

History In Epics and Purānas: With special reference to the Vedic Ritual
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There are some references to Vedic Rituals in the archaic epics viz. Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. In this paper, an attempt is made to point out some discrepancies in these references from the point of view of Vedic ritual texts. Two claims are made in connection with these archaic epics. First they were composed by Vālmīki and Vyāsa respectively who are supposed to be Brāhmaṇas. Moreover, these two epics have been claimed to be Smṛiti-texts in Indian tradition and being such they are authoritative, next only to the Vedas. For a student of history of Vedic and Post-Vedic literature both these claims will appear to be not trustworthy. From the point of view of the history of literature, the archaic epics belong to Śāstra-tradition. Much of these epics was transmitted from generation to generation by wandering bards, monks and public narrators some of whom may be semi-learned Brāhmaṇas. In any case, these people cannot be said to be academicians or scholarly people. They were acquainted with the Brahmanism and Vedic ritual but were not experts in these fields. Therefore, there are many discrepancies in details of Vedic rituals in these two archaic epics. I have tried to point out some such discrepancies in this paper. I acknowledge with thanks my indebtedness to Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. I could get some references to Vedic rituals from the cards prepared by the scholars of the B. O. R. I. for cultural Index to Mahābhārata. The interpretation of these references, and the conclusions about the discrepancies about the Vedic ritual in them are completely my own.

Let us take the example of the Aṅvamedha-sacrifice performed by Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa. Rāma had abandoned Sītā before the performance of this sacrifice. So a golden image of Sītā was present at the time of the sacrifice. (See Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa VII.91.25:- *kṣāntāṃ mama patnīm ca dāksyaṇīṃ jātāṃ ca karmaṇī / agrato bharatāḥ kṛtvā gacchatvagre mahāyāgā* //). In the Aṅvamedha, not one, but rather four wives have to carry out their duties (See e.g. Śatapathabrāhmaṇa XIII.4.1.12). Rāma, who was very famous for his monogamy, could not technically speaking, be eligible to perform the Aṅvamedha-sacrifice at all. Moreover, even his one wife was not present at the time of the sacrifice. In Vedic ritual, there is no provision of golden image of the wife, in case she is not present. But the presence of wife herself is necessary. So Rāma could not perform any Vedic ritual. The author of the Rāmāyaṇa was not aware of the technical details of the Vedic ritual in general and of the Aṅvamedha ritual in particular.

There are some references to the A°vamedha performed by Para°urçma in Mahçbhçrata as well as in Rçmçya´a. Thus according to Mbh III.275.69 he performed ten A°vamedha-sacrifices. Elsewhere he is said to have performed Vçjapeya and also one hundred A°vamedha-sacrifices (*ayajad vçjapeyena so°vamedha°atena ca/* Mbh IX.48.8; see also Mbh XIII.83.32). Here a question may be asked: how Indra did not create any hindrance in the hundredth A°vamedha-sacrifice as he did in the case of the hundredth A°vamedha-sacrifice of Dilçpa (See Raghuv¼a III.39 ff.)? Moreover, even after successfully completing one hundred A°vamedha sacrifices how Para°urçma himself did not become Indra after the performance of the hundredth A°vamedha-sacrifice? Elsewhere it is said that having destroyed K¼atriyas for twentyone times and then having performed A°vamedha-sacrifice, at the end of it, he gave sacrificial gift in the form of earth to Ka°yapa (*trisaptak°tva° p°thiv¼¼ k°tvç ni°k¼atriyç¼¼ prabhu° dak¼ai°çma°vamedhçnte ka°yapçyçdadat tata° //* Mbh XII.49.56). In Vçlmçki-Rçmçya´a (I.75.5) we get the same information (*p°thiv¼¼ cçkhillç¼¼ prçpya ka°yapçya mahçtmane / yaj°asyçntedadç¼¼ rçma dak¼ai°ç¼¼ pu°yakarma°e //*). Here it may be noted that the sacrificial gifts are given at the time of midday-soma-pressing and not at the end of a sacrifice. In this story of Para°urçma there are some more discrepancies. In the first place, according to the Vedic ritual texts, the A°vamedha-sacrifice is to be performed by a K¼atriya king who is an emperor (*sçrvabhauma*) and who has defeated all the kings (*vijit¼*) (BaudhçS 15.1) and not by a Brçhma´a. Para°urçma being a Brçhma´a was certainly not authorized to perform the A°vamedha-ritual at all. Moreover, he was unmarried and as such he was not qualified to perform any Vedic ritual. For only a married man can establish fires and become authorized to perform any ritual. The physical presence of the wife of the sacrificer is an essential condition for Vedic ritual. An unmarried man, a widower or a divorcer or (divorcee) cannot perform any Vedic ritual. Even though Mahçbhçrata or Rçmçya´a does not mention clearly about the unmarried status of Para°urçma the Indian tradition considers him to be unmarried. Tulasçrçmçya´a I.271.3 we read: *bçlaka boli bagha°n nahçn tohi kevala muni ja²a jçnahi mohi / bçlabrahmacçr¼ ati kohi visvavidita chatriyakuladrohi //*). Here he is clearly mentioned to be unmarried. Para°urçma's name is included in the list of seven *ciraj¼vins* (immortal ones) all of who are unmarried. *a°vatthçmç b(k)alirvyçso hanumç¼¼ca bibh¼¼a´a / k°pa° para°urçma°ca saptaite ciraj¼vina° //*). A°vatthçman is mentioned in this list and thus it is implied that he was unmarried. In Mbh. X.9.37 it is said that he, among others, performed many sacrifices in which gifts were given (*avçptç° kratavo mukhyç bahavo bh°ridak¼ai°ç°*). Elsewhere also he is mentioned to be performing some fire ritual (*agnau juhomi bhagavan pratig°h¼¼¼va mç¼¼ balim /* Mbh X.9.37) and offering himself to the deity. The performance of ritual by Para°urçma and

A°vathçman will have to be treated as discrepancies from the point of view of Vedic ritual rules.

In connection with the A°vamedha-sacrifice it has been clearly stated in the ritual texts that there is no offering of omentum of the horse (See 1B XIII.5.2.10; Baudhç¹S 15.30; 1p¹S XX.18.11; Satyç¹S XIV.4.21). In Mahçbhçrata there is a reference to the offering of omentum of the horse in the A°vamedha-sacrifice (*uddh¹tya tu vapç¹/4 tasya yathç °aghra¹/4 dvijar³/4abhç¹ / ... yçjakç a°vamedhe °rapayçmçsu¹ .../ ta¹/4 vapçdh¹magandha¹/4 tu dharmarçja¹ sahçrjuna¹ / (upçjighrat) ...* (XIV. 93.3 ff; cp. Vçlmçkirçmçya¹ I.14.36-37). It is also said that the parts of the body of the sacrificial horse were offered in the fire by sixteen priests (*tçnyagnau juhuyur dhçrç¹ samastç¹ ³/4o²a°artviya¹ / Mbh XIV.91.5; cp. Vçlmçkirçmçya¹ I.14.38*). In the Vedic animal-sacrifice, the limbs of an animal are offered by the Adhvaryu (See e.g. 1pa¹S VII.25.8) and not by all the priests.

In the A°vamedha-sacrifice performed by Uparicarvasu, it is said that no animal was killed (Mbh XII.323.10). In A°vamedha-sacrifice not only a horse is killed but numerous other animals are also killed. Although in the mediaeval period and modern period some performers accepting the doctrine of *ahi¹/4sç* (non-violence) used (use) to substitute the animal by flour-animal (*pi³/4a-pa°u*) or ghee-animal (*gh¹tapa°u*) there is no such provision in the Vedic texts and the A°vamedha-sacrifice done by Uparicarvasu will have to be treated as a symbolic sacrifice and not a real one. There seems to be a discrepancy here.

In Mahçbhçrata 6.22.15 we read description of Bhç³/4ma. There it is said that he has performed thirty A°vamedha-sacrifices. as is well known Bhç³/4ma was unmarried and he was also himself not a king. According to the Vedic rules of A°vamedha-sacrifices the performer of this sacrifice should be a sovereign King and he should have four wives who have to carry out certain duties in this sacrifice. In that case the description of Bhç³/4ma here is a serious discrepancy.

A performer of Vedic sacrifice is expected to be having defectless body. Kçtyçyana°rautas¹tra I.1.5 clearly prohibits the men who are devoid of any particular limb, those who have not studied Veda, those who are eunuchs, and those who are 1dras, from Vedic ritual performance (*a¹gahçnç°rotriya³/4a¹ha°dravarjyam*). The commentator named Karka clearly states that blind, lame, dumb, and deaf etc. cannot perform Vedic ritual. However, according to Mbh I.106.5, Dh¹tarç³/4ra performed an A°vamedha sacrifice after Pç²u's victory over the kings. Dh¹tarç³/4ra was blind. So he was disqualified to perform any Vedic ritual. Moreover, he himself had not conquered the other kings. So he was further disqualified from the point of view of A°vamedha. Elsewhere also Dh¹tarç³/4ra is said to

be performing Vedic ritual in fires (*sa r̥j̥c̥gn̥n̥ paryup̥sya hutv̥ ca vidhivat tata^a* / Mbh XV.24.18). This is a discrepancy.

In Mbh II.12.14 there is a reference to the R̥jas̥ya and there seems to be an anomaly there. Thus we read there that he who receives the act of sprinkling of water (*abhi^{3/4}eka*) at the end of the R̥jas̥ya-sacrifice is called *sarvajit* (all-conqueror). It may be noted that the act of sprinkling water (*abhi^{3/4}eka*) is performed in the R̥jas̥ya-sacrifice, not at the end of it but rather during the performance of it (See e.g. Saty̥S XIII.5.32f).

Elsewhere we read that animals were killed in the C̥turm̥sya-sacrifices (See Mbh III.199.8; *c̥turm̥sye^{3/4}u pa^oava^a vadhyanta iti nitya^a*). But actually according to Vedic texts on these sacrifices, no animal is killed in them. They are Haviryaj̥a (or I^{3/4}i) type of sacrifices in which no animal is killed. This is another discrepancy.

In Mbh V.139.14 Kar̥a says that he has performed many Soma-sacrifices. Since Kar̥a was considered to be a Ś̥ta and not accepted as a K̥atriya, how can he be said to be authorized to perform any Vedic sacrifice? So this reference must be considered to be an anomaly from the point of view of Vedic texts. Kar̥a was not accepted as a K̥atriya; so he was not authorized to perform any Vedic ritual.

There are some references to Sarpasattra of Janamejaya (See e.g. Mbh I.47.13 *r̥j̥c̥na^{1/4} d̥k̥^{3/4}ay̥c̥m̥su^a sarpasattr̥ptaye tad̥c̥* ('tvija^a /). In this context there is also a reference to the sacrificial gifts (*dak̥^{3/4}i'̥c̥*) (See Mbh I.33.25). It may be pointed out that there is no sacrificial gift (*dak̥^{3/4}i'̥c̥*) to be given in the sacrifices of Sattra-type (See Saty̥S XVI.3.18-19). The Soma-sacrifices are at times divided into three classes: 1) *Ek̥ha* :- The sacrifices in which the Soma-ritual is done for one day only. 2) *Ah̥na* :- The sacrifices in which the Soma-sacrificial ritual is performed for two to twelve days. 3) *Sattra* :- The sacrifices in which the Soma-ritual is performed for twelve or more number of days. The longest sacrificial sessions are those in which the Soma-ritual is performed for one thousand years. A twelve-day-sacrifice can be performed either as a Sattra-ritual or as an Ah̥na-sacrifice. All the Sattra-sacrifices are a part of ̥rauta-Soma ritual for which the performers must be ̥hit̥gn̥is. The word ̥hit̥gn̥i means one who has established (three) sacred fires named G̥rhapatya, ̥havan̥ya, Dak̥^{3/4}i'̥a. There seems to be a discrepancy in the reference to Dak̥^{3/4}i'̥c̥s in the Sarpasattra.

Moreover a Sattra can be performed by Br̥hma'̥a-performers only (See Saty̥S XVI.1.20 *br̥hma'̥c̥n̥c̥^{1/4} tu sattram*) and not by a K̥atriya or Vai̥ya. The reason for this restriction is that all the performers in this type of sacrifice have to do the duties of a sacrificer as well as of a priest (*sarve y̥c̥jam̥c̥nam̥c̥rtvijyen̥c̥vipra^{3/4}iddha^{1/4} kuryu^a* / Saty̥S XVI.1.22). Now the work of a priest can be done only by a Br̥hma'̥a. Therefore all the performers of a sacrificial session (*Sattra*) must be Br̥hma'̥as. Janamejaya,

being a king, a K³/₄atriya, was not technically speaking qualified for performing the Sarpasattra. There is a discrepancy here.

An jhitçgni is also expected to be one performing numerous obligatory (*nitya*), contingent (*naimittika*) and optional (*kçmya*) rituals. He is also basically a householder (*g'hastha*), i.e. a married man carrying out similar domestic (*g'hya*) rituals with the help of a Purohita (chaplain). The priests carrying out the 'rauta-rituals are called štvij-s. In Mbh V.54.7 there is a mention of a Purohita who is described to be *sarpasattravidhçnaj@a*. This expression means ""knower of the procedure of the sacrificial session called Sarpa". A sacrificial session (*sattra*) is a 'rauta-ritual. A Purohita is connected with the domestic rituals. There is a technical discrepancy in describing a domestic priest to be expert in 'rauta-ritual. Of course it can be argued that a domestic priest can also be an expert in the 'rauta-ritual just as singer can be a dancer also. But generally it is not so. It is quite possible that the domestic priest has been described to be an expert in the field of the 'rauta-ritual by the author out of his ignorance of the technical difference between these two types of rituals.

I have given above some examples from Mahçbhçrata and Rçmçya´a to support my hypothesis that the authors of these two archaic epics did not know the technical details of the Vedic ritual. They have great respect for the Vedas and Vedic rituals. But it is a different thing to have respect for some particular text and to have detailed knowledge of that text. As has been already said above these two archaic epics belong to the S'ita-tradition. S'itas, the people of mixed caste, generally carrying out the work of bards, chariot-drivers, chariot-makers, or of wandering narrators cannot be expected to be highly learned persons. Most of them know some names of Vedic Sacrifices. A°vamedha was of course the most prestigious one among all the sacrifices. From the point of view of a king it was an ideal aim to be achieved. From the point of view of common people it was a standard of comparison (*upamçna*). The A°vamedha sacrifice was so prestigious that even some small kings may claim to have performed this sacrifice or the bards may describe that their patron-kings have performed this sacrifice even without the real performance. Actually a victorious king who has defeated all the other kings and one who is the king of all the earth (*sçrvabhauma*) (See Baudhç¹S 15.1) is qualified to perform this sacrifice. But in practice everything cannot be as per textual rules.

There were possibilities of compromises in the performance of the A°vamedha sacrifice as far as the duration of the performance, area of wandering of the horse, and the obscene ritual with sexual union of the horse and the chief queen. The very fact that A°vamedha-sacrifice was performed for the sake of publicity, indicates that it was not done secretly but rather openly. Then it must be very inconvenient to perform the obscene ritual literally. This must have also led to various compromises and short-cuts. The

actual performance of the A°vamedha requires about thirteen months duration. A king who has to do a lot of administration work and to spend so much time in his harems cannot afford to spend so much time to perform tedious rituals for a long time. All the claimants of A°vamedha-performance cannot let the horse wander all over the earth and defeat all the other kings. All these factors lead to one conclusion. No performer of the A°vamedha might have done the ritual of the A°vamedha without any compromise; the A°vamedha-sacrifice is therefore rather a bookish and fictitious sacrifice without there ever being an actual performance strictly in accordance with the descriptions of it in the Vedic texts.

This conclusion will be inconvenient to two types of scholars. There have been many scholars who tried to interpret the A°vamedha-sacrifice from the point of view of sexual symbolism and fertility rituals. I do not deny the remote possibility of sexual acts like those described in the Vedic texts on the A°vamedha at a very primitive level and also being performed secretly. The question is about the possibility of their being performed in the case of solemn 1rauta-sacrifice like A°vamedha which is to be performed by a great king being an 1hitøgni in the form of a public ritual for the sake of one's own advertisement. My answer to this question is ""no possibility". In that case the writings of these scholars on the A°vamedha from the point of view of sexual symbolism will be redundant.

The second type of scholars to whom my conclusion about the A°vamedha being a fictitious sacrifice will be inconvenient is the one of those historians who can quote examples of coins, copper-plates, inscriptions etc. in which some kings are mentioned to have performed the A°vamedha-sacrifice. For the historians the evidences like these are very trustworthy and almost decisive. It must be however, remembered that forged documents can be prepared by the ambitious and intelligent kings or their devoted faithful servants (bards etc.). The kings will like to get the credit of the performance of the prestigious sacrifice like A°vamedha and the bards will also like to praise the kings with the same type of descriptions. In any case the documents like coins, copper-plates or inscriptions also cannot be considered to be hundred per cent reliable. So the writings based on such evidences will also be treated as unsound.