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Trial By Fire

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Two months after Athirathram, the 4,000-year-old Vedic *yagna* or fire ritual that was conducted in Panjal village in Thrissur, Kerala, scientists have released their findings. The team led by Prof V P N Nampoori, former director of the International School of Photonics, Cochin University of Science and Technology, observed its effects on the environment with sophisticated scientific instruments. Their conclusion: The *yagna* seems to have accelerated the process of seed germination. Also, microbial presence in air, water and soil in and around the region of the fire ritual is vastly diminished.

The team had planted three types of seeds — cowpea, green gram and Bengal gram — on all four sides of the ritual venue at varying distances. They found that the growth was better in case of pots kept closer to the fire altar. This effect was more pronounced in the case of Bengal gram with growth about 2,000 times faster than in other places. According to Nampoori, sound is a vibration and continuous positive vibrations through chanting, accelerates the process of germination.

The team counted bacterial colonies at three locations — within the *yagnashala*, 500 metres and 1.5 kilometres from the *yagnasala*. Microbial analyses made before, during and four days after the *yagna* revealed that the air in the vicinity of the *yagnashala* was pure and had very low count of microbe colonies. Microbial activities in the soil and water around the *yagnashala* were remarkably less.

Tests conducted near the fire altars of the 1918 and 1956 Athirathram, still preserved in the backyards of Namboothiri homes, reveal that the bricks continue to be free of microbial presence. "It's an indication that the effect of the ritual is long-lasting. Studies are on to find out if these changes are transitional or permanent," say researchers.

An analysis conducted on the dimensions of temperature from the flames of the *pravargya* by Prof A K Saxena, Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bangalore, found that the fire ball that formed during the ritual had a particular wavelength with an unusually high intensity similar to what is observed in typical laser beams at about 3,870 degree centigrade. It may be possible to have stimulated emission at this wavelength (700 nm) and gain from plasma recombination. Saxena said, "We might not be able to prove everything that is good about Athirathram, but the effort is to establish as much evidence as we can which will help in the preservation and continuation of rituals like these."