

# The Pañcamahāyajñas – A General Study

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## ABSTRACT

According to the Vedic tradition and culture, yajña literally means sacrifice, devotion, worship, offering etc. In the various scriptures of the Vedic literature, the Vedic sacrifices are described in detail. From the ancient Vedic times the five daily observances or sacrifices were prescribed as the Pañcamahāyajñas. The combinations of five great sacrifices are called here the Pañcamahāyajñas (pañcānām mahāyajñānām samāhāraḥ pañcamahāyajñam). The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and Taittirīyāraṇyaka mention about the Pañcamahāyajñas at length while these five great yajñas take a very important place in the Ṛgḥyasūtras and the Dharmasūtras. These five great sacrifices should be performed daily by householders which have some importance of the Indian cultural heritage as well as the Vedic traditions. They are viz., the Brahmajajña, i.e. the worship of Brahman or knowledge; the Devayajña, i.e. the worship of gods; the Bhūtajajña, i.e. the worship of other beings; the Pitryajña, i.e. the worship to ones forefathers; the Manuṣyajajña, i.e. the worship to fellow humans. These above five daily sacrifices are performed very easily by the householders, i.e. Brahmajajña is done by the daily recitation of the Vedic texts, Devayajña is by offering the oblation to gods through Agni; Bhūtajajña is by giving food and other needful things to the animals, birds, insects etc.; Pitryajña is by offering rice (piṇḍam) or water to the forefathers; Manuṣyajajña is by serving or helping other human being.

The performances of these great Pañcamahāyajñas have signified the value and ethics of humanity during the Vedic civilization, which are still relevant in the modern society. This research paper is a general study about to know the significance of the five great Vedic sacrifices and their relevance in the modern society and a comprehensive description has been aimed at.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the culture and civilization of ancient India, Vedic yajña signifies the meaning of ritualistic tradition of worship. The yajña is an integral part of the religious practices of the Vedic period which is the foundation of ancient Indian religion and culture. This religious performance of yajña has its own impact on Indian people. The Sanskrit word yajña<sup>1</sup> is derived from the root 'yaj' with the affix nañ which literally means devotion, worship, sacrifice, offer, prayer, praise etc. According to Pāṇini<sup>2</sup>, the root yaj expresses three senses of meaning, the first is devapūjā, i.e. glorification of the deities; the second is saṅgātikaraṇa, i.e. establishing a connection, between the men and the gods; and the third is dāna, i.e. offering of oblations to the gods. According to the Nirukta<sup>3</sup>, the word yajña comes from the root yāc, means to seek something or the yajus (yajurmantras) are closely connected with the yajña. Another word yāga also has the same meaning, worship in the form of offering oblations for the deities or gods. There are fifteen different names of the word yajña are mentioned in the Nighaṇṭu<sup>4</sup> viz., 1. yajña, 2. venah, 3. adhvaraḥ, 4. medhaḥ, 5. vidathaḥ, 6. nāryaḥ, 7. savanam, 8. hotrā, 9. iṣṭiḥ, 10. devatātā, 11. makhah, 12. viṣṇuḥ, 13. induḥ, 14. prajāpatiḥ, 15. dharmah.

In the various scriptures of the Vedic literature, the Vedic sacrifices are described in detail. Basically the Kalpavedāṅga is the main source work for the detail knowledge of sacrificial rites and duties. Though the Brahmaṇa texts of the

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Vedic literature mention the different yajñas, viz. Agniṣṭoma, Rājasūya, Mahāvratā etc. but the Kalpasūtra literatures, viz. Śrautasūtra, Ṛgḥyasūtra, Śulvasūtra and Dharmasūtra describe different yajñas in a systematic way to be performed by the people of four casts (caturvarṇas) in their four stages of life (caturāśramas). It is noticeable that the Ṛgḥyasūtras and the Dharmasūtras describe the household ceremonies of daily life, which can be performed by the householder (Gṛhastha) himself. From the ancient Vedic times, the five daily observances or sacrifices were prescribed as the Pañcamahāyajñas. The combination of five great sacrifices is called here the Pañcamahāyajñas.

## ABOUT THE PAÑCAMAHĀYAJÑAS

These five great sacrifices take a very important place in the Ṛgḥyasūtras and the Dharmasūtras. The Pañcamahāyajñas should be performed daily by every householder to the best of his capacity and ability, which bear significant role in the Indian cultural heritage. In the Pañcamahāyajñas, the householder is the chief agent and he does not need any help from other priests. The performance of these five great sacrifices is unavoidable and very simple sacrificial ceremony to be performed by a householder in his daily-life. These Pañcamahāyajñas are viz., Brahmajajña, Devayajña, Bhūtajajña, Pitryajña and Manuṣyajajña. The Brahmajajña is the sacrifice to the Brahman; the Devayajña is to the Gods; the Bhūtajajña, which means the sacrifice to the living beings; the Pitryajña, i.e. the sacrifice to the forefathers, and

lastly the Manuṣyayajña or Nryajña is the sacrifice to men. According to many ancient scholars, these five great sacrifices are not only important but also should be performed by a householder to be excluded himself from different types of sins<sup>5</sup>, viz. *cullī*, *peṣaṇa*, *upaskara*, *kaṇḍani* and *codakumbha*, i.e. the hearth, the grinding mill, broomstick, winnowing basket and similar mortar and pestle and water-jar. These five kinds of injury or death or sins are unconsciously and unknowingly caused by every householder in their daily activities. The sacrificial performance of the five great sacrifices is a part of the most important religious as well as moral duty of each householder, although in reality they consist only in small offerings and a few, simple ceremonies.

The Pañcamahāyajñas has been also discussed in the earlier Vedic literary works. It is well-known to all that the Sūtras are posterior to the Brāhmaṇas. The Brāhmaṇa texts mention a number of rites and sacrificial performances found in the later Gṛhyasūtras and Dharmasūtras. So, the Brāhmaṇa texts prove the existence of the Gṛhya rituals. The Gṛhyasūtras also refer to the views of the Brāhmaṇa texts on many Gṛhya rituals and religious duties to be performed by a householder. The Śatapathabrāhmaṇa<sup>6</sup> describes the rites of the Pañcamahāyajñas. The Brahmajajña, i.e. the daily study of Vedic texts is highly praised in this Śatapathabrāhmaṇa. The Taittirīyāranyaka<sup>7</sup> describes the five great sacrifices in detail (2.10). Although the references to the Pañcamahāyajñas are also traceable in the Samhitās<sup>8</sup> and Upaniṣads<sup>9</sup> also, but the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa and the Taittirīyāranyaka has depicted a clear description on these religious duties of Gṛhastha, the householder. The rites of the Pañcamahāyajñas are vividly described in the Gṛhyasūtras and Dharmasūtras. The Purāṇas also discuss about the five great sacrifices and the impacts of the Pañcamahāyajñas on it.

### THE BRAHMAYAJÑA

The sacrifice to the Brahman or the study and teaching of the Veda is simply referred to the Brahmajajña. This is one important sacrifice among the Pañcamahāyajñas, i.e. the five great sacrifices or the religious compulsory duties of a householder. The Brahmajajña is also known as the Svāddhyāya<sup>10</sup> or daily recitation of the Vedic texts according to the particular Vedic Śākhā of a householder. On account of other word, among these five, the Brahmajajña consists in the recitation of Vedic texts, i.e. Svāddhyāya. The Gṛhyasūtras and the Dharmasūtras give a detailed description about the recitation of Vedic texts. It is stated in the Gautamadharmasūtra that a person should daily study the Vedas, Nityasvāddhyāyaḥ.<sup>11</sup> The commentator Haradatta of the relevant text states that Gautama's import of the passage Nityasvāddhyāyaḥ is intended to mean that the householder should practice the Vedic texts at any time besides the performance of Brahmajajña also.

By performing Brahmajajña, a person gains purity of his mind and body too. The householders have to perform this duty of Vedic study through this Brahmajajña to develop their knowledge. Here, in this sacrifice the householders have to perform three Prāṇāyāmas<sup>12</sup>, i.e. the act of restraining the breath which is most important for the physical development. In present society also, the rules of Prāṇāyāmas are very popular both in the younger generation and the older generation. These exercises protect us from

various horrible diseases and make the brain strong for further development. Besides this, the study of the Veda was obligatory to all twice-born people. The daily recitation of the sacred texts had a direct bearing on the moral uplift of the people. Thus in simple word, we have come to know that this Brahmajajña is one's own daily study of the Veda.

### THE DEVAYAJÑA

Another one of the Pañcamahāyajñas is the Devayajña. This is a sacrifice to the Gods or Vaiśvadeva. The Devayajña should be performed by offering fuel-sticks into the Agni, i.e. fire. In every morning and evening the householder should offer the oblation with the words- 'agnaye svāhā; somaya svāhā; prajāpataye svāhā' etc. the food he offer may be consisted of curds or milk or rice-gruel etc.<sup>13</sup> The Śatapathabrāhmaṇa<sup>14</sup> states about the performance of this Mahāyajña. The Devatās to whom Homa<sup>15</sup> or Devayajña was offered are different according to different Gṛhyasūtras and Dharmasūtras. In the ancient Vedic age, Agriculture was their main occupation and they had to depend on the co-operation of the natural phenomena for their prosperity. They were afraid of the unexpected natural disasters which may damage their harvest. So, the householder offered oblations and invoked different deities for a healthy growth of the crops. The practice of Homa, i.e. offering the daily oblations to the gods has an important role in the maintenance of the world.

### THE BHŪTAYAJÑA

Among the five great daily sacrifices, the Bhūtayajña has also significantly importance in the ancient Indian tradition. This sacrifice consists in Bali<sup>16</sup> offerings to the all creatures or living beings. It is also known as Baliharāṇa<sup>17</sup>. Here, the householder offers Balis in particular places to particular deities and beings. The householder, at first, should have to clean the ground and then pour out water and put down Balis at the particular places.

In the Bhūtayajña, the householder should offer food to the house-deities, as well as to the creatures, like birds and animals etc. The directions to give food to the living beings are the outcome of the noble sentiment of Universal kindness and charity and the idea that one spirit of togetherness between all creatures in the Universe. It is also very important for a householder who has a very auspicious intention of serving the creatures should their surroundings. This sacrifice shows the kindness and moralities of human being to be helped in environmental stability.

### THE PITRYAJÑA

The sacrifice to the fathers or fore-fathers is called the Pitryajña. This is another important Mahāyajña among the five great sacrifices, i.e. Pañcamahāyajñas. Pitryajña means offering to the Pitṛs, the forefathers. Here, in this sacrifice the householder offers to the Manes or the forefathers with the words—'pitṛbhyo svadhā'<sup>18</sup> Āchārya Manu says that Pitryajña is Tarpana<sup>19</sup> that means the offering of libations of water to the Manes; but some other works say that it includes the offering of both food and water to the Manes.

Besides this, the Pitryajña also contains not only some social values, but some religious values also. The memory of the dead person is along cherished by his near relatives and therefore, they give away gifts and perform Śrāddha<sup>20</sup> for the departed soul. The performance of such rites is

conductive to the satisfaction of both the departed soul and the bereaved family. The word *Śrāddha* is derived from *Śraddhā*, i.e. respect, faith, purity etc. Without *Śraddhā* a person cannot fulfill *Śrāddha*, i.e. offering in funeral rites in honor of the departed relatives. Performing the *Pitṛyajña*, a householder indicates the respect and gratefulness to their ancestors.

### THE NṚYAJŅĀ

The *Nṛyajña* or *Atithiyajña* is the famous and very important sacrifice among the *Pañcamahāyajñas*. *Manuṣyayajña* is performed by honoring the guests, *Atithi*. The another name of the *Nṛyajña* is *Atithiyajña*.<sup>21</sup> It is enjoyed in the Vedic texts that, at first the householder should give food to beggars and guests and after that he may take food. This sacrifice has a great ethical value in the present society.

The *Nṛyajña* or *Manuṣyayajña* means the honoring of guests, i.e. hospitality. Hospitality has been highly extolled in the Vedic texts which contain copious details with regard to the manner of receiving, entertaining and seeing of a guest. The *Manuṣyayajña* enjoins many duties to the householder to receive the guests honor him in accordance with his age and request him to accept a seat. Thereby, the observance of hospitality is marked with the sterner side of the Vedic ethics. The motive of this injunction to honor guests was clear, viz. universal amiability. In this sacrifice, the *Atithi* takes an important role, who must be pleased by the householder. As an *Atithi* comes to home without any prior information, householders should expression of the interesting and provide the things he needed as well as service by heart. It brings the happiness and humility of a society. In present time, the *Atithiyajña* deals with a very vital role in the social-cultural aspect of human life. The Vedic traditional concept "*Atithi devo bhavaḥ*"<sup>22</sup> signifies the relevance of this sacrifice as well as the universal behavior of human mankind.

### SIGNIFICANCE

The *Pañcamahāyajñas* is an unavoidable compulsory *dharma* or duty of a householder. These five great sacrifices instituted in a very simple way with a few sacrificial offerings. Each sacrifice of the sacrifices of the *Pañcamahāyajñas* has the noteworthy benefits to the different aspects of a society. These five great sacrifices comprises the advancement of knowledge, purification of air and environment, respect and honor of the elders and the learned, protect and help to the birds, animals, services to hungry and distressed needy person etc. After the performance of these *Pañcamahāyajñas*, the performer householder feels the various, peaceful and happy life. Again, it brings the refinement of character, promotion of righteousness. The performance of the *Pañcamahāyajñas*, as the part of daily duties, would not only bring progress and improvement in the life of an individual but, it will also produce happiness in the society at large and the whole universe as well.

Each of the five sacrifices of the *Pañcamahāyajñas* has their own importance and no other can replace them. By chanting and discussing the Vedic mantras a householder performs the *Brahmayajña* and shows the reverence and gratitude to the Vedic thoughts as well as the *mantra* *draṣṭṛā* ṛṣis. It inducts the spiritual growth and acknowledgement attitude

to the divinity. The *Devayajña* implies the prayer or worship to the god *Agni*, the one visible god, and the deep aspirations for the welfare of himself and all aspects of the universe. The *Bhūtajajña* specifies a great service to the environment as well as the all creatures by providing the help in ecological balance and many other aspects of the nature. In this sacrifice one should offer or support to the beings whatever they needed. Again, the *Pitṛyajña* should perform every day by offering the water or *piṇḍa* to the forefathers as the respect and gratitude and convey the family teaching grounds to develop their thoughts. One who comes to a household without any previous information is called the *Atithi*. In the *Atithiyajña*, householder would service and help for the *Atithi* or man to feel them comfort and pleasure. To develop and promote the humanity as well as the brotherhood in a society, we should perform the *Nṛyajña* by distributing the food, cloth, water to the needy person or sharing the knowledge of righteousness to the common masses.

### CONCLUSION

The *Pañcamahāyajñas* or the five great sacrifices are unavoidable activities and constant everyday duties of a person in his *gr̥hasthāśrama*, the second stage of human life. The combinations of five individual sacrifices have their specific importance to the different aspects of humanity. As the institution of these sacrifices are performed in a simple procedure following some steps of offering and service. In the Vedic cultural tradition, these five great sacrifices lead the universal value of human mankind and the reformation of socio-cultural integrity. It conveys the happiness of mind, peace and spiritual prosperity of human lifeline. Again, these five sacrifices teach to show the gratefulness and to hold the unity among the natural phenomenon. The institutional acts of the five great sacrifices are nothing but social services. If we, the human being have the ability to provide in a direct way or indirect way for somebody's hope, peace of mind and faith for one's life, it is a social service as well as the social responsibility of every mankind to progress our thought culture. In present time also, the simple activities of these *Pañcamahāyajñas* have been practiced in daily life by the household people of different community for some extant. Hence, the relevance and impact of these five great sacrifices have conveyed the significance of ancient Vedic cultural heritage to the contemporary day today life of human race.

According to my own observation, the *Pañcamahāyajñas* are simply performed daily activity of a human being as the great creation of universe to show their concern and responsibility towards the different aspects of natural phenomenon followed the path of spiritual and moral value of lifeline. We with our limited intellect can only understand and experience things under the material world, but being a *pramāna sāstra*, the *Vedas* go beyond what we can see and experience. Thus, a great influence and relevance of the Vedic cultural and traditional heritage encourage us to continue and hold for the expansion of a society. Here, it is a humble attempt to this interesting topic of the *Pañcamahāyajña*, and significantly referred the each five sacrifices. There are more points noticed to be searched and studied in this topic for the improvement of our human morality as well as social-religious value-education of present society.



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- [1] cf., *Śabda-Kalpadruma*
- [2] cf., *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, 3.3.90
- [3] yajñāḥ kasmāt? prakhyātaṃ yajati karmeti nairuktāḥ/ yācñyo bhvatīti vā/ yajurbhirunno bhvatīti vā/ bahukṛṣṇājinaityopamanyavaḥ/ yajūmṣyenam nayantīti// *Nirukta*, 3.19
- [4] cf., *Nighaṇṭu*, 3.17
- [5] pañcasūnā cullī peṣaṇyupaskaraḥ/ kaṇḍanī codakumbhaśca vadyate yāstu vāhayet // *Manusmṛti*, 3.68
- [6] pañcaiva mahāyajñāḥ / tānyeva mahāsatrāṇi bhūtayajño manuṣyayajñāḥ pitryajño devayajño brahmayajña iti // *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 11.5.6.1
- [7] pañca vā ete mahāyajñāḥ satati pratāyante satati samtiṣṭante devayajñāḥ pitryajño bhūtayajño manuṣyayajño brahmayajña iti // *Taittirīyāranyaka*, II.10
- [8] svadhā stha tarpayata me pitṛn// *Śuklayajurvedasamhitā*, 2.34
- [9] cf., *Aitareyopaniṣad*, 4.1 , a note prepared by Swami Sarvananda (ed.)
- [10] svādhyāyo vai brahmayajñāḥ // *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 11.5.6.3
- [11] brahmayajñastu nityasvādhyāyaḥ // *Gautamadharmasūtra*, 1.5.4
- [12] apāne juhvati prāṇam prāṇe' pānam tathāpare/ prāṇāpānagatī ruddhvā prāṇāyāmaparāyaṇāḥ// *Bhagavadgītā*, 4.29
- [13] cf., the *Śabdakalpadruma* stats about the devayajña in the meaning of the word *homa*.
- [14] aharahaḥ svāhākuryādā kāṣṭhātathaitam devayajñam samāpnoti // *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 11.5.6
- [15] i) cf., *Amarakośa*, 2.7.14  
ii) as quoted from Apte, Vaman Shivaram, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* meaning of the word Homa-offering oblations to gods by throwing ghee into the consecrated fire, (one of the five daily yajñas, to be performed by a brāhmaṇa, called Devayajña q.v.); Iṣṭiyāgaḥ/ sa evāsecanādhiko homaḥ// SB. on MS., 6.8.7
- [16] i) cf., *Amarakośa*, 2.7.14  
ii) *Manusmṛti*, 3.81,91
- [17] aharaharbhūebhyo balim haret / tathaitam bhūtayajñam samāpnoti // *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 11.5.6.2
- [18] svadhākuryādodapātrāttathaitam pitryajñam samāpnoti // *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 11.5.6.2
- [19] pitryajñastu tarpaṇam // *Manusmṛti*, 3.70
- [20] i) The word *śrāddha* comes from the word *śraddhā* with the affix *aṇ*// *Amarakośa*, 5.1.110  
ii) cf., the *Vācaspatyam* stats that, “śraddhayā dīyate yasmāt śrāddham tena nigadyate” ityukte pitrādibhyaḥ śraddhayādepe//
- [21] aharahardadhādodapātrāttathaitam manuṣayajñam samāpnoti // *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 11.5.6.2
- [22] *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, *Shikshavalli*, I.11.2

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