaj from Akkalkot, some of his followers started performing Vedic rituals devoid of killing the animals. Also elsewhere, in regions like Kerala, Vedic sacrifices are sometimes performed without ritual violence. In 1975, the famous Atirātra performance at Pāññāl was decided to be performed without the act of actual animal sacrifice because the possible opposition from the public was taken into consideration. However, during this event, at the time of preparing the fire altar, a tortoise was immured alive. Very few persons among the spectators, Indians as well as non-Indians, noticed it. This was an act of a very silent violence, hardly opposed by anybody. A tortoise (*kūrma*) does not produce any sound. It is also considered to be a brick (*iṣṭakā*) in the mystic sense. The fact that a tortoise was chosen to be “silently” sacrificed in Pāññāl confirms the famous Sanskrit saying: *devo durbalaghātakaḥ*, “thus god kills a weak animal.” This being so, nobody performs sacrifice using animals such as tigers, lions, and similar beast but offers meeker he-goats or like animals, else weak birds, often not even able to fly.

There is a waterfall in the Goa region of India. Naturally, in rainy season, there is a lot of water in the area. A train passes through that region extremely close to the waterfall. Once, I travelled by train on this route. Unnoticed by anyone, a man threw forcefully a cock into that waterfall. This was a kind of animal sacrifice, a part of a votive rite. In this way, many birds and other animals are offered all over the world, either as a part of religious rituals or just for the sake of consumption by human beings. It is indeed impossible to count the numerous acts of both religious and secular violence that occur on daily basis. The efforts on behalf of non-violence are, by comparison, very few. Still, no one has been able to stop such acts (to mention only the rich literature written on or against war) and no one has been successful in preventing wars or war violence.

There are numerous temples in India, particularly devoted to various forms of Durgā, Kālī, or to some local minor deities to which he-goats or birds are offered. At times, in places like Guwahati, male

buffaloes are also killed. In the so-called Tantric rituals meat, liquor, etc. are a part of religious rites. Among gods some are believed to be vegetarians. And to them, no animals are offered. God Viṣṇu and his various forms like Kṛṣṇa and Jagannātha are famous for their non-violent nature. Narasiṃha, being a form of Viṣṇu, is treated as non-violent in Maharashtra, but in some other parts of India, he is as cruel as a lion and assaults and hunts animals. God Gaṇeśa with his head of an elephant is also a non-violent god. There is a temple of this god in Maharashtra famed in a following story: Once, a devotee offered some non-vegetarian food to Gaṇeśa but the god turned away his face. Therefore, now we only see there his back while in other temples we see the face of this god. As we have seen, numerous gods in different temples of India are associated with various traditions regarding violence and non-violence.

In *Bhagavadgītā*, the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* is highly praised. The text divides qualities into two classes: good and bad. They are called *daivī sampat* and *āsurī sampat* respectively, that is, “divine wealth” and “demonic wealth.” The doctrine of non-violence is included in *daivī sampat* (XVI.2). The people belonging to the latter category, namely possessed of “demonic wealth,” always think about killing their enemy (XVI.14). It is, however, important to note that in the fourth chapter of *Bhagavadgītā* (IV.8), the god Kṛṣṇa says:

*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām |*  
*dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge ||*

For the protection of good, for the destruction of the evil-doers, for the establishment of the Religion, I take birth from age to age.

Thus, even violence is at times necessary, like for the sake of protecting religion. Ultimately it is the purpose that justifies whether violence may be accepted as good or bad.

There is one more form of ritual violence worth mentioning. It is not an actual violence but rather an imaginary one, known as “black magic.” In Sanskrit, it is called *abhicāra*. The word *abhicāra* literally



means “(ritualistic) attack.” The word is derived from the root *abhi-car* which means “to attack.” Of course it is only a ritualistic attack on the enemy, either in order to kill him or cause harm to him, physically, financially, or through any other way. In Vedic ritual, there are detailed descriptions of *abhicāra* which is present almost at every step in the performance of Vedic rituals. It is to be noted that it is a weak person who performs such type of rituals with a hope to be able to harm the enemy. *Abhicāra* rites include throwing some offerings into the fire, utterance of words meaning harm to the enemy, and so on. Thus, *śāpa* or “curse,” “abuse,” is also a part of oral violence, even if ineffective in reality. The Mīmāṃsakas offer a lot of discussion on *abhicāra*. On the one hand, because the Mīmāṃsakas are strong advocates of the *Veda* in general, they cannot deny that Vedic texts have prescribed black-magical rites. On the other hand, in modern times they have also accepted the doctrine of non-violence in principle. Therefore, they cannot accept this violence although it is merely notional. The text called *Arthasaṅgraha* includes non-violence even in the definition of *dharma* or “religion.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the definition of *dharma* according to this text, *codanālkṣaṇo ’rtho dharmah*, denotes that something beneficial, prescribed by the *Veda*, is *dharma*. In this way, what is non-beneficial, i.e., consisting of violence, cannot be defined as *dharma*. Since it has been prescribed by the *Veda* it has to be called *dharma* but because it consists of violence, it is difficult to accept as *dharma*. The Mīmāṃsakas introduced a stratagem to circumvent this problem; they argue that the *Vedas* do not prescribe that one should practice black magic and kill an enemy. They simply show the way of performing black magic if one intends to perform it. The logic of Mīmāṃsakas is partially correct and applicable to the optional black magic but they do not take notice of the fact that sometimes in the Vedic ritual black magic may also be obligatory. For example, while preparing sacrificial bread, one must hold the winnowing basket

<sup>7</sup> *Arthasaṅgraha* is a textbook on Mīmāṃsā ascribed to Laugākṣi Bhāskara. It mentions the most important points in Mīmāṃsā-system of philosophy. See Gokhale 1932.

in the fire and utter a formula which means: “the evil being is burnt, the enemies are burnt” (VS I.7; ŚB I.1.2.2). One has to perform it no matter if there is any real enemy intended to be burnt. Such a form of black magic is prescribed by the *Veda* and one cannot avoid it; one has to accept it as a part of Vedic religion.

Finally, let us conclude with emphasis on the vicissitudes of Vedic ritual and violence. From the primitive state of nomadic life to the sedentary agricultural life there was a growing importance of non-violence in the worldview of Indian people. Although there is no complete absence of violence in their rituals, at least in theory the principle of non-violence is well-established. The changing geographical and ecological conditions have played a significant role in these vicissitudes. Non-violence as an ideal principle has its own important role to play in the social, economic, and political thoughts of Indian people in all the stages of life.

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