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Report on the Atirātra ritual held in Kerala in April 2011

Due to generous support from SAI, in April 2011 a group of Harvard graduate students and I had the chance to attend a two-week 3000-year old Indian ritual, the *Atirātra Agnicayana*, held at Panjal in Kerala for the first time since 1975.

This ritual is carried out very rarely: the last ones were performed in 1901, 1956, and in 1975, which I could not attend at the time. Therefore I was especially glad that I was able to attend this year's performance, along with our graduate students. It was for them, just as for me, a unique chance to observe and record, at great length, this complex ritual that has been performed in its ancient form since about 1000 B.C.E.

In preparation for our attendance we had studied the relevant texts that are available in print. The 12 days of ritual are summed up in the Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra (c. 500 BCE). It records minutely all the steps that have to be undertaken in its performance. This involves 17 priests, who have to be specially trained for this it long ritual. However, they are specialists in the recitation of Vedic texts that they have learned in family based special schools since their childhood. They therefore know the texts by heart, including the very intricate way of singing a large number of Vedic melodies (Sāman).

When we arrived just before the ritual began, the offering ground in a large rice field had been well prepared, tents and sheds had been erected for the visitors, but especially so for the actual performance of the ritual. The ritual ground was separated from the visitors that came to see the ritual by barriers, which we could not transgress. Yet, we had chance to view the rituals and to film them across the bamboo fences. Otherwise, we had the possibility to move around freely and observe the various actions being performed during the ritual from various angles at the perimeter.

This year's ritual was organized by a group of rich merchants from Kerala state, who however had their business in the United Arab Emirates, and now chose to reinvest some of their money in the local tradition of ritual performances, all of which enhanced their social status in their homeland. For, they belong to a lower caste and had to ameliorate their status by the well-known process of Sanskritization. A huge amount of money was spent for the actual ritual, the management and the feeding of all the visitors: several times per day, free food was available.

In addition, a film crew had been hired to film the ritual. They did so with several cameras from various angles, including a camera mounted on a giant beam that was moved around the offering ground as to get very close shots of the major ritual activities. We hope to get a copy of those films, some 160 hours, but so far have not succeeded to persuade the main donor to part with a copy. Nevertheless, we have dozens and dozens of hours of film that we took ourselves: that was not always very easy because of the pushing and shoving of the thousands of visitors circumambulating the sacred ground. We nevertheless have a lot of data that we can cut and paste and produce a film that will give a clear idea of what was going on. Maybe we have to ask SAI for financial aid for this long and difficult undertaking.

As for the ritual itself, we visited it daily, almost continuously, however after day 4 of 5, the crowds began to swell very much. At first, we could easily hold onto our filming positions at the rim of the offering ground and our reserved seats in the “Research Wing”. But later on that became increasingly difficult because of the increasingly large number of people milling around. They were moved on by special guards but got stuck time and again. In the last 3 of 4 days, the crowd was so large that it was virtually impossible to do any work and even our “Research Wing” seats were increasingly occupied by visitors when we left them. So we elected to come at night instead, as during the last two nights the ritual continued without pause. Large sections of Rgveda Mantras had to be recited, altogether 1000 of them, and similarly elaborate and extensive singing of melodies from the Sāmaveda took place. We stayed overnight (*atirātra* ‘overnight’, after all), arriving at 12 or 2 o'clock in the morning, when only 3-4 people were present, and stayed on until the sun rose, and many more people started to arrive. It started to get very hot then, and on the last day some screening was taken down, so that we had to survive in the full glare of the sun.

However, it must be mentioned that we could leave our cameras and other equipment on our seats and proceed to the railing of the offering ground --- nothing was stolen: people are extremely honest. People in general were extremely friendly. The same applies to the local Brahmins. We did not have any difficulty in talking to them, or requesting them to recite certain Rgveda, Yajurveda or Sāmaveda texts for us. I could do a little private fieldwork on the side, recording several versions of our texts, where they editorial problems exist.

The same applied to the local Śaṅkara University at Kalady, where I had been invited for a series of lectures. Teachers and students were extremely open-minded, and not bound by the usual strictures. We actually had *real* discussions, unlike my experience in Chennai and Delhi in the summer of 2009. At Kalady we could discuss items of Indian Studies. In addition, the students were extremely well prepared. Since I had been asked to also talk about a comparison of Indian and Japanese mythology, the at least one student had actually studied the Japanese text (in English translation) at length and could ask intelligent questions. In short, my short visit to this university, where I had to give some 7 lectures, was a very good experience.

The major research questions.

1st, actual performance

2nd, relationship of the modern performance with the ancient texts.

3rd, changes between the 1975 and the 2011 performances

4th, current local interpretation of the rituals

5th, the question of ‘scientific’ investigation of the effects of ritual.

6th, the local Brahmin community and its interaction, training of priests, teaching of the sacred text to their young students: persistence of tradition.

7th, the cooperation of the 3 Vedas in ritual.

8th, Brahmin villages and Brahmin ritual in the context of multicultural Kerala; the background of election fever

§ 1 ACTUAL PERFORMANCE

The 2011 performance closely followed that of 1975 that is amply, though not completely, documented by Frits Staal's 1983 book. We therefore both could compare both in detail. We used a PDF and a printout of the main features of the 1975 book as our companion materials.

Documentation of the 1975 and 2011 performances

Our material is similar to that of the 1975 performance, documented by Staal, who had taken some 30 Betamax videotapes and a color film then, including many dozens of tape recordings that had become available to me on CD. We were therefore in a very good position to compare the 1975 performance with that of 2011.

Mainly, the two performances were twin copies of each other. All of the major features of the last performance were repeated this time. Continuity of tradition was clearly visible. Some of the participants of the 1975 ritual were still alive, and one of them, an old man, sat on a plastic chair in the middle of the offering ground and followed much of the performance.

Amusingly, due to my ‘advanced’ age, I was taken by many as Frits Staal, and people would come up to me and ask me “are you Staal?” Frits Staal actually participated in the 2011 ritual for a few days, but this time he was not allowed to sit on the actual offering round, and therefore left in frustration. Anyhow, his health was not too good (He passed away a few months ago).

One small deviation from the 1975 performance was that many Brahmin women were allowed to enter the sacrificial ground and talk to the priests; many of them visited the hall of the sacrificer’s wife and chatted with her. This certainly was the reason for one of the many rumors in the local tea stalls, alleging that something would go wrong with the ritual. As we have seen, something *did* go wrong, because the expected rain arrived about 15 min. earlier than the actual burning down of the offering sheds.

Goats

A major innovation in the 1975 ritual was the substitution of 11 goats that had to be offered, by vegetarian offerings (*piṣṭapaśu*); in 2011 these substitutes were again tied to the offering pole, and the ritual was carried out properly this time as well: the 1975 substitution has by now become a regular part of the performance. The old Sūtra text that

we had studied during the winter semester, of course, still speaks of actual strangulation and offering of 11 goats, and such animal sacrifice is carried out at other Vedic rituals, though increasingly secretly.

Implements

As mentioned, the major implements of the ritual had been prefabricated. For, there was no time during the 12 days to bake the thousand bricks and to fashion various clay vessels and wooden implements, such as a large number of offering ladles.

Pravargya

For me, one of the initial, preparatory parts of the soma ritual, the Pravargya, was of great interest to me as I had dealt with it some 40 years ago in my PhD thesis. Here was my first chance to follow this ritual step-by-step, with all its actions and textual recitations.

Though the clay implements were ready on the offering ground, the priests proceeded as if they were fashioning them only during the ritual --- that means, they had to collect the clay, load it on a donkey, bring it to the offering round, make three rough lumps of clay, fashioned them by hand in the form of three rolls in sausage form, put these on top of each other, and then fashion a rough clay vessel by hand. In this archaic ritual, of course, a turntable cannot be used. Moreover, one cannot ask a potter to prepare the ritual implements, because he belongs to a low caste.

Consequently the ritual vessel was “prepared” on the offering ground in a very elaborate session. Later on it was used for particular milk offerings to the twin deities, the Aśvin. This is perhaps the most spectacular part of the actual ritual. The clay vessel is heated until it is glowing red hot, then milk is poured into the vessel, and its contents virtually explode several yards high.

Role of the supervisor.

The role of a particular Brahmin, whom we nick-named the “supervisor”, was remarkable. He knew the whole ritual performances by heart and directed the major and minor participants by telling them what to do and when. One must not forget that this is, after all, a ritual that extends over 12 days, including the last two nights. He has studied the ritual from early on in his adult life, and he was a master of it already when he was about 35 years old. Carrying a pointing stick, he would rush around from one spot to the other, and direct people what to do.

He also supervised the extra recitation, which he also knows by heart. So when one priest recited a certain passage, the ‘supervisor’ might sometimes notice that he made a mistake, and directed him to repeat the sentence or the melody. For, the ritual has to be performed 100% correctly, according to old Vedic beliefs. If a mistake is made and not corrected the ritual will have no effect. This is underlying belief was visible this time as well.

Priests

The priests that took part in the ritual ranged from quite old men to fairly young boys who had just learned the part of the texts that were necessary for this particular ritual. It was especially interesting even amusing to hear a boy priest, with his child's voice, giving instructions in old Malayalam and Sanskrit, to the middle-aged *yajamāna* (the 'sponsor' of the ritual) how to behave, what to do, and what not to do during the ritual and during the year following the ritual.

The preparation of the priests had taken more than half a year. Several of them had to be specially trained, including some of the very young performers: for example the Subrahmaniam priest, who was only about 10 years old, and of whom by now a video exists online under "athirathram 2011."

Of course, occasional critical comments by onlookers were heard about the competence of the reciters and singers. We have to compare the actual recordings with the texts.

Ritual Ground

The preparation of the ritual ground follows instructions that are recorded in the same old Sūtra texts and that we had studied during the winter semester before going to India. The layout plan therefore was very well known to us. On the offering ground there were several sheds, open on all sides or nearly all sides, with thatched roofs that protected the main actors during the ritual.

Press

The ritual was widely reported in the press. Every day there was a quarter page, sometimes half page long report on the daily proceedings, mostly in the local language (Malayalam), but also in some English newspapers. Television was present as well, at least for the major part of the ritual, and several of us were interviewed about our interest, what the ritual meant to us, and what the "scientific" effects of the ritual might be. We had to underline that we were merely interested in the performance as such and in the ancient texts that were recited and sung.

§ 2. The relationship of the modern performance with the ancient texts.

Some of the major deviations include the following.

Innovation: burning of the offering ground

Both the 1975 and 2011 performances had the burning down of the offering halls at the

end of the ritual, while the ancient Vedic texts refer only to that of the *kuśa* grass that was strewn around the major offering fires. This is a medieval innovation. In the 1975 ritual as well as this time, all thatched halls were burnt down at the very end of the ritual. This is a major occasion, for which thousands of people looked out fervently.

In general It should be added that the actual performance depends just on medieval handbooks, composed in the local Malayalam language. We have to check, therefore, whether the burning down of the halls is already mentioned in these handbooks, composed in the medieval form of the language which few foreign scholars can read.

After burning down the halls, the rains should arrive. As mentioned, this time a huge rain storm arrived 15 minutes early. Rain, prematurely ending the dry season, is actually expected at the very end of the ritual. Indeed, as at every occasion that this ritual had been performed, rain arrived. With one hitch this time: the priests were a little slow on the 12th of day and night performances, and so there was a huge wind blast, followed by a giant downpour. All of this is typical for the pre-monsoon season.

But this time it was already the second one of two great unseasonal rainstorms that the area had seen for several months. Nevertheless, the prediction and the expectation of the people was fulfilled again. Actually, a number of rumors had swirled regarding this year's performance. It was heard, for example, that the admission of women into the offering round was the reason for several glitches in the ritual.

The burning down of the halls is one of the several items that have to be followed up in the future. As it happens, our graduate student Finn Gerety was in Kerala for the year 2011/12, and could to some extent follow up on items that still need to be investigated, such as the two types of Rgveda recitation in Kerala, and the two types of learning this tradition, apart from Finn's major topic, the Sāmaveda.

Goats and substitutes

Another major deviation, already seen in the 1975 performance, was that the substitution of 11 goat victims that had to be strangled and whose omentum was to be sacrificed. In 1975 there was a serious dispute about this fact, not because of vegetarianism and ahimsa, but because of political interference. At the time, the Communist Party of Kerala had used this large ritual, in part financed by foreigners, to stoke up emotions and discussion. As one of the local Brahmins, Itti Ravi (in Staal's film) put it: "some people *opined* that the goats should not be offered; we discussed it and decided against it." The Communist Party thus saved the lives of 11 goats. In 2011 there was no discussion of this type, instead vegetarian substitutes were offered as in 1975. It has become a new tradition.

As a matter of fact, substitutes of this type are not something new. Already in the late Vedic texts they are allowed under the name of *piṣṭapaśu*. However, Vedic Brahmins in various parts of the country still follow the old custom, sometimes very strictly. As I was told by a colleague, who traveled over South India in search of rituals some 20 years ago, he came across one village where the Brahmins were to sacrifice Soma ritual. The

villagers, vegetarian Hindus, opposed the killing of the Soma goat, and therefore the Brahmins took it upon themselves to kill it. They out their petromax lamps and strangled the goat outside the village. Its entrails were then offered next day at the Soma ritual.

Implements

As mentioned, the ritual implements had been prepared beforehand, especially those made of clay. However, the offering pole was fashioned in front of our eyes, just inside the offering ground by a low caste carpenter. It was remarkable that a carpenter could enter the outskirts of offering round, but of course not any other visitors, including the much venerated F. Staal and us, outcaste foreigners.

In 1975, Prof. Staal was allowed to sit between the two major ritual halls, well inside the offering ground. He had come over from his retirement home in Thailand this time as well, transmitting to all of us a very bad cold. But, this time he was not allowed to enter the offering ground at all, and had to watch from the outside like everybody else. Therefore he left after a few days, finding the 12 days ritual a little too exhausting: he was well over 80 years old.

Most of us did not know the local language, Malayalam, with the exception of one student who had studied, just for half a year, the very similar Tamil language. Nevertheless, as the local language is full of Sanskrit words I could make out a lot of what was announced by loudspeaker, when someone gave a summary of what was going to happen next. As far as the actual ritual texts recited or sung, we could of course follow them, based on our previous study during the winter semester.

There are other small deviations from the ritual handbooks. Our former PhD student, Prof. Carlos Lopez (Florida), noted while the wife of the *yajamāna* ('sponspr') had to undergo a special ritual in the west of her hut, the *patniśālā*, this apparently did not take place in 2011. Thus, we were quite 'worried' about the actual state of the *yajamāna* and his wife, because if she had not been consecrated properly, the ritual could not be successful.

Only in such details the two rituals (1975, 2011) differed from each other.

Technology

The pronunciation of Sanskrit in this part of India is very clear, and this time all the recited texts were amplified by microphone and loudspeaker. This was another innovation: a microphone was present all of the time, of course held by another Brahmin priest, inside the offering ground.

We too made use of this innovation in technology—there were many cell phones and cameras visible all over the place—and occasionally asked Brahmin friends to take some videos for us inside the sacred ground where we could not go: especially so, one of our colleagues, Prof. T.P. Mahadevan from Howard University in Washington did so; born in the 'outskirts' of eastern Kerala, he actually played a minor role in the ritual.

Soma Merchant

He was the ‘Soma merchant’ in the ritual. The plant out of which the sacred drink Soma is pressed, is collected, as the Vedic tradition tells us, in the mountains and then brought to the offering round. Since the Himalayas are some 2000 miles away, the plant is brought from the local Western Ghat mountains, that too reach sometimes heights of some 6000 feet. The Soma plant—nowadays a creeper—is collected by local aboriginal tribes, and then brought to the offering ground, where our friend Mahadevan acted as merchant. He had to sell the Soma, carried in a bundle on his head, to the Brahmins assembled. Some haggling should take place and he should get a cow as payment. However, once the deal was done, he was to be beaten up by the Brahmins and sent away.

The innovation this time was that he was not actually beaten up. He stayed along with us in the only local hotel some 5 miles away, from where we had to commute by motor rickshaw to reach the offering round. I had been there quite early on the Soma pressing day, but he had not yet arrived -- which made the other Brahmins quite nervous. One of them asked me in Sanskrit: “Mahādevan kutra? Where is Mahadevan?” In the end, he arrived just in time and the Soma sale could proceed in due order.

Thus, in various ways tradition persists or is slightly innovated, sometimes with the recurrence to the old Vedic ‘escape routes’ for mistakes and substitutions.

§ 4. The current interpretation of the 2011 performance.

As mentioned, local people came to visit in droves. They apparently regard the fire as the main deity, and when it was installed on the main altar, they did not just walk around the offering ground clockwise, as is common, but they also prostrated themselves.

In the first two days, there was a smaller number of visitors, circumambulating the offering ground, however, as mentioned, in the last few days there was a constant stream of worshippers that was so thick that we could hardly move among them. The local male and female volunteer guards tried to move them at a steady pace, but there were necessarily many hitches and holdups.

The local people regard this ritual as some kind of *pūjā*, as they are used to from their temple worship. Because the fire altar is built up out of 5 layers of bricks in the shape of a bird, an eagle, people eagerly looked out for an eagle to appear in the skies, and they were not disappointed. One started to circle high above the offering round on one of the first few days, and later on it was joined by others.

There was a great commotion when a ‘Garuḍa’ was circling above the offering ground. People stopped, looked up and pointed out the mythical bird. That happened a few more times over the next two days. The actual appearance of Garuḍa was expected on the last

day of the ritual. The circling of the eagle constituted a premonition of the success of the ritual.

The reason for this belief is not difficult to fathom. Like so many other beliefs, it may be grounded in some ancient textual references, but in this particular case it was not very clear from where it stemmed, apart from the bird shape of the altar. Garuda is a mythical bird definitely is post-Vedic.

As a matter of fact, the ancient Vedic texts talk about the eagle-shaped bird altar as transporting the ‘sacrificer’ (*yajamāna*) to heaven after his death. In that respect, the disposal of the offering implements of the preliminary Pravargya ritual during the Agnicayana is a ‘dry run’ of the laying out the body of the sacrificer and his transport to heaven. None of that is known to the current local population. But they nevertheless still regard the bird shaped altar and its replica in the sky, the eagle, as very important. In this fashion, the old Vedic tradition continues, if only in form, not in its original meaning.

Another aspect of the current interpretation of the ritual, since at least 1975, has been the interpretation of the “scientifically” measurable effects of the sacrifice. In 1975 there was at least one person, as reported to me by Frits Staal, who believed in certain “scientific” effects of the ritual. This time, we had a slew of scientists, measuring whatever they thought was relevant.

In the same vein, local people who approached me and asked me whether I was Frits and many other questions, also asked me about the “scientific effects” of the ritual -- a question that I tried to avoid by pointing out other items. Similarly, local Kerala TV took me aside for an interview and asked me similar questions, which I again avoided answering directly.

§ 5. “Scientific interpretation”

This brings me to the so-called “scientific interpretation” of the ritual. Ever since the 1870s, some Hindu sects (Arya Samaj, etc.) have tended to interpret the Vedic texts and rituals in modernist fashion. Whatever the current science of 1870 or 1900 or 2011 told us about the nature of the universe had to be rediscovered in the ancient texts. Therefore, it was only natural that following the 1870+ interpretations one looked for effects of the fire ritual on nature and humans. People have more and more tended to believe that the performance of the fire ritual cleanses the air, kills bacteria, and establishes good relations between various groups of people.

The Pravargya ritual was repeated in the morning and evening of every day. It attracted not just the local visitors, but also some scientists. There were quite a number of them who wanted to measure the effects that the ritual had on the surroundings, nature, plants and humans. There was one group with the large spectrometer, actually put on the table inside the offering ground; it was to measure the explosion of milk. True enough, they reported that when the milk exploded their instruments showed a major deviation from normal. There was another scientist who had planted some seeds and measured how well

they grew with exposure to the ritual or not. And so on.

Some of this was even broadcast on a Telugu website dedicated to this particular ritual. It goes into quite some detail regarding the scientific measurements. However, it mentions the “Harvard” group visiting the offering ground.

As a matter of fact, we were frequently asked about the ‘scientific effects’ during these 12 days. People automatically assumed that we wanted to study *these* effects. When we told them that we were interested in the performance as such, as we had read it, they insisted: but what about the effects?

It is quite an interesting aspect to study the underlying belief system at hand, and the development of this belief, and to see how the intrusion of so-called scientific measurements in the margins of the ritual took place. As mentioned, when I asked Frits Staal whether scientists had been present in the 1975 ritual, he said: just one Dr. Raghavan. Over the last few decades, the scientific interest in these ancient rituals has exploded. One can observe this also in the performance of similar, though much smaller rituals, often present on the Internet and on YouTube. In the commentaries accompanying such internet presentations usually all the beneficial effects of the ritual are underlined on the surroundings and on people in general.

Some of our students have had longer discussions with the scientists (see their testimony). With the scientists, too, it did not help that we pointed out that we were just interested in the ritual as such, its performance, its recitation, and its singing. They always reverted back to the question of the ‘effects’ of the ritual?

§ 6 Local Brahmins

The local Brahmin community and its interaction, the training of priests, the teaching of the sacred texts to young students and the persistence of tradition was another major topic.

This was closely studied by Finn Gerety, who constantly moved among the priests, interacting with them at many locations inside and outside the offering area (see his own report).

§ 7. Cooperation of the 3 Vedas in ritual

In order to get a Vedic Śrauta ritual performed, up to 17 priests belonging to the four Vedas have to cooperate. However, the Atharvaveda has been missing in South India for the past 500 years. Its (very minor) role is taken over when necessary, by other priests. However, within the three Vedas, there is some competition between the various communities. For example the Kauśītakins, not the Aitareya Rgvedins have been prominent over the past century. And among the (relatively few) Adherents of the Sāmaveda, too, there is competition as to who should perform a particular ritual. This aspect will be investigated in detail by Finn Gerety in his thesis.

§ 8. Brahmin villages and ritual in the context of multicultural Kerala; election fever.

As is well known, Kerala is a multicultural, though monolingual state. Next to Hindus, it has a fairly large number of Muslims and Christians, many of them belonging to the old Syriac church.

Even in the village next to the offering ground one could see Muslim mosques, usually painted bright light green. One factor in this is that the Muslim community has earned a lot of money by sending their younger people to the Gulf states and transferring much of the money earned back home. Everywhere in the state one can see new big houses being built, again painted brightly.

Another factor is the prominence of the local form of Communism. The Kerala Communist Party had been in power for decades. We arrived in the middle of an election campaign, and election posters were seen all over the villages. People were eagerly reading newspapers, as in this state we have nearly a hundred percent literacy. Even then, most of the posters prominently showed the party symbol. The election took place after the end of the ritual. For the first time, the Communist alliance lost its majority by just one seat in the local parliament, and a combination of the Congress party and others took over.

The Christians, too, send workers to the Gulf states. As a result, new churches have seen all over the state. Christians are very active as well. I had the visit of a man from the South of the state who just came to hand me some Christian literature in Malayalam, including a CD with Christian songs. They were all couched in traditional Hindu terminology, and thus were full of Sanskrit words. For example, the morning prayer (*suprabhātam*) was closely modeled on the Hindu morning prayer.

In addition, there were many visitors from outside the state. Some of them followed the neo-Hindu sects founded in 1870 and later, some were traditional scholars. In one case, a religious teacher came with this whole class just to see the ritual: they had traveled far, I believe from near Bombay. Some of our students talked to them at length.

Some of them were trying to proselytize us, and tried to explain their particular brand of Hinduism as the only valid one. Most of them were recording the rituals with their own cell phones and cameras. Some were seen in the morning performing yoga exercises.

In sum, the offering ground represented a virtual kaleidoscope of Hindu and other believers. We saw a few veiled Muslim women performing the ritual circumambulation of the offering ground...

In sum, the investment of SAI in enabling the participation of our graduate students and me in this very rare ritual has paid off very well: it has produced a wealth of data that will be used by us in our future work, some of it forms that may appeal to the interested public, such a san exhibition and a film.

Again, I express my gratitude for making this possible.

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