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## **Ritual, Masks, and Sacrifice**

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### **Introduction**

Ritual is intimately connected with the mask, either in the wearing that hides the true face, or in the adoption of a public face. The mask makes the disengagement from ordinary time and the connection to the ancient and repetitive, which is the heart of ritual, psychologically acceptable. Together, ritual and mask facilitate the apprehension of identity and its connections with paradox by placing the mystery of change outside of life's ordinary reasonableness into the domain of magic and power. This change and transformation is enacted by the sacrifice of the ritual.

The question of transformation is also related to cognitive categories, sexual identity, and violence. There is not only aggression and violence in Nature (as in the *matsyanyaya* of big fish eating the smaller fish), but also within the human soul. It is in the human nature to own and command, and this sets up a struggle with other individuals. Rousseau's idea that man is fundamentally good as in his famous slogan "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains", led to the naïve view that violence is a consequence of social ills alone. But society only embodies that already exists as potential in each individual, and violence is a fundamental impulse of life. Hobbes and Sade represent ancient psychological views more accurately than Locke, Rousseau, or contemporary liberals.

Ritual recreates the universe in a symbolic mirroring whose structure depends on the cosmology underlying the culture. It helps shift perspective from the outer to the inner. Reconciliation to loss may be easier if one acknowledges that subjective *facts* are constructions of the mind. The creation of internal reality by the mind is confirmed by the consideration of altered states of consciousness. It is for these reasons that masks help one to confront the questions of identity and personhood.

Visions of the end of the world flavour the grammar for much ritual and sacrifice. There exist two main views, centered about permanence and change, respectively. In the first, the end leads to the resurrection of the body; in the second, the spirit goes through cycles of change. Conflicting body-centric visions of the end of the world are at the root of the ongoing war in the Middle East. The vision of a permanent body maps to a word-centric tradition, whereas those who consider change as part of natural law use images, since the image is a snapshot of a dynamic sequence.

Sacrifice, as recreation of the order in the universe, can be of two kinds: either literal, in a mirroring of the idea of a permanent life after death; or symbolic, where it is sacred theatre to represent the larger *play of the gods* in the universe. Sacrifice and killings continue as part of human society and one can see it most clearly in the relationship between man and animals.

In this essay, I consider themes related to ritual, masks, and sacrifice to illuminate aspects of culture in the past and in our own times. This consideration includes the contemporary treatment of animals, the traditional victims of sacrifice.

### **Person and Mask in the West**

In Rome, the term *persona* applied to individuals who had full citizenship, determined by membership of recognized descent lines or lineages. Such families had to demonstrate possession of *simulacra* and *imagines*, which were death-masks of the ancestors, cast in wax, though in a wider sense they were also the ghosts of the dead. As representations of ancestral faces, the *simulacra* and *imagines* were kept in the *lararium*, the family shrine in cupboards or hung from the wall. It was in their watchful presence that initiation ceremonies of the youth were performed. At funerals, the masks were worn by professional actors who publicly performed the deeds of their lives. Sometimes ancestral *imagines* were hung at the four corners of the funeral bier. The *persona* therefore represented the individual who could validate his social identity through the lineage, and this contained in it ideas such as that of reincarnation and serial succession.

Masks were used by actors for dramatic effect to convey danger, mystery, and to facilitate the sense of transformation in the viewer's mind. The actor could take the persona of gods, demons, or of animals. It also made it possible to show killing in symbolic terms, with great power.

With the rise of Christianity, its underlying duality brought the notion of *possession* to the fore. In addition to the good people who waited patiently for the Day of Judgment to enjoy their everlasting life, bad people became *larvae*, who could return to possess and torment living people. In 643, there is declaration by the King of the Lombards that killing witches was justified. The term *masca* became synonymous with witches. Before this, the Church Councils had already condemned the practice of masking, especially as *cervuli* (horned animals) and *vetulae* (old women). Masking represented the power of alteration of identity, which was especially reprehensible if it transformed into animals or women. Cesare Poppi summarizes:<sup>1</sup> “The Middle Ages believed in miracles, but only in those transformations of the order imposed by God on Creation that could be related, one way or another, to that original *transformatio* that was the Eucharist, i.e. the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. The rest, any other ‘masking’ of the divine imprint on Creation, was diabolical. And not only the Devil was himself ‘a mutant’, but he was a mask, a false appearance in need of constant re-masking due to the as many exposures he had to undergo. In this respect, he was *the non-identical*, *the confounder*, *the Great Liar* – and he lied first of all about himself and his appearance.”

The agency within, if it was in conflict with the plan of the Church, became a sign of the devil. Consequently, art and sciences suffered serious circumscription and Europe was plunged into the Dark Age. According to David Napier:<sup>2</sup> “[W]hat distinguished medieval visual representations was the conviction that all ambiguous personifications save the Trinity were both morally unacceptable and categorically harmful... For Christians, an all-knowing god cannot be moved by mimesis; transformation through visual performance and supernatural omniscience must remain antithetical. For the Middle Ages, the body itself became a persona---a mask that its wearer only escaped at death.”

With the breakdown of materialism as the basis of science and the rediscovery of the inner world of the mind, the modern man's sensibility has become receptive to ancient artistic expression, making ritual more accessible. But this increased accessibility has not always been accompanied by greater understanding, which explains the ambivalence towards it on the one hand and the passionate embrace of the irrational on the other. From this perspective we find that the current religious strife is not unrelated to the attitudes springing out of the paradoxical in science.

### **Sex, Violence, and Art**

First time visitors to America can't fail to be struck by the prominence that sex and violence have in the arts, the media, and popular culture. Some see in this signs of decadence; others view it as birth pangs of a new, more humane culture of knowledge, the necessary evil that heralds a new golden age.

A myth popularized by modern-day utopians is that if only oppressive, paternalistic institutions were dismantled, an ideal and perfect society would be created. The left holds capitalistic organizations responsible not only for social ills but even decadence and violence. The establishment feminists believe that if the young were to be properly raised, all problems related to gender will be eliminated. The reduction of the power of paternalistic institutions is seen behind the advancement of the previous century toward equal rights for women, spread of education, and reduction of poverty and hunger. Other advancements adduced are the freeing of women from ‘male-encouraged’ practices such as binding of feet (China), wearing of corsets (West), and the veil.

But the progress that has occurred is not only a result of cultural change, but also of industrial revolution. Machines at home freed up women to work in the marketplace. In the service industry, women could work as equal to men, empowering them in the process. But women may have been freed from corsets, only now they wear five-inch high stiletto heels.

Acknowledging violence as a part of the human condition helps a culture to devise ways to confine it to the theatre of the mind. Ignoring the individual's propensity for violence we run the risk of continuing the mistakes that made the last century one of the most bloody in history.

In rich societies, violence has taken new forms. There are massacres by schoolboys, violence to oneself through drugs and self-mutilation, even cannibalism. At colleges, young people pierce their tongues, eyebrows and other organs, not because paternalistic institutions demand it but because it is 'cool' to do so. Then there is violence arising out of despair, greed, and envy.

More traditional societies have their own gallery of horrors. Consider the terror of the last decade in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Balkans, Rwanda, and Algeria, where throats have been slashed, people burnt to death, and women raped on a wide scale. Entire communities have been massacred.

Violence arises out ignorance, by a misidentification with the animal self within. Nature transcends the dichotomy of good and evil. Beauty softens the horror of this, taking our minds into a land of imagination. Beauty, Schopenhauer said, is the "cheap glitter" that conceals the horror. Art, as representation of beauty, intimates transcendence beyond the humdrum.

Modern life alienates us from Nature, even our own. Culture is a structure that keeps the animal instincts of man at bay, by appealing to reason and higher meaning. But modern education does not prepare the young to understand differences in gender and culture. Biological cycles confirm the primacy of Nature over self. The menstruation cycle, in accord with the motions of the moon, is the most dramatic example of this, but there are other cycles too. We are tossed about by forces within us over which we have very little control. Since the woman gives birth, the primacy of Nature was celebrated in the ancient world through the symbol of the Goddess.

Greek plays were staged to celebrate and honour Dionysus, who symbolizes the fearful powers of the mind, the individual and his freedom. In contrast is Apollo, representing order, form, clarity and civilization. On its own, the Dionysian is too chaotic and disorganized, and the Apollonian sterile. According to Nietzsche, it was the Dionysian energy, modified and qualified by the Apollonian sense of form which produced tragedy, and was furthermore the driving force behind Greek civilization.

If Apollo was the god of the plastic arts, Dionysus was the patron of music and dance. The gradual disciplining of the irrational was to result in the highest standards of art. Each needed the other for progress. When the Apollonian gained the upper hand, decline set in, leading to a progressive weakening of the springs of creativity, to decadence, and shallow rationalism. A similar process is occurring in modern western culture, as the one-sided rationalism of the enlightenment has culminated in such shallow schemes as utilitarianism, with its bland disregard of the instinctual basis of life.

Tragedy, conceding all the pain and frustration of life emphasized by the pessimists, involves the affirmation of life in its most difficult problems, and is the mark of exuberant vitality, whereas conventional optimism is shallow and sterile.

Those who accept the primacy and mystery of Nature are Dionysians, others for whom law and moral order are central are the Apollonians. These are complementary views after the Greek gods Dionysus and Apollo, who are akin to Shiva and Vishnu. This complementarity was recognized by the Greeks who came to India with Alexander, and it is explicitly recognized in the conception of Harihara, a fusing of Visnu and Siva. The further complementarities of the God and the Goddess is through the idea of the God's consort and divinity that is half-male, half-female, *Ardhanarishvara*. The God provides the framework for moral order, whereas the Goddess provides the inspiration that makes transformation possible. In a recursive playing out of structure, within each sect there are the right-hand and left-hand ways.

Divinity in the pagan world is hierarchical. The gods stand above the titans, and the *devas* above the *asuras*. The world of Apollo is a projection of the mysteries of Dionysus. Reality is the dance of Shiva on the cosmic body of Vishnu; this dance is produced by the power of *maya*.

The pagans of the West also understood this complementarity, but with the defeat of Old Religions in Europe, Egypt, and the Near East began a rejection of Nature and of the Goddess as a symbol of Nature. Society went from a glorification of now and here to that of hereafter and death, from a glorification of knowledge to the idea of everlasting life in paradise.

Religious beliefs can be put in three classes: (1) Vedic or pagan, where the complementarities of Apollo and Dionysus is understood; (2) Sky religions, which decry earth and the Goddess, where ultimate meaning is to be found in paradise after death; (3) Earth religions, where there is no moral counterbalance of Nature. The Vedic and pagan religions give weight both to the aesthetic of the word and the eye, the Sky religions value just the word, and the Earth religions worship the image alone. It is the interplay between these religions and aesthetics that leads to the development of art in different styles. It will also be clear that great religions have many diverse currents.

Camille Paglia equates classical antiquity with the visual aesthetic which she calls paganism. During the Middle Ages in Europe (Dark Ages) when strict Christianity ruled, images were outlawed in favour of the word. Slowly Catholicism, with its own florid images, became increasingly pagan. Protestantism was a reaction to Catholicism, an attempt to return to the primacy of the word. Modernity is the swing back to paganism and its visual mode. By now Judaism and Christianity have come to terms with images.

The history of Western art, literature, and popular culture may be viewed as a struggle between the two poles of word image. Paglia says:<sup>3</sup> “The most ancient conflict in western culture, between Jew and Egyptian, continues today: Hebrew word-worship versus pagan imagism, the great unseen versus the glorified thing.”

In word-cultures Nature is the other, to be controlled and exploited. This is mirrored in a subordination of women, a rejection of graphic and representational art, and a rejection of mythology. In societies where the aesthetic of the word is taken to an extreme, women

are completely segregated and even relatives may be 'killed for honour'; there is a rejection of words outside of the sacred circle and, consequently, a rejection of history of other circles.

Religious war is a war between two different aesthetics. The Mughal emperor Jahangir in his *Jahangirnama* calls<sup>4</sup> "Vedanta the science of Sufism", yet he has no compunction in destroying the image of the Varaha in the important pilgrimage centre at Pushkar<sup>5</sup> to show his disapproval of that artistic representation of divinity.

Paglia summarizes<sup>6</sup>, "Paganism is pictorialism plus the will-to-power. It is ritualism, grandiosity, colossalism, sensationalism. All theater is pagan showiness, the brazen pomp of sexual personae. Judaism's campaign to make divinity invisible has never fully succeeded. Images are always eluding moral control, creating the brilliant western art tradition. Idolatry is fascism of the eye. The western eye will be served, with or without the consent of conscience. Images are archaic projection, earlier than words and morals. Greco-Roman personality is itself a visual image, shapely and concrete. The sexual and psychological deficiencies of Judeo-Christianity have become blatant in our own time. Popular culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flow. It is our imperial sex theater, supreme temple of the western eye. We live in the age of idols. The pagan past, never dead, flames again in our mystic hierarchies of stardom."

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan may have been the last stand of the word-only idea that rejected all images. In the pursuit of its goal, it was compelled to ban TV and destroy the images of the Buddha in Bamiyan. Other Islamic countries, like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, have been unable to stop the assault of the eye-aesthetic through books, magazines, TV and the Internet. They may not acknowledge it, but they are becoming increasingly pagan in the sense of imagism.

### **Ritual and Paradox in India**

Indian ritual also involves a specialized vocabulary with layers of meaning and a deliberate use of paradox. Here words serve as masks. Vedic texts are replete with paradoxical images for the communication of a transcendent understanding. We see the continuation of such usage in the poetry of the medieval saints of India, where this language was called *sandhya-bhasa*.

The earliest Indian rock art that predates the Harappan civilization has figures wearing masks. Terracota masks have been found in Harappa; these include a goat mask. In the *Natya Sastra*, coloured paste (*mukharaga*) was applied by the actor on the face to communicate the emotion and identity required for the performance. Identity had a social component, which is why it was defined by the reaction it evoked. This set it partly as a choice made by the individual within the circumstances of his social situation. Identity also had a temporal component related to the continuing changes within. These changes, if deliberate, were termed sacrifice, and they were set in terms of various grand stages of life, and also smaller stages represented by various *samskaras*.

The term *sacrifice*, with its common meaning of “killing to offer to God or gods”, is cause of much misunderstanding of the Vedic ritual. Vedic *yajna* (sacrifice) need not involve any killing of animals. It is a highly symbolic performance, and the animals of the sacrifice may be clay images or grains; or they may just be specific utterances. The Chandogya Upanisad, speaking of Revati Samans says, “The *hinkara* is goats, the *prastava* sheep, the *udgitha* cows, the *pratihara* horses, and the *nidhana purusa*” (CU 2.6.1; 2.18.1). In other words, the different parts of the song are compared to different sacrificial animals.

When an animal is sacrificed in the ritual, we are speaking of mock killing in sacred theatre. The word “killing” is described in the texts to apply equally to the pressing of the soma stalks and the grinding of the grain (TS 6.6.9.2, SB 2.2.2.1-2, 4.3.4.1-2, 11.1.2.1). The normative meaning of the term is symbolic. I recently analyzed<sup>7</sup> the basis of Asvamedha ritual for its theological, psychological and astronomical basis.

The Vedic view acknowledges that all creation is interdependent. Just as the self (atman) is mystically equivalent to the universe (Brahman), the body has within it all creatures. Of the principal animals conceived within the body, the horse represents time. The horse-sacrifice is then the most mystical and powerful, because it touches upon the mystery of time, which carries within it the secret of immortality.

The sacrifice of the animals is the enactment of the killing of the mortal lower self for a transformation into the immortal higher self. Since the higher self cannot manifest itself without the lower one, one must settle for something less, a ritual rebirth of the individual. In other words, sacrifice deals with mastery of time.

There have been several modern scholarly studies of the concept of sacrifice. According to one view, sacrifice provides a means to the community to redirect feelings of violence and aggression, saving it from collapse. Sacrifice is then a social construct of great use, and it has elements of competition and gift-giving woven into it. The victim is both outcast and saviour, and being separate from others, the king is often the ideal (but not real) victim. This may explain elements of sacrifice in many societies, but it does not explain Vedic sacrifice.

The distinctiveness of Vedic sacrifice comes from many reasons of which the following two are the main ones: (i) Its ambiguities are deep, and it operates at several levels, including the spiritual; and more uniquely, (ii) it posits an identity of the sacrificer and the universe. This latter idea is perhaps why the “knowledge” central to the sacrifice becomes, in the end, the purpose of the sacrifice and the vehicle of the transformation of the participants. The “theatre” aspect of the ritual is, therefore, considerably accentuated.

### **Sacrifice and Sacred Theatre**

The central idea behind the Vedic system is the notion of *bandhu* (bindings or connections) between the astronomical, the terrestrial, the physiological, and the spiritual<sup>8</sup>. These connections are described in terms of number of characteristics, such as

the 360 bones of the infant (which later fuse into the 206 bones of the adult) and the 360 days of the year. In a similar vein, the Garbha Upanisad says that the body has 180 sutures, 900 sinews. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad takes the number of *nadis* to be 72,000. All these numbers are related to 360, the nominal day count of the year.

Another central Vedic number is 108. Its astronomical basis is that the sun and the moon are approximately 108 times their respective diameters away from the earth. Furthermore, the diameter of the sun is approximately 108 times the diameter of the earth. The number 108 is also taken to represent the 'distance' from the body of the devotee to the Isvara within. The chain of 108 'links' is held together by 107 joints, which is the number of *marmas*, or weak spots, of the body in Ayurveda. . The Natya Sastra speaks of the 108 *karanas* -- combined movements of hand and feet -- of dance.

We can understand that the 108 beads of the rosary (*japamala*) must map the steps between the body and the inner sun. The devotee, while saying beads, is making a symbolic journey from the physical body to the heavens or getting a measure of Isvara through his own self. This explains the tradition of the 108 names of divinity. The number 108 appears in many other settings in the tradition, including temple architecture.

One can see a plausible basis behind the equivalences between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Modern research has shown that all life comes with its inner clocks. Living organisms have rhythms that are matched to the periods of the Sun or the Moon. There are quite precise biological clocks of 24-hour (according to the day), 24 hour 50 minutes (according to the lunar day since the Moon rises roughly 50 minutes later every day) or its half representing the tides, 29.5 days (the period from one new Moon to the next), and the year. Monthly rhythms, averaging 29.5 days, are reflected in the reproductive cycles of many marine plants and those of animals. The menstrual period is a synodic month and the average duration of pregnancy is nine synodic months.

It is reasonable to assume that the Vedic thinkers were aware of these connections, as were the ancient people in other cultures. The uniqueness of the Vedic vision was the extension of the bindings to the body to those in the inner landscape of the spirit.

The Vedic rites were meant to help the participant transform themselves through sacrifice. The rishis saw the universe as going through unceasing change in a cycle of birth and death, potentially free yet, paradoxically, governed by order. This order was reflected in the *bandhu* between the planets, the elements of the body, and the mind. At the deepest level, the whole universe was bound to, and reflected in, the individual consciousness.

Vedic ritual is a highly systematized performance of various elements that include manipulations, formulas, liturgy, exchanges, where some of these elements are varied according to the specific rite. These elements have symbolic significance. The basic pattern is that of the preparation or offering of one or more cakes or bowls of porridge.

The place of sacrifice represents the cosmos. Three fires are used, which stand for the three divisions of space. The course of the sacrifice represents the year, and all such ritual

forms part of continuing annual performances. The rite culminates in the ritual rebirth of the *yajamana*, which signifies the regeneration of his universe. It is sacred theatre, built upon paradoxes of reality, where symbolic deaths of animals and humans, including the *yajamana* himself, may be enacted.

The mystery of the sacrifice, with its suspension between life and death, reality and magic, logic and mystical experience is communicated in a language which is full of riddles. For example, it is stated that Prajapati is Agni's father, but he is also Agni's son (SB 6.1.2.26); also, the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice with the sacrifice (RV 1.164.50).

The sacrifice is not the drama associated with it, but rather the transformation accruing from it. Says Kena Upanisad 2.3: "He by whom Brahman is not known, knows it; he by whom it is known, knows it not. It is not known by those who know it; it is known by those who do not know it."

Vedic ritual is also related to the ongoing struggle between the devas and the asuras, where the devas represent the higher cognitive centers in man, and the asuras represent the lower centers that are associated with the body. Viewed as independent agents, the asuras are materialists, content with the identity of the body with their self; this is described aptly in the dialogue between Prajapati, Virocana, and Indra (CU 8.7-14). The devas need to subdue the asuras to establish order. The asuras are older because the body comes first; the devas are the younger descendents of Prajapati (BU 1.3.1).

The prototypical sacrifice is that of Vrtra, who represents the covering that separates the individual self from the inner Sun (SB 1.1.3.4). Indra, as the deity of the atmosphere, must make this sacrifice. Indra kills Vrtra by the offering of a cake (SB 5.2.3.7).

We must be cautious and not read the descriptions of ritual literally. The ritual books have enough warnings about the paradoxical aspects of the performance.

Sacrifice allows the participant to bridge the divide of the body and the spirit and be transformed. But to the outsider the performance can be viewed in *asuric* terms, or correctly (*daivika*). The *asuric* reading is literal; the correct one transcends simple dichotomies.

This is stressed most clearly in the Isa Upanisad. One is enjoined not to consider either the material or the abstract spiritual reading the correct reading. Ritual requires performance and that is the material or the avidya part of it, but that, in turn, becomes the ground for the transcendent meaning: "He who knows at the same time both the spirit (*sambhuti*) and the destruction (*vinasa*), overcomes death by destruction and obtains immortality through the spirit." (IU 14)

Unfortunately, to a beginner trying to understand the Vedic system, the *asuric* position appears most natural. This is responsible for much misunderstanding of Vedic rites and their meaning in the West.

## **Sacrifice and Massacre Societies**

We shift our focus from India to the New World where the paradigm is that of permanence. With the fear of dying behind notions of bodily ascension to paradise, the blood sacrifice is a grand gesture to impress upon the Unknown to fulfill wishes. In a study of the conquest of America by Spaniards, Tzvetan Todorov felt the need to postulate two kinds of society<sup>9</sup>. Noting the allegation that 80,400 persons were sacrificed in Mexico by King Ahuitzotl during the inauguration of a single temple, and that there was widespread genocide of the native Indians so that in Mexico their population is estimated to have gone down in the century after the arrival of the Spaniards from 25 million to one million, Todorov called them sacrifice-society (Mexicans) and massacre-society (Spaniards).

The identity of the victim of religious murder in a sacrifice-society is determined by strict rules. He is not too alien, and he speaks the same language but, politically and socially, he is part of an autonomous group. His sacrifice testifies to the inferiority of his clan or religious belief. In Europe, the killing at the stakes by the Inquisition was sacrifice.

On the other hand, massacre is linked to alien individuals far from one's country. The individual identity of the victims does not matter. The victims are treated as less than human. Indeed, the Indians in the New World were not given legal human status by the Pope until 1530. The massacres are dissimulated and denied. Wars of colonialism, away from the metropolitan country, are wars of massacre.

Todorov also spoke of the modern totalitarian state that has elements of both sacrifice and massacre. Here, the killing is done on the home ground, but there is no ritual associated with it. There is no vision of everlasting life in heavenly paradise; rather, a vision of a paradise on earth where the facilitators of the regime will be forever remembered. The Nazi and the Communist regimes belong to this category.

## **Man and Beast**

I shift to the question of the relationship between man and beast –the traditional victim of sacrifice -- in modern society, and I will do this by means of an impressionistic account of a visit to a high-security prison rodeo in Louisiana. It was organized as a fundraiser for prisoners so that they could continue to ride horses and run their workshops. The prison itself is situated on high ground and the prison property is so large that you can see the skies to the horizon in all four directions.

After entering the main gate the road slopes gently upwards for miles, as if this were the navel of the earth. The vastness of the grounds, very little tree cover, high watchtowers and a razor-topped wire fence around must make the inmates feel that they are at the end of the world.

We didn't get to see the actual accommodations of the inmates, but from the documentaries I have seen on such facilities, it is clear that the idea is to cage them and

compel the beast in them to submit to the stronger will of society. The reward for good behaviour is permission to work in the workshops.

Some may not like the characterization of the beast within, but I believe that not only the criminal but the rest of us also have an animal lurking within who is kept in check by fear of retribution and the civilizing force of culture and habit. The rate of incarceration is different from nation to nation and it seems to set the tone for civil behaviour. Currently, there are about 800 prisoners per 100,000 people in America and about 35 per 100,000 in India.

The notion of the animal within is acknowledged in Indian thought in the idea of the *asuras* who precede the gods. The *asuras* take the body to be everything, whereas the gods seek higher meaning. Without culture and self-discipline, we are *pasu* (animals). When our habits (*pasa*) that bind us down to our animal nature are broken, we become truly human (*pasupati*).

To come back to the rodeo, the stands were packed with visitors from far and wide. One section was separated by a chain link fence from the others; this is where the prisoner-spectators sat. Other prisoners in striped shirt uniforms were helping in the supervision of the show, some others were participants in the rodeo competitions for pride and good points.

There were stalls where one could buy handicrafts including leatherwork, clocks, and woodwork made by the prisoners. Food and drink stalls sold hot-dogs, hamburgers, funnel-cakes, cotton candy, ice cream and other treats to entice young and old. It felt somewhat like a village fair, but not quite so.

The difference was perhaps the nature of the contests -- the rough rides, and the riders being thrown, trampled upon, and gored. In one contest, four 'poker players' sat a table in the arena and a frightened bull was let loose, the victor being the person who moved last. The bull was goaded to attack the players and he tossed the players, one by one, several feet into the air with his horns. There was something in the air reminiscent of the contests of ancient Rome.

Many participants were limping or walked stiffly, a few were carried away in stretchers. Some, in spite of obvious injuries, kept on returning, driven by jailhouse bravado. The rodeo is one of the few places in modern living where we see animals and men interact on somewhat of an equal basis. The zoo does not achieve this because of the asymmetry of its situation. These apart, the modern man knows animals from TV shows or as pets, or from their packaged body parts in grocery stores.

Jeffrey Masson has reviewed<sup>10</sup> scientific research that shows that animals in the wild or in captivity experience emotions of love and anger, suffering and loneliness, jealousy and disappointment. Animals are curious, they worry, they hate, and they anticipate happiness. I have personally seen a bull separated from its long-time companion shed big tears in obvious grief.

If we don't interact with animals, how would we know if there is an ethical way of treating them? Granted that all life is part of a food chain; don't we still need to ensure that there is no unnecessary cruelty and violence in our interactions with them?

I am not one to argue for absolute non-violence as even farming requires the killing of worms and pests. Nor am I arguing for vegetarianism. (As an aside, a case for vegetarianism could be made based on production efficiency and on compassion for life. But not everyone has the same sensibility and, therefore, there should be no compulsion in dietary matters.)

One could base the treatment of animals on the principle that each species should be allowed to live in conditions as natural as possible. It is only in such conditions that we could hope for the animal to realize its biological purpose. There may be important lessons to be learnt about nature of mind, behaviour, and biology that could be invaluable to man's own survival. Being compassionate to animals is not entirely altruistic. On the other hand, treating animals with cruelty not only dulls our own sensibility but may also lead to dangerous diseases. Giving cows feed made out of dead cows led to the incurable mad-cow disease.

Until recently, man and animal lived in some kind of equilibrium. Everyone saw death, either of one's own kind, or of animals in ritual slaughter and in hunting. The mechanization of raising and killing animals has destroyed this equilibrium.

Animals are raised in factories, in most unnatural conditions. Their diet is unnatural. Beef cattle in the United States are raised at feedlots after they have turned six months old. Here, in further eight months, they are fattened to over twelve hundred pounds and then slaughtered.

The feedlots are like enormous cities of cattle with tens of thousands of residents. They are taken off hay and grasses, and fed corn, antibiotics, steroids, and vitamins (which may be animal in origin). The sanitation is shocking. The animals wallow in their own refuse and a cloud of fecal dust hangs around. The digestive system of the animals is not suited to the corn feed and it leads to several diseases which are kept suppressed by the steady feed of antibiotics. American houses and cities might be clean but where the animals are grown is horribly unclean.

Similar animal factories are being used to raise chicken, pigs, catfish where these animals hardly ever move once they are born, because of the crowding. Peter Singer in his *Animal Liberation*<sup>11</sup> argues that those who oppose human suffering must also oppose inflicting pain on animals. But animals in military, scientific, and commercial enterprises are often put through unnecessary pain.

The treatment of beef cattle in meat factories is ethically indefensible and it has arisen out of a system of subsidized corn production and relentless and mindless pursuit of profit.

It has been calculated that to fatten a steer in eight months of stay at a feedlot requires corn grown with the help of fertilizer made out of about 280 gallons of oil. Since oil is extremely cheap in the US compared to Russia and Argentina, the meat produced in those countries cannot compete in price. Fossil fuel based agriculture in the US may have contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the continuing crisis in Argentina. Singer tells us that during pregnancies sows are confined in stalls that do not permit them to turn around and walk to and fro. The veal calf will spend its whole life constrained to a pen so its anemic muscles will remain tender when butchered. This calf is not even provided enough space to lie down.

The workings of American meat factories warn us of a new danger of globalization. Logic of efficiency taken to extreme limits without regard to humaneness and compassion will create conditions that deaden the soul.

## Conclusions

The study of the cognitive categories of the past has lessons for the understanding of the present. The more we have been changed by science and technology, the more we have remained the same. Our ancestors grappled with the paradox of reality in two different ways: either by postulating a permanent self that made the consideration of images and masks illegal or dangerous, or by the consideration of a self that is forever going through the process of change. They knew these two sides represent complementary aspects of reality.

Modern societies may have largely abandoned old ritual. The new ritual that has taken its place is not organized by the priesthood of a religion; it is amorphous and ever-changing, disseminated through movies and music. Its Dionysian elements are provided by alcohol and drug parties; its Apollonian elements are the framework of the life ethic and the new movies that launch myths and stars. The violence going on in the wars being fought at numerous places around the globe offers the sacrifice and massacres of the blood offerings.

The new masks of the times are the airbrushed faces of the models on TV and billboards. These images present a constructed reality that is now the standard that people in real life try to emulate. The ritual of ordinary life is to conform to the rhythms of the machines around and engagement with pop-culture. Meanwhile, killing of animals is not to be seen in real life, although upon it is based the entire food industry.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. Poppi, "*Persona, larva, masca: masks, identity and cognition in the cultures of Europe.*" In S.C. Malik (ed.), *Rupa-Pratirupa: Mind, Man and Mask*. IGNC/Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2001, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> A.D. Napier, *Masks, Transformations, and Paradox*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 198, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> C. Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. Vintage Books, New York, 1991, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>W. Thackston (tr.), *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*. Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>6</sup>Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup>S. Kak, *The Asvamedha: The Rite and its Logic*. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> S. Kak, *The Architecture of Knowledge*. Centre for Studies in Civilizations/Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2004; S. Kak, *The Wishing Tree*. Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> T. Todorov, *The Conquest of America*. Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1985, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup>J.M. Masson, *When Elephants Weep*. Delacorte Press, New York, 1995.

<sup>11</sup>P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*. Ecco, New York, 2001.

