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The Significance of Upakarma

An Explanation of the Vedic Ritual of Yajur Upakarma, known in Tamil as "Avani Avittam"

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Upakarma (Avani Avittam): Nature and Purpose

Upakarma (/upakarma/) means beginning or "Arambam", i.e. to begin the study of the Veda (Veda Adhyayanam). For example, Yajur Upakarma means to begin the study of the Yajur Veda. Those belonging to the Yajur Veda observe the Upakarma in the month of Sravana (August-September), when the full moon (paurnami) and sravishta nakshatram coincide. Why begin study of the Vedas on this particular day? This auspicious day also happens to be the day when Lord Narayana took the avatara as Lord Hayagriva. Lord Hayagriva as we all know restored the Vedas to Brahma and also is the God of Knowledge.

The next question is: why do this every year? In the not too distant a past, Veda Adhyayanam was performed only during the period Avani to Tai (from mid-August to mid-January). Therefore, one is supposed to perform an "utsarjanam" in the month of Tai, i.e., a giving up of the learning of Vedas from Tai to Avani. Just like a Upakarma function there was a Utsarjana function in Tai. The period between January to August was then devoted to learning other branches of our shastras. Thus the cycle of Upakarma and Utsarjana with regard to Vedic studies was established. However, this method took 12 or more years to learn just one veda. Slowly this became impractical and Vedic studies continued throughout the year.

Therefore, the first thing to do before the Upakarma function is to do a praayashchitta (atonement) for having learned Vedas during the prohibited period. Specifically, one atones for not having performed the Utsarjanam in the month of Tai. That's why we begin the function by doing the "kAmo'karshIt..." japam. The purpose is declared as "adhyAya-utsarjana-akarana-prAyaScittArtham..." (to atone for not doing the utsarjana of Vedic study) and the sankalpam continues as "...ashTottara-sahasra-sankhyayA kAmo'karshIt manyur aKArshIt mahA-mantra-japam karishye" (I will now do recite the great "kAmo'karshIt" mantra 1008 times). The meaning in Tamil is "kAmAththAl seyya pAttadhU, kOpaththAl seyya pAttadhU" -- done out of desire, done out of anger. The correct way of chanting this mantra is "kAmo'karshIt manyur aKArshIt". Don't add namo nama etc. The right time to perform is immediately after your morning anushthana like sandhya, samadadaanam (if you are a brahmachari), brahma-yajnam etc. This is
performed during the abhigamana kaalam. Brahmacharis are supposed to have a hair-cut (preferably by a man!) after this.

The Kanda Rishis and their Significance

We saw that the "kAmo'karshti manyur akArshlt" japam is done with a sense of contrition. Who else but Vasudeva can bear the burden of our acts of omissions and commissions with regard to shastras? SArnamayena sthira pradlpena -- Daya Devi (compassion of the Lord personified) lights the lamp of shastras so that the jiva can find its way to its home in the Absolute.

After the kamo'karsheetsh japam, we proceed to perform the Upakarma function. It is done after mAdhyAhnikam but before Ijya-ArAdhanam (there is some variation here, but all methods are fine). The main purpose of the Upakarma function is to offer prayers and express our gratitude to those rishis who gave us the Vedas -- the rishis through whom the Vedic mantras were revealed. These rishis are known as "kaanda rishis". There are different rishis for the different Vedas. We are expected to worship those rishis who belong to our shakha or branch of the Veda, one of Yajur, Rk, Samam etc. The Yajur Veda consists of 4 kaandams. These are known as

1. prAjApatya kaaNDam
2. saumya kaaNDam
3. Agneya kaaNDam and
4. vaishvadeva kaaNDam.

These kaandams are named after those rishis who first taught the Vedas, viz., Prajapati, Soma, Agni and Vishvdeva. Subsequently we also offer our prayers to the Upanishads saamhiti, yajniki, and vaaruni, and finally to Swayambhu and Sadasaspati, through whom the Yajur Veda came down to us.

The sankalpam is mainly taken for performing the Upakarma Homam. Then we say tad angam snAnam karishye, tad angam yajnopavIta-dhAraNam karishye, tad angam kANDarshi tarpaNam karishye -- which implies that all other activities like snaanam, yajnopaveeta dhaaranaam, tarpanam etc., are only performed as an 'angam' or subsidiary to the Upakarma Homam (which is the angi or primary).

In the Upakarma Homam as well as in the tarpanam, the offerings are made to the kaanda rishis. In fact this tarpanam is so important that it is included as part of our nitya karma-anushthaanam, our daily worship. There are other minor points that are worth noting:

1. Brahmacharis should wear maunj (belt made of sacred grass), aijnam (deerskin) and dandam (stick made of palaasa wood) after they wear the poonool (sacred thread). There are separate mantras for each.
2. It is said that: purAtanAn parityajya which implies that you should wear a new set of clothes (veshti and utteredlyam)
before the tarpanam and homam.

3. It is also said that: kAndarshi tarpaNa-kAle punaH snAtvA Ardra vastra eva tat kuryAt, i.e, before performing the kaanda rishi tarpanam you should once again take a dip in the water and do it with wet clothes.

4. The rishi tarpanam is done with the poonool in the nivita position (like a garland) and the water along with rice and sesame seeds should leave the root of the small finger.

5. In some traditions you fast on the Upakarma day or at least fast till the end.

6. In some traditions a general pitr tarpanam is also done.

-- Vijayaraghavan