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Rituals, Knowledge, and Method: The Curious Case of Epistemological Sanskritization

Attempting to define rituals has often proven to be difficult, and this difficulty attests to the complexity of this category. There have been many widely differing definitions of rituals, and many of them understand rituals in terms of rule-following, as actions of particular kinds, as activities which concern tradition and community, as having a functional form and so on (see for example COLLINS 1988; MICHAELS/WULF 2010). While it is difficult to find a common thread in the many different ways of understanding rituals, there is nevertheless an overarching theme in the commonsensical views on ritual, namely, an opposition between rituals and knowledge. However, contrasting rituals and knowledge is not really the right approach, since they are both different kinds of categories. A far better match is the opposition between rituals and method. Both these terms capture processes and both have entirely opposite aims. It should not be a surprise to find that method is in opposition to rituals since the origin of the idea of method in the intellectual world is indebted to some perceived views of rituals. While contemporary accounts of rituals describe the narrative, performative and emotional richness of rituals, in this paper I will focus only on the relationship between rituals and knowledge. Rituals, particularly in modernity, have been associated with blind beliefs and superstition. In this modernist reading of rituals, they have also been equated with meaningless action, with belief in supernatural elements and so on (see STAAL 1979). Most of these elements that described rituals are somewhat synonymous with the belief that rituals have little to do with reason (see GOWER 1997).

In the development of the idea of method, reason plays a central role. And very often, reason is counterposed against rituals. What characterizes rituals, in this sense, is the lack of reason behind a ritual act — this does not necessarily mean that there is no reason behind the act but that there is no reasonable relationship between the act and what it intends to achieve. Obviously, one would find it difficult to accept this broad categorization of rituals especially because what is often at stake is not that there is no reason behind rituals, but that reason is incommensurate with another mode of reason. So it should not be

a surprise to note that the opposition to rituals — as something related to blind belief and superstition — is established through the invocation of method. The idea of method is first of all established within reason. For example, if one wants to achieve a particular goal, then one follows a particular method which will enable the achievement of that goal. Whereas rituals, even if they are associated with some method, are outside the method and do not in any essential way contribute to the achievement of that goal.

One can see the prevalence of this view in many discussions on the role of rituals within the practice of science (see BAUCHSPIES/CROISSANT/RESTIVO 2006, p. 52). First of all, science — following the same historical trajectory as the origin of method — constructs itself consciously as an activity which is primarily anti-ritualistic. In the way this is predominantly understood, this means that there is nothing within the “significant” practice of science which is ritualistic in character. When confronted with overwhelming evidence of ritual practices of individual scientists, scientific institutions and the like, the standard response has been that while there are ritualistic practices of this kind, they are not significant, since they do not contribute to the epistemological claims of the sciences. This means that while scientists could be ritualistic (even in their professional settings), these rituals are not in any way connected to the way scientific knowledge is produced or justified.

Such a belief is widespread in many domains of human activity, and this belief betrays a particular view of rituals as having no significance, as having little epistemological role and as being unnecessary. In other words, rituals are primarily a surplus, something which we could have done without but for various reasons hold onto. I believe that even if we accept these characterizations of rituals, we will immediately recognize something very interesting — to understand the nature of rituals we need to understand the meaning of this surplus as well as the notion of the “unnecessary.”

Rituals and the “Unnecessary”

Philosophers have long made much of the modal term “necessity.” They have spent great energy on trying to characterize the meaning of “necessary” as well as related terms such as possibility. A study of rituals offers us a different concept which we have to make meaning of — the concept of the “unnecessary.” At first glance, this might seem to be nothing more than “not necessary” or the negation of necessary, but that would be too quick and convenient. If defining necessary itself is such an arduous task, the task of defining “not necessary” is much worse.

“Necessary” is much more easily used than understood. Typically, we can distinguish two kinds of necessity — *de re* and *de dicto* (see GRAYLING 1997). The former is the necessity associated with objects and the latter with statements. So, one might say that it is necessary that a triangle has three sides,

and that this is a necessary property of a triangle. To say that it is necessary that the “earth goes around the sun” is different from the observation that the earth necessarily goes around the sun. The former is the necessity associated with the statement that the earth goes around the sun, while the latter is associated with the necessity of a property of earth which is to go around the sun.

There are different kinds of necessity: conceptual, physical, metaphysical and so on (see VAIDYA 2007). While it is difficult to characterize the nature of necessity in general, the most contentious one is metaphysical necessity. When we say that two terms are necessarily related, very often we tend to ascribe a metaphysical necessity to the relation between these two terms. For example, the general definition of a law is one that describes a relationship between two properties. One way to understand the nomological status of this relationship is by saying that this relationship is necessary. But what could this mean? It could mean that these two terms always go together, but all that one can say from this togetherness is that the two terms are concomitant but not necessary. This brief introduction is necessary in order to understand the association of the unnecessary with rituals.

In the case of what we generally refer to as rituals, we can note a constant engagement with the idea of the necessary and unnecessary. There has been another set of terms that have also been used to define rituals — meaning and meaninglessness. Rituals are supposed to be meaningless *to* a particular context, particularly in those rituals which are potentially in the domain of epistemology. This is actually another way of saying that these rituals are unnecessary. Just like there are different kinds of necessity, there can also be different kinds of the unnecessary. For example, something can be physically unnecessary, conceptually unnecessary and so on. But the difficulty in formulating these notions already illustrates a fundamental problem in understanding the unnecessary. Although this notion of the unnecessary is commonly used, its meaning is far more difficult to pin down. I believe that the multiple meanings of rituals are largely about attempts to characterize what it means to be unnecessary in different contexts.

Different types of rituals are often unified as rituals because of a common property: they are rituals because they are all not *really* necessary. Rituals are those that one could do without — for example, a ritual associated with dance is seen as a ritual because of the underlying assumption that a dancer can perform the piece without having to do the ritual.

There is a distinction that we should note here between rituals and preparation. For example, an athlete warms up before starting a race. The warm-up is away from the arena and could, in principle, be seen as a ritual. But why do we not consider these warm-ups to be rituals? Only because they are seen to be necessary for the consequent act of racing. In other words, for more effective racing, for making sure that there is no injury sustained in the act of racing, one has to do proper warm-ups. Thus, warm-ups are seen as preparations and not as rituals.

Every act has a prior set of preparations needed before it is performed. This is true even in the scientific lab. Prior to “starting” an experiment, a variety of acts have to be performed. Sometimes people might misunderstand them as rituals, but they are not if they are seen to be preparations which are necessary for the experiment, just as warm-ups are *necessary* before racing.

Consider these two examples. There were reports that before a satellite was launched some scientists in India took a model of the satellite to do *pūjā* for it in the Tirupathi temple. This act was seen as a ritual. It was not seen as part of the various preparations which a satellite has to undergo before launch. But why isn't this act of performing *pūjā* before the launch seen as a preparation for the launch? Those who believe that this act is a ritualistic one do so only because this act is not seen to be necessary for the success of the launch, whereas other preparations in the laboratory are necessary for the success of the launch. This act of doing *pūjā* is in the same way expendable and does not in any way contribute to the performance of the “main act.”

The other example relates to a so-called ritual associated with a dance performance. This ritual consisted of the main dancer doing a series of actions behind a screen after which he comes on stage to perform the “main act.” The action which the dancer performed behind the screen was described as a ritual. Why is that a ritual? Why is it not part of the performance itself? How different is it from the warm-ups of an athlete before a race? I believe that the primary reason why the act behind the screen was seen to be a ritual was because it was “associated” with some religious act, and such an act was seen to be not *really* (necessarily) connected to the dance performance.

What is problematical in the identification of rituals in both these cases is that they are interpreted to be unnecessary to the function of the act they are associated with. But we should remember that such claims of being necessary and unnecessary are based on some prior theoretical assumptions. This implies that the very recognition of something as a ritual is itself based on a particular framework. Most often, this framework is one which recognizes rituals as something in opposition to method.

Methods are essential in that they contribute to a given act in a significant manner. They are not expendable and replaceable. Methods are necessary. They are necessary in the sense that if one does not follow a particular method, then the desired result will not be generated. There are two other markers that capture this opposition between methods and rituals: method as unemotional and rituals as related to the emotional; and method as *justified* and rituals as “blind” beliefs. There is a logic to the argument that methods are that which are not ritualistic and this is the logic of necessity.

Preparations are part of method in that they are necessary first steps for the final act. Thus, preparations of an experiment will often involve stages which might look ritualistic to somebody who is not an experimentalist, but to the experimentalist these stages are essential for doing the experiment.

If somebody does a religious act before an experiment, then we tend to call that act a ritual. But note that even this conclusion is based on the belief that religious acts are not relevant (not necessary) to the conduct of the experiment and hence should be seen as rituals. However, such a view may not be held by a person who believes that religious acts are integral to the success of any act.

By suggesting this I do not want to suggest that rituals are nothing but methods in a different bottle. While it is true that the recognition of what is a ritual is based on some theoretical “biases,” it is also important to conceptually distinguish rituals and method. One way is through the notion of the necessary which is associated with method but not with rituals. But in doing so, we run into the problem of characterizing the “not necessary” which characterizes rituals. As mentioned earlier, defining necessity and necessary are very difficult, and the problem is compounded in the case of the “not necessary.”

Instead, we could consider another term which captures this character of rituals but without the metaphysical baggage of necessary and unnecessary. This term is the “surplus.”

Rituals as surplus

First of all, the idea of the surplus opens up new oppositions. For example, the pair of terms that go together is necessity–possibility or necessity–contingency. There are no such clear terms which pair with unnecessary. When we say something is necessary, we often mean that it cannot be otherwise. When we say something is unnecessary, we are only saying that we do not need it. There are no grand metaphysical themes associated with the unnecessary as is the case with necessary. Surplus is something which is expendable. Something which one can do without, meaning that we do not *really* need it, that it is really *unnecessary*.

Surplus is an excess, and excess does not carry the metaphysical baggage of necessity. When we recognize something as a surplus, we do recognize that perhaps it is not needed, but in calling it a surplus and not unnecessary, we are withholding judgment. In doing so, we are also allowing for the possibility that the surplus might be playing a role of significance, but we also allow for the possibility that it might be not doing that. In other words, the logical status of the surplus is “undecidable.”

One might think that this is an odd way of describing rituals. As a response, I would only point to the notion of rituals in non-Western cultures, particularly the Indian one. There is quite a bit of ambiguity regarding what exactly constitutes rituals in the Indian context. Many of the meanings associated with rituals in the modern context are not to be found in the Indian context. Moreover, when modern writers dub some act as a ritual, they are perforce placing a different framework on these acts. One of the basic problems is this is that in the Indian context, it is difficult to place ritual and method as

oppositions. Consistent with Indian philosophy in general, facile oppositions such as between metaphysics and epistemology and between logic and epistemology are not found in Indian intellectual systems (see MOHANTY 2002; SARUKKAI 2005a). One other dominant binary which is not found is that between the rational and the empirical. The fact that such a clear distinction between the rational and the empirical is absent, implies that reason and experience are interwoven categories in Indian intellectual and cultural traditions. This means that the idea of ritual (if seen as something on the plane of experience) is perforce related to the idea of method (seen as something on the plane of the rational). Thus, the meanings of rituals have far more epistemological substance in Indian practice. I believe that when modernists dub something as being ritualistic in the Indian context, they are importing particular meanings of ritual into a domain which cannot handle such meanings and oppositions.

This means that the very idea of rituals, however difficult it may be to characterize in the Indian context, is not in opposition to method. But there is indeed a common marker that captures the function and structure of acts that are often seen as ritualistic in the Indian context. This marker is that of the surplus. Many narratives of what are called rituals in the Indian context make better sense if we see rituals as embodying the notion of surplus without making any epistemological or ontological judgments about the surplus. As a consequence, there is really no clear distinction between preparations and rituals in the Indian context. This also means that rituals need not be interpreted in terms of necessary and unnecessary. Rituals as surplus are necessary—conceptually and as a matter of practice! This is best illustrated by the use of mathematics in the sciences.

Rituals as the ground for method

First of all, the objective of the above analysis is not to reduce rituals to method. The aim is not to show that rituals have method and methods are ritualistic, but merely to suggest that methods are essentially related to rituals. This means that rituals are essentially related to knowledge production even in the “hard” sciences. Often, when rituals have been studied in the context of science, it is primarily regarding the rituals associated with institutionalization, with behavior of scientists and so on. There is no sustained analysis on how rituals contribute to scientific knowledge, and hence, study of rituals in science reduces to peculiar acts by some scientists or some groups within science. On the contrary, rituals are necessary for the production of scientific knowledge. Indeed, the central claim here is that there are epistemological rituals—rituals that are essential to the processes of knowledge creation. In the creation of method in opposition to rituals, it is the method which is seen as the route to knowledge, and rational pursuit of knowledge is one that is achieved through method and not through ritualistic acts.

