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## **Kerala Yajna with Foreign Participation**

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# The Illustrated Weekly of India

**Sanjay Gandhi's Maruti**



**Also: Kerala Yajna With Foreign Participation**

# Kerala Yajna With Foreign Participation

**THE ALTAR.** Ten types of bricks are used in its construction—in all, one thousand bricks. It is completed in five days at the rate of 200 bricks a day. Each brick is consecrated to a particular Vedic deity and is laid to the accompaniment of mantras. During this ceremony, two white horses are tethered at the eastern side of the yagasala.



**THE YAGASALA.** This is built with bamboo and thatched with palm-leaves. Particular care was taken to see that iron was not used. All measurements of the yagasala are either the multiples or divisors of the height of the yajamana (the one who performs the sacrifice), when he stands upright with his arms raised in a posture of supplication.

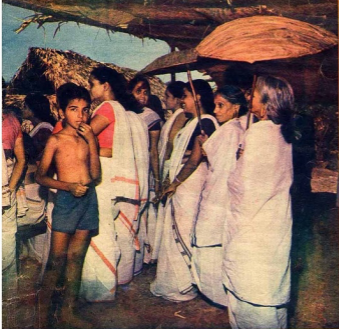


The yajna performed at Panjal, a remote village in Kerala, took the spectators back to the Vedic age. It was conducted under the auspices of an international committee of indologists. The foreign participation, as well as the original decision of an animal sacrifice, created a bitter controversy in the State. As a result, the idea of animal sacrifice was abandoned and a "symbolic substitute" was used.

by V. T. INDUCHUDAN

ONE of the most complicated Vedic sacrifices called *Agnichhapana* performed in Panjal, a remote village in Kerala, carried the spectators back to nine or ten centuries before Christ—in the time of the Brahmanes, *Araaryasakas* and *Srouna Sutras*. The Nampuriti brahmins of Kerala, who are said to be the only people preserving the traditions of this ritual, organised the sacrifice lasting for twelve days beginning with the advent of spring on April 12.

Through several centuries, Nampuriti families wielded economic, social, political and cultural influence and many or most of them were big landowners. Their high priests are known as *vedikas* and they con-



ducted yajnas as household or community rituals which were expensive affairs. Agnicharyas was held as late as 1967. Somayajna, a simpler sacrifice, has been more common.

The Namputiris have been hit by the agrarian laws enacted in Kerala during the post-Independence period and their religious tradition has received a setback. However, some families of ustadikas have doggedly stuck to their traditions and preserved ancient manuscripts, although they have been unable to conduct the rituals for want of money.

#### Foreign Indologists

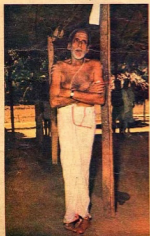
It was at this stage that two scholars, one from the US and another from Finland, accidentally came into contact with a leading Namputiri ritualist named Mamunnu Ittiravi of Panjal. Professor J. F. Staal, born in Holland in 1930 and now working in California University, had come to India to learn Sanskrit. He visited Kerala in 1967 and met Ittiravi Namputiri from whom he tried to learn the practical aspects of the yajna literature.

Impressed by his vast store of Vedic knowledge, he returned twice—in 1963 and 1971. Another visitor was Dr. Asko Parpola, a well-known indologist from Finland, who met Ittiravi Namputiri in 1971.

The problem that confronted these foreign scholars, as also many leading Indian authorities, was that they possessed only textual knowledge of Vedic literature and have never seen the actual Agnicharyas being conducted, an experience which would throw a flood of light into the social life of the Indian people of the Vedic period. With this end in view, Professor Staal attempted

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**NAMPUTIRI WOMEN**, known as antaranjanam (literally, "people who are confined to the house"), watch the yajna in their traditional dress. When they go out, they shield themselves from obtrusive glances with palm-leaf umbrellas.



**CHERUMUKKU VALLABHAN SOMAYA-JIPAD**, who belongs to a well-known priestly family. He was the chief supervisor of the yajna.



**CHIEF SACRIFICER**. The yajamana, Cherumukku Vaidikan Neelakantthan Somayajipad (he took the title of Akshatiripad, after the performance of the sacrifice).



**CHERUMUKKU VAIDIKAN KRISHNAN NAMPUTIRI**. He was the adhvaryu, in charge of the Yajurvedi part of the ritual. The yajamana is a Ripivedi.

to persuade Itiravi Namputiri to conduct a simpler ritual, called *Somasaga*, in 1962. However, the attempt failed due to some technical reasons.

In 1971, Professor Staal and Dr Parpola entered upon a more ambitious project of persuading Itiravi Namputiri to organize the more complicated *Agnichayana*. Itiravi accepted the idea and the *puja* was scheduled to take place in 1974. It was a costly affair and Staal and Parpola attempted to form an International Agnichayana Committee of Scholars, a project which they successfully carried out.

There was not much delay in the formation of the committee in which scholars of eleven nations participated—they came from Holland, America, Britain, Japan, India, Austria, East Germany, West Germany, France, Nepal and Finland. Since in the prevailing conditions there was no hope of another *Agnichayana*, the current ritual was supposed to be the last in human history, and elaborate arrangements were made to record it in film and tape with the permission of the Government of India.

### Bad Luck

Unfortunately, the year 1974 was one of bad luck. Some ritualists non-cooperated and the event had to be postponed. At one stage it looked as if it would never take place, but the entry upon the stage of two Namputiris, Cherumukku Vaidikan, one of the leading priests in Kerala, and Erkkara Raman Namputiri, a reputed scholar, made it possible to conduct the *puja* in April 1975.

But, as the sacrifice was about to be conducted, there was an unexpected outbreak from a section of the public and the press against the ritual. Two objections were put forward. One related to the suffocation to death of goats which was to form part of the ceremony. We are a nation dedicated to ahimsa, some of them pointed out. A leading daily wrote in support of this argument, to which the sympathisers of the *puja* retorted: "Are you not every day dissecting hundreds of animals in the colleges and butchering thousands in the market, including cows?"

One section of the agitators objected to foreigners filming the event. They claimed that the films would be used for cheap propaganda against India. The Communist Party (Marxist) spoke of "the political penetration of Delhi Imperialism into India".



**THE FINAL SACRIFICE.** On the last day of the *Agnichayana*, the *yagnasala* is offered to the God of Fire, Agni. Picture shows the *yagnasala* being consumed by flames.

In the mean while, somebody (said to be a Jans Sanghi) threatened to burn himself in the sacrificial fire!

As the date of the *puja* approached, the Namputiris conducted hurried consultation and gave a written undertaking to the district authorities that they proposed to abandon animal sacrifice and would conduct the sacrifice with substitutes. This appeared to have had the desired effect and the *puja* started on the scheduled day and went on peacefully. It was attended by hundreds of thousands of devotees who trekked their way to Panjal.

According to eminent Sanskrit scholars, who came from various parts of India, the *Agnichayana* of the Namputiris followed the general pattern of the *Boudhavana Srouta Yajna*, with a few alterations and including some local rites. The practical conduct of the *puja* has helped in an understanding of passages in the Vedas which have so far remained obscure.

The *puja* started with the collection and "fabrication" of materials. A *yagnasala* (i.e. the sacrificial hall) was built with bamboo and dried palm-leaves. It had several chambers, each intended for different rites during different stages of the sacrifice. Hundreds of pots and wooden imple-

ments were made. One remarkable feature was that no metallic implement or vessel was ever used.

One of the first rites of *Agnichayana* (and also of the *Somasaga*) is the handing over of the *soma* creeper from which the intoxicating juice beloved of Indra is brewed. The hereditary right of gathering the *soma* from the mountains is vested in a local chieftain, the Raja of Kollengode. According to legend, this family originated from the Sun.

The eldest of the family takes an ascetic life bearing the title "Vengaganadu Nambidi". The *soma* creepers which grow on his mountains, as also the skin of the black antelope and other forest produce necessary for the *puja*, are collected by the hill tribes. The eldest Raja, who is a surgeon, then hands over these materials to a Namputiri priest during a simple ceremony conducted in a local temple.

This writer had the opportunity to climb the hills while the tribals collected the *soma*. It is a leafless creeper whose growth is alleged to be regulated by the moon. I gave specimens to the Central Ayurvedic Research Institute for investigation. Dr Venkataraghavan, Director of the Institute, has given me a note according to



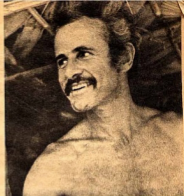
**CLAY VESSELS** are used for the ritual. They have protuberances which are called "breasts". Perhaps they symbolize plenty.



**HEADS** of different animals made of clay are buried under the soil after before it is built up.



**AGNI** is made out of an instrument called *arani*. The rotation of the instrument causes friction and produces sparks.



THE FOREIGN CONNECTION. Left to right: Dr Asko Parpola, Vedic scholar from Finland known for his theories about the Indus Valley script; Mr Inari, a Vedic student from Kyoto University working on a thesis on this particular Agnichayana; and Prof J. P. Staal of California University, leader of the International Committee which helped conduct the yajna. His wife is a Malayali.

which this creeper is not known to Ayurveda and modern botanists. The latter call it: *Carcotermis breviflora* W & A. It is known to grow in the Deccan, Konkan and Karnataka at altitudes of 4,500 ft and contains a lot of latex. Some proper is presumed to grow in the Himalayas and this one collected from Kollengode is called by some scholars *Sonaprasadina* meaning a substitute. But Rajeswankar calls this *Pruthi-soma* meaning a counterpart. It is presumed to yield some alkaloids.

The yajna is supposed to be organised under the aegis of the yajmanas. After the preliminary rites, he enters the yajmana with his wife. From this moment the couple shall not leave the yajmana until after the Agnichayana is concluded. They live in penance and consume only goat's milk. The yajmana keeps the fingers of both his hands closed day and night, to show perhaps that he shall not do anything else other than the yajna. The fingers remain

closed from the night of the first day to the end of the ninth day of the yajna. Often the fingers are incapable of movement on the ninth day and they are required to be massaged back into life.

The sacrificial fire is made out of an instrument called *aruni*. It consists of two pieces, one a wooden cylinder with a piece of wood made into the shape of a lotus bud attached to the bottom of the cylinder. The pointed end of the bud is placed on a flat piece of wood on the edge of a four-inch-square basin bored into the flat piece. The cylinder is kept vertical and churned with a rope and the friction of the point of the bud with the flat piece causes sparks to fly into the basin where some inflammable material is placed.

Most of the rites consist of pouring ghee or other substances into the fire to the accompaniment of hymns from the Rig, Sama and Yajur Vedas. There is a large group of chanters who are called *ritviks*, five

among whom are supposed to be most important. They are called *adhvaryu*, *brahmas*, *hotu*, *udgata* and *sodasya*. The first is the "Prime Minister" and the others "Ministers". Each one of these have a number of subordinate staff.

Every act in the yajmana by any *ritvik* is accompanied by the chanting of *mantras*. The belief in the hypnotic power of the word pervades everywhere. Every object and every act, however insignificant it might be, is codified, technically named and an esoteric meaning attributed to it.

On the fourth day of the yajna they started the work of piling up the *chitri*, which, when completed, formed a platform in the shape of the divine bird Garuda lying flat on the ground with spread wings. The *chitri* is built with five layers of bricks and is a comparatively large structure. Ten types of bricks are used. Totally, a thousand bricks are used. Every brick is laid to the accompaniment of *mantras*. The sacrificial fire is lit on the *chitri* and the rites are done on it.

Early in the morning on the last day the *ritviks* performed what is called the *asubhratama*. It consisted of a holy dip in the waters of a big tank in a nearby temple. This was accompanied by a kind of community bath by the devotees, men and women.

### Awe-Inspiring Sight

After this, the entire yajmana was burnt down. The tongues of Agni consumed the entire structure.

It was an awe-inspiring sight. The time fixed for this rite was four in the afternoon of April 24. A big crowd was on hand. A little while before the conclusion, they shouted in enthusiasm as they saw a kite flying at a great height above the yajmana. It was supposed to be Garuda, the divine bird. The traditional belief on seeing such a sign is that Lord Indra is pleased with the yajna and consequently rains will come down. I do not know whether it was a coincidence—it did pour within a radius of thirty miles, an hour before the conclusion of the yajna.

## WHAT IS "AGNICHAYANA"

Scholars hold that yajnas have a history of over 5,000 years in India. In Kerala a "renascence" in yajnas took place over 1,500 years ago in counteract Buddhist influence. This movement was spearheaded by Mezhathole Agnihotri, who conducted over 39 yajnas at Yajneswaram. In the past 15 years, about 189 yajnas have been conducted at Sukapuram, Perumaram, Irinjalekudi, Talapuzhodu and Kariakatt in Kerala.

The present yajna is estimated to have cost Rs 25 lakhs. It was conducted under the auspices of an International Agnichayana Committee of Scholars headed by an American, Prof J. P. Staal. The Committee has also financed the ritual.

This "foreign connection" had raised a lot of criticism in Kerala. *Nesari* poets and critics like N. V. Krishna Warrior and Thappal Sankaran had attacked what they termed as "the desire for dollar". Krishna Warrior went in the extent of saying that the films (which were taken of the yajna) when shown abroad would only disgrace India.

The animal sacrifices which were to have been a part of the yajna provoked the most hostile criticism. Altogether the

ritual demanded the sacrifice of 14 goats—one each on the first, ninth and twentieth day; and eleven on the tenth day.

The goats are supposed to symbolize cows. They are killed by suffocation and certain parts of their bodies are burned in the sacrificial fire.

This part of the yajna was strongly attacked by the well-known poet and first *Janagan*, Asseri Varmer, G. Sankaran Kurup, "G", as he is popularly known, said that the animal sacrifice is an act of barbarism. He opposed to the Committee to desist from the act. On the other side, the sacrifice was defended by another noted poet, Akitham. He held that even the act of breathing was himsa; therefore, there was nothing particularly wrong about the sacrifice, since it was going to help further research on Vedic rites.

Besides these public figures, various organisations, newspapers and ordinary citizens took part in the controversy. Eventually, under public pressure, the Committee decided to conduct the yajna using clay figures in the place of real animals. This marked the end of the controversy and the Agnichayana was begun with this subtle alteration on April 12.