

XVII *Yajña*

Sacrificing means “giving to gods”. The Indian rituals have provided food for sociological thought (Hubert and Mauss) and have provoked disapproval in Upaniṣadic and classical texts as well as in modern ones.

A Actors and stages of sacrifices

According to Malamoud (1976), the actors involved in a sacrifice are⁷²¹

- the *yajamāna* or *svāmin*, i.e., the patron who has the sacrifice performed on his behalf, pays for it, and enjoys the merit,
- the *devatā*, i.e., the god to whom the sacrifice is addressed, and
- the *ṛtvij*, i.e., the officiating priest(s).

The same author lists four basic elements:⁷²²

- the *śraddhā* (“belief”, “confidence”, see section VI.B) that the *yajamāna* entertains with respect to the efficacy of the ritual and to the officiating priest,⁷²³
- the *dīkṣā*, i.e., the consecration of the *yajamāna*,⁷²⁴
- the *yajña*, i.e., the sacrifice in the narrow sense, and, finally,
- the *dakṣiṇā*.

Thus, the officiating priest can expect the fee-gift *dakṣiṇā* for his services of *dīkṣā* and *yajña*. It may be helpful to provide a few patterns. In the upper part of Figure 6, a worshipper praises a god and hopes to obtain riches or offspring. A reciprocal relationship is also present between the officiating priest and the king, as indicated by the lower part of this figure. The three parties to a sacrifice mentioned by Malamoud are indicated in Figure 7. The *yajamāna* as the central figure at the intersection of two exchange relationships is seen in Figure 8.

721 Malamoud (1976, pp. 156–159)

722 Malamoud (1976, pp. 161–162)

723 In the words of Malamoud (1976, p. 161): “La confiance dans l’opération veut la confiance dans l’opérateur.”

724 See the detailed study by Gonda (1985).

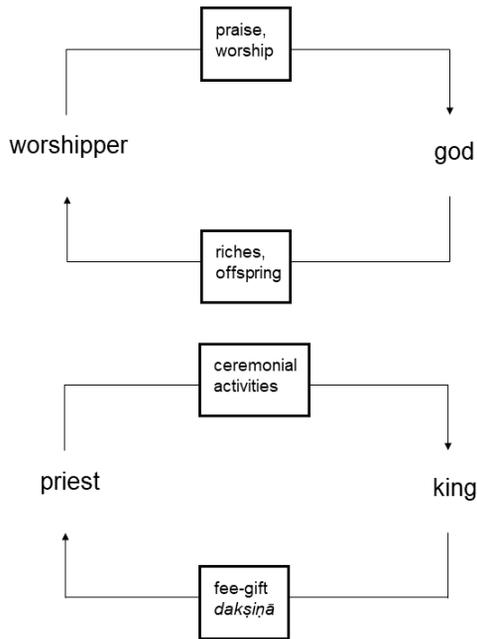


Figure 6: The simple sacrificial exchanges

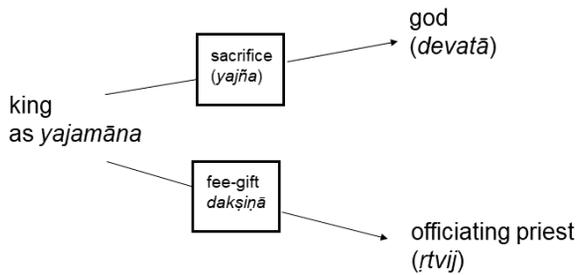


Figure 7: The *yajamāna* gives in a twofold manner

Hubert and Mauss (1964) build their much-lauded⁷²⁵ treatise of the sacrifice on Hindu texts and on the Bible. Their definition of the sacrificial system encompasses

- the “sacrifier”, i.e., “the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects”⁷²⁶ (above: the *yajamāna*)⁷²⁷,
- the “objects of sacrifice”, i.e., “those kinds of things for whose sake the sacrifice takes place” (above: riches, offspring) enjoyed by the *yajamāna*⁷²⁸

725 See the monograph by Strenski (2003).

726 See Hubert & Mauss (1964, p. 10).

727 See Hubert & Mauss (1964, pp. 107–108: fn. 10).

728 See Hubert & Mauss (1964, pp. 10–11).

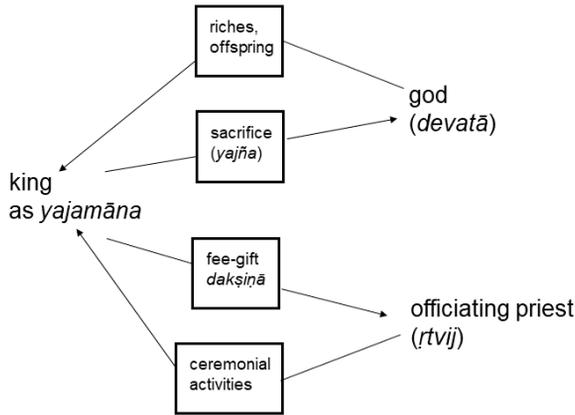


Figure 8: The sacrifice as a conjunction of two reciprocal relationships

- “consecration” of sacrificer or of objects of sacrifice, i.e., passing “from the common into the religious domain”⁷²⁹ (above: *dikṣā*)
- the “victim”, i.e., “any oblation, even of vegetable matter, whenever the offering or part of it is destroyed”⁷³⁰, and, to a lesser degree,
- the “sacrificer”, i.e., “[a]n intermediary, or at the very least a guide” who is “[m]ore familiar with the world of the gods, in which he is partly involved through a previous consecration [... and] can approach it more closely and with less fear than the layman, who is perhaps sullied by unknown blemishes”⁷³¹ (above: *ṛtvij*),
- specific places and instruments⁷³²

Summarising, these two Durkheimian sociologists define that

⟨223⟩ Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned.⁷³³

B Premodern Indian criticism of Vedic ritualism

(1) An Upaniṣadic attack against Vedic ritualism

Olivelle (1998, p. 434) has observed that “[m]ore than any other Upaniṣad, the [Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad] engages in a direct and frontal attack against both vedic ritualism

729 See Hubert & Mauss (1964, pp. 9–10).

730 See Hubert & Mauss (1964, pp. 11–12), who do not restrict sacrifices to events where “blood is shed”.

731 See Hubert & Mauss (1964, pp. 22–25).

732 See Hubert & Mauss (1964, pp. 25–28).

733 Hubert & Mauss (1964, p. 13)

and the vedic texts that embody the ritual tradition.” Indeed, according to MU 1.2.6, the “oblations shining bright” tell the “offerer”:

⟨224⟩ This is yours, this *brahman*’s world,
Built by good deeds and rites well done.⁷³⁴

However, Vedic rituals are merely an expression of blindness or ignorance:

⟨225⟩ Surely, they are floating unanchored,
these eighteen forms of the sacrifice,
the rites within which are called inferior.
The fools who hail that as the best,
return once more to old age and death.
Wallowing in ignorance, but calling themselves wise,
thinking they are learned, the fools go around,
Hurting themselves badly, like a group of blind men,
led by a man who is himself blind.⁷³⁵

After doing away with Vedic rituals, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad focuses on *brahman*, with MU 3.2.9 claiming: “When a man comes to know that highest *brahman*, he himself becomes that very *brahman*.”

(2) **Kṛṣṇa’s svadharmā ethics**

In the Bhagavad Gītā, Kṛṣṇa develops his *svadharmā* ethics.⁷³⁶ Briefly, a man should perform one’s duty (*svadharmā*), i.e., the duty that conforms to one’s social class. In particular, Kṛṣṇa insists that Arjuna, being a warrior, should perform his *kṣatriya* duty. But, and that is a vital condition, while doing one’s duty, one should not be eager to earn the fruits, whatever they may consist of:

⟨226⟩ *karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadā cana |*
mā karmaphalahetur bhūr mā te saṅgo ’stv akarmaṇi ||
yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṃ tyaktvā dhanamjaya |
*siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṃ yoga ucyate ||*⁷³⁷

You have a right to the action alone, never to its fruits. Don’t let the action’s fruits be your motivation, and don’t be attached to inactivity. Perform actions while established in yoga, Dhananjaya, having abandoned attachment, having become even-minded towards success and failure; for yoga is said to be evenness of mind.⁷³⁸

734 These translation are offered by Olivelle (1998).

735 MU 1.2.7–8, translation by Olivelle (1998)

736 A decision-theoretic analysis is provided by Wiese (2016a).

737 MBh 6.24.47–48

738 Cherniak (2008, pp. 188–189)

This ethical theory is clearly at odds with a reciprocal understanding of sacrifices. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa clearly spells this out in a later section of the Bhagavad Gītā:

⟨227⟩ *aphalākāṅkṣibhir yajño vidhidṛṣṭo ya ijjate |
yaṣṭavyam eveti manaḥ samādhāya sa sāttvikaḥ ||
abhisamdhāya tu phalaṃ dambhārtham api caiva yat |
ijjate bhārataśreṣṭha taṃ yajñaṃ viddhi rājasam ||*⁷³⁹

Sacrifice is rich in *sattva* when it is made in observance of the injunctions by those who desire no fruits but believe it is their duty to make offerings; but a sacrifice made with a reward in view or for some fraudulent purpose, best of the Bharatas, should be known as full of *rajas*.⁷⁴⁰

C Bloomfield's "critical" views

(1) Utilitarian purpose of sacrifices

According to Bloomfield (1908, p. 65), "the earliest Hindu poetry [i.e., the Ṛgveda, HW] is not epic, nor lyric in the ordinary sense, not idyllic, nor didactic, but [...] almost throughout dominated by a single idea, namely, the praise of the gods in connection with the sacrifice." A few pages earlier, Bloomfield (1908, pp. 60–61) had this to say on the sacrifices' purpose:⁷⁴¹

- ⟨228⟩ As regards its immediate purpose, or its economic aspect, it is thoroughly utilitarian and practical. Its purpose is
- (a) to secure happiness and success, health and long life for man, notably the rich man, while living upon the earth;
 - (b) to secure to a very talented and thrifty class of priest-poets abundant rewards in return for their services in procuring for men this happiness, success, and so on;
 - (c) to satisfy the divine powers, visible and invisible, beneficent and noxious, gods and demons, that is, to establish livable relations between gods and men; and, finally,
 - (d) to secure after death the right to share the paradise of the gods in the company of the pious fathers that have gone there before.

Bloomfield (1908, pp. 184–185) furthermore remarks:

- ⟨229⟩ Men can subsist and prosper only if the gods return in kind. The gods, on the whole, are good; they do not beat down the requests of him that comes

739 MBh 6.39.11–12

740 Cherniak (2008, pp. 286–287)

741 The markers (a) etc. are added by the current author.

with prayer and cup of *soma*. Reciprocity, frank unconditional reciprocity, thus becomes an accepted motive: “Give thou to me, I give to thee,” [⟨34⟩, HW] is the formula. The sacrificing king, or rich householder, is thereby placed between the upper and the nether mill-stone: he must satisfy both gods and priests, each of whom show a surprising habit of becoming more and more exacting as time goes by. In this way the high poetic quality of Vedic religion is crowded and choked by many conceptions mean from the start, or bent by these circumstances into a mean shape. The gods themselves, notwithstanding their luminous origin, are brought down to the plane of human weakness. Open to adulation, they become vain; eager for advantage, they become shifty; reflecting human desires, they become sordid, and in some cases even indecent.

With respect to the reciprocity mentioned by Bloomfield, remember the comment by Oberlies on ⟨36⟩. The humans press Soma and balance the otherwise unbalanced relationship between them and Indra. This is in line with the withdrawal symmetry obeyed by the Shapley value (section XI.E).

As in *dharmadāna*, *śraddhā* is also relevant for sacrificers. Bloomfield (1908, pp. 186–199) deplores the deterioration of that term:

⟨230⟩ There is scarcely any idea which has suffered so much from the utilitarian aspects of Vedic religion as the Vedic idea of faith. [...] The word starts well in the Rig-Veda. It means first of all belief in the existence and godhead of the gods. [...] So there is no doubt that faith means the belief in the existence of the gods, and their interference in the life of man. It would be doing injustice to those early believers to say that they did not develop the idea beyond this stage of mere primary utility. [...] Next, faith is wisdom; faith is the sister of wisdom: [...] Unfortunately, the Vedic conception of faith, at least the prominent or average conception sinks to a much lower plane. In the main and in the end, faith expresses itself in works, and the Brahmans who are anything but mealy-mouthed have seen to it that they shall be benefited by these works. In other words, he who gives baksheesh (*dakshinā*) to the Brahmans, he has faith (*śraddhā*). [...] The frank system of barter of the sacrificer’s *soma* and ghee for the god’s good gift and protection, with considerably more than one-eighth of one per cent brokerage for the priest—that, surely, is not the religious feeling in the souls of the composers of the Rig-Veda hymns. I have taken pains to show how constantly present is this external side of their religion: may the religion that is free from all external considerations, the religion from which is absent every form of safe-guarding self, throw the first stone.

(2) The *dakṣiṇā* as baksheesh

The importance of the *dakṣiṇā* is stressed again and again in Vedic texts (see section IV.B). Bloomfield (1908, p. 69)—unlike Jamison & Brereton—deems it correct to translate *dakṣiṇā* as “baksheesh”:

⟨231⟩ *úd u śriyá uṣáso rócāmānā ásthur apāṃ nórmaýo rúśaṃtaḥ |*
*kṛṇóti vísvā supáthā sugāny ábhūd u vásvī dáksṣiṇā maghónī ||*⁷⁴²

The shining Dawns have arisen for splendor, glistening like the waves of the waters. She makes all pathways, all passages are easy to travel. She has appeared—the good priestly gift, the bounteous one.⁷⁴³

Up the shining strands of Dawn have risen,
Like unto glittering waves of water!
All paths prepareth she that they be easily traversed;
Liberal goddess, kind, she hath become baksheesh.⁷⁴⁴

Consider

⟨232⟩ *devámdevaṃ rádhase codáyaṃty asmadyák sūnṛtā īráyaṃtī |*
*vyuccháṃtī naḥ sanáye dhíyo dhā yūyáṃ pāta svastíbhīḥ sádā naḥ ||*⁷⁴⁵

Impelling every god to largesse, rousing liberalities in our direction, dawning widely, impart insights to us for our gain. – Do you protect us always with your blessings.⁷⁴⁶

Bloomfield (1908, p. 71) interprets this in the following manner: “That is to say, make our poetry so clever that it shall not fail to stimulate the liberality of the patron of the sacrifice!” This critical author (p. 81) goes so far as to say: “To treat sacrificial themes in the high poetic way seems to most of us hollow mockery.”

Malamoud (1976, pp. 167–168) criticises Bloomfield’s view: “For some, who study the *dakṣiṇā* by considering it from the point of view of the *rtvij*, the *dakṣiṇā* is above all an institution which enables the Brahmins to consume. [...] Bloomfield [...] does not have enough sarcasm or rather ironic admiration for those clerics who cunningly and insolently re-claim their ‘baksheesh’. [...] This analysis, with the moral judgment it implies, does not teach us much.”⁷⁴⁷

742 RgV 6.64.1

743 Jamison & Brereton (2014)

744 Bloomfield (1908, p. 69)

745 RgV 7.79.5

746 Jamison & Brereton (2014)

747 Translation by HW

D The *dakṣiṇā* as a hybrid form of payment

From the emic point of view, a *dakṣiṇā* should not be seen as a payment or fee. In YSm 1.220–222, a *bhṛtakādhyāpaka* (“someone who teaches for a fee”)⁷⁴⁸ is mentioned. Literally, a *bhṛtakādhyāpaka* is “a hired man who is a teacher” (see section VII.B on *bhṛtaka*). Such a person was among those classified as *nindita* (“disqualified”)⁷⁴⁹. This disqualification concerns performing the ancestral offerings mentioned in YSm 1.219. In contrast to the usual dissociation of a *dakṣiṇā* from a payment or fee, the 17th century *mīmāṃsā* text <31> argues for considering a *dakṣiṇā* a wage.

I think that it has always been clear to indologists, ancient and modern, that a *dakṣiṇā* is a hybrid form of payment, between a fee or wage on the one hand and a gift on the other.⁷⁵⁰ Therefore, I translate *dakṣiṇā* as “fee-gift” (see Table 10). A *dakṣiṇā* is a fee to be given to a particular person who has performed a particular service.⁷⁵¹ It is similar to the *vetana* (wage, see <124>) a hired man could expect in return for his services. See also Kauṭilya’s treatment of partnerships of officiating priests and, in particular, the context of working slaves, employees, and partnerships of agriculturists and traders (see subsection VII.B(5)).

Table 10: A *dakṣiṇā* as a hybrid form of giving

	payment obligation to a specific receiver	payment to any worthy receiver
fixed amount	<i>vetana</i>	
amount payable <i>śaktitaḥ</i>	<i>dakṣiṇā</i> payable to Vedic priest or <i>guru</i>	<i>dāna</i>

On the other hand, a *dakṣiṇā* shares a gift’s property of not having a particular amount agreed upon ex ante. Thus, a *dakṣiṇā* and a *dāna* are given *śaktitaḥ* (according to the donor’s means). Compare this to subsection XV.B(3), pp. 167.

⁷⁴⁸ YSm 1.221a, Olivelle (2019b).

⁷⁴⁹ YSm 1.222d, Olivelle (2019b).

⁷⁵⁰ However, the framing of this insight is somewhat unusual. While Heesterman (1959, p. 242) considers the *dakṣiṇā* a gift rather than a salary, Mylius (1979) contradicts this in words, if not so much in substance. See also Weber (1921, p. 61), according to whom the brahmin “took only ‘gifts’ (*dakshina*), not ‘salary’”. The giving of gifts upon the use of services was in fact a ritual duty.” Translation by HW.

⁷⁵¹ According to Malamoud (1976, p. 158), “[l]es *ṛtvij* sont, pour le temps de la cérémonie, au service du *yajamāna* (ou plutôt au service de la cérémonie elle-même)”.

E Hubert and Mauss on the function of sacrifices

Hubert and Mauss (1964, pp. 101–103) stress the social function of sacrifices:

⟨233⟩ The unbeliever sees in these rites only vain and costly illusions, and is astounded that all mankind has so eagerly dissipated its strength for phantom gods. But there are perhaps true realities to which it is possible to attach the institution in its entirety. Religious ideas, because they are believed, exist; they exist objectively, as social facts. The sacred things in relation to which sacrifice functions, are social things. And this is enough to explain sacrifice. [...] personal renunciation of their property by individuals and groups nourishes social forces [...] individuals find their own advantage [...] they invest with the authority of society their vows, their oaths, their marriages. They surround, as if with a protective sanctity, the fields they have ploughed and the houses they have built.

For an even more concrete example of what social function a sacrifice may fulfil, see the Varuṇa rule expounded upon in section XVI.F.