

SACRIFICE: ITS ORIGIN AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HINDUISM AND ISLAM

ZIA-UR-REHMAN ZIA ☆

Abstract

Sacrifice as a ritual has different dimensions, physical, spiritual, social, etc. All these aspects of sacrifice are obvious in Hinduism and Islam. Anthropologists, psychologists and scholars of comparative studies looked at the ‘act of sacrifice’ as an activity around which most of the religions activities are woven. Across cultures and throughout history, all human cultures use ‘sacrifice’ as the physical and psychological means for “dealing with the mystery and unpredictability of the natural, social, and cosmic realms”.¹ So the mental and physical involvements are the base of sacrifice and the final aim of sacrifice is to become more secure at cosmic, natural and social levels. Sacrifice is one of the important rituals through which people, ancient and modern, maintain their thinking in these three realms.

As we know that Hinduism and Islam lived side by side as neighbor, both constitute large communities in Asia. The performance of sacrifice in both the religions shows that the grip of these religions upon their followers still is strong and important to their socio-religious attitudes. In this article I tried to understand the origin and social importance of this ritual by comparative study of both religions.

The Origin of sacrifice

Hinduism, Islam and modern theories describe different aspects of the origin of the sacrificial act. Anthropologists build their concept of sacrifice on the idea of Animism, for instance Tylor’s theory of sacrificial gifts.² Like other beliefs, according to them, sacrifice also has its root in Animism. So the anthropologists find out the origin of sacrificial act in animism although they have different views on the notion of sacrifice.

☆ Lecturer, Islamic Studies, University Degree Collage, G.C University,
Faisalabad

As Hinduism is considered one of the oldest cultural traditions in modern history, the anthropologists find out the foundation of Hindu sacrificial act in Animism. It has been clearly pointed out in their writings that "Hinduism has not been made, but has grown."³ Further "Hinduism is an unusual combination of animism and pantheism."⁴ Hindu sacrificial activities are evident of this. If animistic people exist no more but the possibility of continuity cannot be rejected because of its flexible nature. Hinduism has always been very much tolerated and welcomed new ideas including those revealed and non-revealed religions. Therefore, historically we find the roots of Hindu ritual of sacrifice in local Dravidian cults as well as Iranian thought which, according to some scholars, brought to India by Aryans.⁵

In regard to Islam, anthropologists have the same opinion. They considered Semitic Religions as the developed shape of polytheism. As Jevon explains in his Introduction to the History of Religion:

"If we accept the principle of evolution as applied to religion and the many different forms of religion seem to be best accounted for by the theory of evolution it seems to follow that monotheism was developed out of polytheism. The process of evolution is from the simple and homogeneous to the more complex and highly organized, from lower forms of life to the higher."⁶

According to this theory sacrificial rites were there in early religious societies and continued in developed religions, i.e. Semitic Traditions, with more organized ideologies. No doubt cosmological facts are always same but at this stage of the history of Religion man began to see these facts in more organized manner. That's why we find the institution of sacrifice in Semitic Religions, from its material to the methods of offering, more organized as compared to what we see in non-Semitic religions.

According to Hindu texts, gods are the founder of sacrifice. In Hinduism, we observed that the gods obtained immortality and heaven by sacrifice, that they created the universe by sacrifice, that Prajapati, the creator, is the sacrifice.⁷ According to Rig-Veda the self-sacrificing cosmic being Purusha creates not only the world and

classes of beings but also the institution of yaja (sacrifice) and the first cosmic laws. Sacrifice for Vedic poets and ritualists became the crucial link between human and divine worlds. Karman, ritual “work” in yaja, was declared a human responsibility, and sacrifice evolved into a complex, highly sophisticated instrument by which the cosmos itself was ritually renewed.⁸ When sacrificial rite took shift from gods to the man in Vedic age, which is earlier period of Hinduism, the idea of animism is quite visible. As Eliot mentioned, “The earliest stratum of Vedic religion is worship of the powers of nature such as the Sun, the Sky, the Dawn, and the Fire which are personified but not localized or depicted.”⁹ Without doubt this feeling is strengthened by the intense hold which the doctrine of metempsychosis has on the Hindu mind. It is difficult, as we have already seen, for any believer in Hinduism to draw a line of demarcation between gods, men, and animals. If men depend on animals, so also do the gods; if men are associated with animals, so also are the gods.¹⁰ So, at this stage, the sacrificial act is in Hindu tradition actually performed with the sense of becoming in the footstep of gods. The studies of Hindu texts make clear two things: first; that sacrifice is a divine institution and secondly, the practice of sacrificial rituals was practiced from the dawn of Hinduism. Thus the origin of sacrifice can be identified with the origin of Hinduism itself.

When we reflect on Islam we find that The Qur’ān narrates at sacrifice was a God appointed act since the humans sent to the earth. “To every people did we appoint rites (of sacrifice), that they might recite the name of Allah over the sustenance He gave them from animals (fit for food).”¹¹ According to The Qur’ān Adam was the first man created by Allah and the first human society generated on earth by Adam and Eve. The Qur’ān mentioned that the sacrificial act was performed in this earlier society. The Qur’ān narrates the story of Adam’s two sons, Qābil (Cain) and Hābil (Abel), when they offered sacrifice to their Lord. “Recite to them the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam. Behold! They each presented a sacrifice (to Allah). It was accepted from one, but not from the other. Said the later, be sure I will slay thee. Surely, said the former, Allah doth accept of the sacrifice of those who are righteous.” (Al-Qur’ān, 5:27)

Islam never claimed that the sacrifice established by Muhammad (PBUH) first time but it was from the beginning of humanity on the face of earth. Although people are scattered on the earth but Allah sent His guide to every nation “To every people a

guide.” (Al-Qur’ān, 13:6) Islam has no problem to accept that there were ‘Guides’ sent by Allah to the people of earlier societies wherever they lived. But Islam rejected the anthropologists’ view point that sacrifice is a man made institution but it is a God appointed act (Al-Qur’ān, 22:34). Islam also rejects the Hindu view point on the origin of sacrifice that god or gods themselves offered first sacrifice then by following them man adopted sacrifice as a godly act. In Islamic concept of Tawhid it is far away that man shares something with God. According to Hindu theology a sacrifice is basically an act which makes their gods strong and fit to perform their duties.¹² Thus sacrifice was not only represented as something which is identical with cosmic order, but it was also a necessary condition for the proper working of the cosmic order.¹³ Islam never accepted this view because sacrifice is nothing more than the gratitude of man to his Lord. “It is not their meat, nor their blood that reaches Allah: it is your piety that reaches Him.” (Al-Qur’ān, 22:37) In another verse Allah explained that he does not need any kind of help from you but He gives you every kind of sustenance. “No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me.” (Al-Qur’ān, 51:57)

By concluding our discussion we can say that Hinduism, Islam and anthropologists have some common features on the issue of the origin of sacrifice despite their differences which we discussed above. These features can be concluded as following:

Sacrifice is a ritual which has its origin in pre-historic times and it is found in every cultural group or community on the face of earth.

- a. From its beginning it was a religious activity not a secular one.
- b. It has always been performed with specific notions and aims.
- c. It was an initial kind of worship or permanent part of worship.
- d. It was the symbol of relationship between man and god or the supernatural.

Importance of Sacrifice at Social Level

As we know, in modern age ‘Religion’ was primarily conceived as a system of ideas, and religious practices were viewed as expressions of these ideas. In this way religious practice i.e. ritual becomes social

fact.¹⁴ The cultural role of 'sacrifice' as a ritual is vital; it includes stimulating belief, maintaining religious strength, motivating economic exchange, enhancing courage, and transforming individual consciousness, often in order to bring it into alignment with group values as well as to increase individual and group activity in social structure. Some researchers have viewed ritual essentially as the means by which culture is passed on from one generation to the next, as the 'key' to traditions.¹⁵ For others ritual behaviour has been fundamental in establishing individual or social identity. Some other scholars considered ritual basically a safety valve to release psychological or social pressures.¹⁶ In this connection, we can say, that sacrifice as a ritual has all these characteristics and benefits at social level in its performance.

With regard to Hinduism, the social importance of sacrifice has more than one dimension. On the one hand where it has positive indicators like creating unity in Hindu community, making strong their belief in gods on the other hand it has some negative feature also, one of them is the social division in the society. Sacrifice is an institution which is directly responsible for this caste system and provides strong base of social discrimination in Hindu society. The popular Rg-Veda hymn of sacrifice provides at the same time the detail of this social classification of the society.

“When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet? The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaisya; from his feet the Sudra was produced.”¹⁷

This hymn provides four group organization of the society. In the first group are priests, teachers, scholars, and others who represent knowledge and spirituality. People in this group are called brahmanas, or brahmans. Those in the second group, called ksatriyas, are represented by kings, warriors, government bureaucrats, and others who represent power. Those in the third group, called vaishyas, are represented by farmers, traders, merchants, and other skilled workers. Those in the fourth group, called shudras, are represented by unskilled workers.¹⁸ A group sometimes known as untouchables has at times constituted a subcategory within the shudra class, sometimes referred to as a fifth group.

Only three first castes enjoyed full social religious rights and can participate in sacrificial rituals.¹⁹ The third class shudras has no right to participate in sacrificial rites; “sudra has no business with sacrifices.”²⁰ So, Brahmans claimed that they are repository of sacred knowledge, and alone privilege to perform sacrifices.²¹ In addition to these privileges, only they may partake of the sacrificial Soma, and eat the remaining of the sacrifice, no one else being regarded as sufficiently holy to consume food of which the goods have been partaken.²²

In the same way we can observe the gender base discrimination in Hindu society which has its roots in sacrificial institution. As Victor Turner describes the general attitudes of Hinduism toward women, “Hinduism has always been a patriarchal religion. Women play a decidedly secondary role in it. This is specially so with regard to ritual activity.”²³ The issue narrated in Hindu texts as following; “No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by woman apart (from their) husbands.”²⁴

In Islam there is no social classes, every member of Muslim community has right to partake in sacrificial ritual irrespective of gender, colour and social status. In Islam the base of reward is not caste or gender but it is piety of the heart.

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you.” (Al-Qur’ān, 49:13)

And in the same way there is no gender base distribution in sacrificial rites. Both perform sacrifices independently. And both get equal reward from Allah.

“If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith. They will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them.” (Al-Qur’ān, 4:124)

Sacrifice in Islam creates the unity in Ummah, and encourages them to prepare to take sacrificial notion as a message of life. To become ready to offer their lives for the sake of Allah, “say: truly, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are all for Allah, the Cherisher of the worlds.” (Al-Qur’ān, 6:162) This conscious of sacrifice makes a Muslim more active in his social life.

In Hindu tradition, they burn the sacrificial substances in the fire. In animal sacrifice they burnt some portion of animal in the fire while the remaining parts are eaten by Brahmins.²⁵ So the sacrificial material is actually destroyed and remaining consumed by a class. In Islam it is lawful for sacrificer to eat the meat of sacrificial animals²⁶ as well as preferable to distribute it to others including non-Muslims.²⁷

Conclusion

Hence, all this discussion in theory and practice of sacrifice could be concluded as following:

1. Sacrifice is accepted as an act of homage between man and god in both religions. Although the nature of this homage is different in both traditions.
2. Sacrifice can be a reference point of the history of religions particularly in Hindu tradition. One can understand the development of Hindu tradition by studying the concept of sacrifice.
3. In Islam 'sacrifice' is the mean of spirituality while in Hinduism, sometimes, spirituality is the mean to offer the 'sacrifice'. Because the word 'sacrifice' in Hindu tradition also stands as religion, dharma, itself.
4. Bloody sacrifice was always there in Hinduism and still it is offered by many Hindus, the change accrued in it was due to Janis and Buddhist influences. Islam lived also with these religions but never accepted any influence.
5. Human sacrifice survived in Hinduism until today which shows the less importance of human life in Hindu tradition. Just to get long life, wealth, and strength to overcome the enemies a Hindu can kill a human being in the name of sacrifice. Islam is beyond this type of cruelty.
6. Concept of sacrifice in Islam is more comprehensive, socially more beneficial, and naturally more harmonized with human needs than of Hinduism.

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