

SUMMARY

The oldest attested form of Hinduism is the Vedic religion – the Aryan tradition, which appeared on the Indian Subcontinent in the mid-second millennium BC. Beliefs and practices of this period varied significantly. Knowledge about them has survived to our times in religious texts (the Vedas), as well as in the religious practice of some Brahmins groups in India up to now. In the heart of the Aryan religious world there was a sacrificial ritual, accompanied in the early period by the consumption of unidentified so far hallucinogen called/known as – Soma. Among the religious practices of the Aryans there was a simple sacrificial ritual of pouring milk into the fire twice a day: at dawn and dusk followed by reciting the appropriate formulas (mantras), that transformed into a ritual called agnihotra. Over the centuries, the ritual system has become extremely extensive, and intellectual efforts to interpret it (through analogies, etymologies, myths, etc.) were aimed at creating a coherent vision of the world that would explain, on the basis of ritual dependencies, the structure and principles of reality at both levels of macro- and microcosmos. In Vedic texts, agnihotra is often considered a “model ritual”, the starting point for the entire sacrificial system.

The purpose of the research is to describe the religiosity of the Vedic period by reconstructing how the fire sacrifice (agnihotra) and its functions were understood in various texts (divers layers of Vedic literature), and to analyse several factors (psychological, social and environmental) that affected the changes in interpretation of this ritual. The reason for the focusing on this topic is the relatively small amount of religious studies that take into account the well-attested and remarkably rich Vedic tradition as a source enriching our understanding of the universal phenomenon of religion (particularly issues of sacrificial ritual).

The project will include research on the agnihotra’s sacrificial ritual’s perception and understanding in two early stages of the Vedic religion, expressed in the following groups of texts:

- Collections of the hymns and sacrificial formulas (the Sanhitas),
- Exegetical texts (the Brahmanas),
- Contemplative and speculative texts (the Aranyakas and the Upanishads).

These studies will be based not only on the classical philology and text analysis, but also the theoretical and methodological framework of cognitive science. This research can explain how a simple sacrificial ritual is – according to the texts - used for expressing worldview, interpreting the world and the place that man occupies in it. In Vedic thought, sacrificial ritual is understood not only as a "model of the world" reflecting the process of its creation, but also "a model for the world". This second function is based on the belief, that performing the ritual directly affects the functioning of the world.

The study of Vedic religiosity may extend our general knowledge of the common Indo-European tradition. It also may provide fundamental data indispensable to understand a phenomenon of sacrificial ritual based on universal mental processes responsible for magical and mythical thinking.