An Introductory Word

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Director Dr. Shailesh Nayak, former Director Prof. Roddam Narasimha, Creator of the NIAS Logo, Shri. Balan Nambiar and this distinguished NIAS audience.

I never imagined I would ever have the twinned fortune to speak before two doyens – RN, as he is fondly known, from the world of aerospace sciences and Balan Nambiar from the world of the Arts.

In the library, there is a video-film titled Alter of Fire. That film records a 12-day ritual performed by Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala in April 1975. This event was possibly the last performance of the Agnicayana, a Vedic ritual of sacrifice dating back 3,000 years and probably the oldest surviving human ritual. The ritual has been long considered extinct and never before witnessed by outsiders, until the making of that film.

The co-producer of the film, the late Prof. Frits Staal (d.2012) was a Sanskrit scholar and philosopher at the University of California, Berkeley. Incidentally delivered a lecture in 2005 at NIAS on the invitation of Prof. Narasimha titled “What Euclid is to Europe, Panini is to India: or are they?”, on 6 May 2005 is available as a NIAS publication.

The elaborate ceremonies of the ritual require several months of preparation and rehearsals by the participation of seventeen priests, and -- most notably -- the construction, from a thousand bricks, of a fire altar in the shape of a bird -the Logo of NIAS about which this public lecture is about.