

DID BRAHMINS HAVE POWER IN PREMODERN INDIA?

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- ❖ Definition of power

- ❖ Rank order

- ❖ Privileges enjoyed by Brahmins
 - ❖ Right of way
 - ❖ Punishment
 - ❖ Material benefits, in particular
 - ❖ Obtaining gifts: thesis and antithesis

- ❖ Brahmin involvement in the trias politica
 - ❖ The seven-member theory of state
 - ❖ Executive and judiciary
 - ❖ Legislature
 - ❖ Protection of state by rituals
 - ❖ *Varuṇa* rule: thesis and antithesis

- ❖ Revisiting power-over, i.e., the third question

Power matrix with examples

	Action power	Payoff power
Control-of-events power	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exclusive permission to teach the Vedas• Right to emigrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High purchasing power• High rank• Low punishment for offense
Power-over	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Command obeyed by others• Forbid someone to study the Vedas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Market power (high price)• Taxing• Incite someone to give a gift

Rank order

In Sanskrit, these four classes are called

1. *brāhmaṇa* (Brahmin),
2. *rājanya* (ruler),
3. *vaiśya* (freeman), and
4. *śūdra* (servant)

in the Ṛgveda.

Manu: second class = *kṣatriya*

Occupations

Āpastamba: The occupations specific to a Brahmin are
studying
and teaching the Vedas,
sacrificing,
officiating at sacrifices,
giving gifts,
receiving gifts,
inheriting, and gleaning, as well as
appropriating things that do not belong to anybody.

Occupations

The occupations of a Kṣatriya are the same, with the exception of teaching, officiating at sacrifices, and receiving gifts, but the addition of meting out punishment and warfare.

The occupations of a Vaiśya are the same, with the exception of meting out punishment and warfare, but the addition of agriculture, cattle herding, and trade.

Priviledges enjoyed by the first class

Right of way (power-over/action power):

The road belongs to the king, except when he meets a Brahmin; and when he does, it is to the Brahmin that the road belongs.

Punishment (payoff power):

- ❖ The punishment for hurting or killing Brahmins
- ❖ The punishment of Brahmins

Privileges enjoyed by the first class

Material benefits (control-of-events/payoff power):

Manu: This whole world—whatever there is on earth—is the property of the Brahmin. Because of his eminence and high birth, the Brahmin has a clear right to this whole world. The Brahmin eats only what belongs to him, ...

- ❖ Inheritance: other brahmins final recipient
- ❖ Exemption form taxes
- ❖ Keeping a substantial portion from treasure-troves
- ❖ Receiving gifts

Privileges enjoyed by the first class

Obtaining gifts (payoff power):

Giving is a religious duty, for kings and others. The main group of receivers are learned Brahmins:

Manu: He [the king] should pay honor to Brahmins who have returned from their teacher's house; for this is the inexhaustible treasure deposited with Brahmins decreed for kings. Neither thief nor enemy can steal it ... A gift to a non-Brahmin brings an equal reward; to a Brahmin by name, a double reward; to one who is advanced in vedic study, a thousandfold reward.

Privileges enjoyed by the first class

Obtaining gifts (payoff power):

Brick: Two fundamental motivations:

1. Desire to establish orthodox, Vedic Brahmins as the ideal recipients
2. Theoretical principle that the merit of a gift is directly proportional to the virtuousness of its recipient (with “virtuousness”, of course, here defined from a Brahmanical perspective).

... the achievement of both of these desires would have been very much in the interests of the Brahmins who composed most of the law texts

Revisiting ...

obtaining gifts:

Vasiṣṭha: Discipline, austerity, self-control, liberality, truthfulness, purity, vedic learning, compassion, erudition, intelligence, and religious faith—these are the characteristics of a Brahmin.

Two interpretations

- i. as “definitions of a proper Brahmin” with “unambiguously high opinions of themselves and of their place in society”. Thus, Brahmins have somehow managed to enjoy payoff power in the control-of-events sense in the form of material wealth (the *dāna*) and in the form of high rank.

Revisiting ...

obtaining gifts:

- ii. requirements the Brahmins have to fulfil. Consider
One can know a person's virtue by living with him, his purity by interacting with him, and his wisdom by talking with him. A recipient should be tested in these three things.

(ii) stresses the requirements Brahmins as (worthy) *pātras* rather than (i) the self-exaltation put forward by Brahmins themselves

Revisiting ...

obtaining gifts:

Brick: “it serves the purpose of policing the Brahmin community by encouraging its members to aspire to the high standards of an ideal Brahmin lest they be deemed unfit to receive patronage.”

Clearly, the Brahmins’ knowledge of the Vedas, of Upaniṣadic or classical literature is also instrumental for keeping the ritual and scientific traditions intact. -→ Functional theory of dāna

First verse on gifting in one law text: Brahma, after performing ascetic toil, created Brahmins to protect the Veda, to bring satisfaction to ancestors and gods, and to safeguard dharma.

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

The seven-member theory of state:

Kauṭilya enumerates:

Lord, minister, countryside, fort, treasury, army, and ally are the constituent elements.

Kauṭilya argues that “a calamity affecting each previous one is more serious”

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Executive and judiciary:

Kauṭilya's definition of a state covers both executive and judiciary:

- While Brahmins did not typically fill the role of kings, Brahmin ruling dynasties came into being a few hundred centuries BCE.
- Brahmins were not supposed to fight unless in a time of adversity.
- The commander of an army (*senāpati*) could have been a *kṣatriya* or a Brahmin.
- Members of the first two classes were typically chosen to serve as ministers (*amātyas*).

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Executive and judiciary:

Purohitas (chaplains) serve as advisers:

He [the king, HW] should appoint as Chaplain a man

- ❖ who comes from a distinguished family and has an equally distinguished character,
- ❖ who is thoroughly trained in the Veda together with the limbs,
- ❖ in divine omens, and in government, and
- ❖ who could counteract divine and human adversities through Atharvan means.

He should follow him as a pupil his teacher, a son his father, and a servant his master.

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Executive and judiciary:

Olivelle: “The most important ministers comprise the king’s innermost circle of advisors called *mantrin*, counselors, within which the Chaplain (*purohita*) occupies a central position. The counselors do not have specific tasks to carry out, but the king is always expected to consult them before initiating any task.”

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Legislature:

There exists a large number of law books, but we have only vague ideas of where they may have been employed and how they came about. It is usually assumed that they have been composed by Brahmins.

The king had no legislative power, but kings created new rules usually by recognizing existing customs.” Manu:
He [the king] who knows the Law should examine the Laws of castes, regions, guilds, and families, and only then settle the Law specific to each.

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Protection of state by rituals according to an inscription from the 12th c.:

An army from Sri Lanka had invaded the mainland, removed the door of the Rāmeśvaram temple, obstructed the worship, ...

A Śaiva officiant was engaged by the emperor to perform a ritual that would bring destruction on those responsible for this desecration.

The ceremony was continued for twenty-eight days and at its end the invading army was indeed defeated.

→ close links with the institution of kingship and thereby with the principal source of patronage

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Varuṇa rule:

Manu:

A good king must never take the property of someone guilty of a grievous sin causing loss of caste; if he takes it out of greed, he becomes tainted with the same sin.

He should offer that fine to Varuṇa by casting it into water, or present it to a Brahmin endowed with learning and virtue.

Varuṇa is the lord of punishment, for he holds the rod of punishment over kings; and a Brahmin who has mastered the Veda is the lord of the entire world.

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Varuna rule:

Just another clever device by Brahmins to gain influence and wealth?

Sharma: fine collected by the Brahmins indicates

- ❖ *de facto* power over the king
- ❖ theocratic character to the state

Revisiting ...

Varuṇa rule:

Pure waste to throw the property into the water?

However: The subjects may fear that the king uses the fines to overcome financial bottlenecks.

In contrast, they will trust the king to punish them in a just manner if they believe that the king is a believer (in Varuṇa). → second-order believes → too facile?

Revisiting ...

Varuṇa rule:

The king (who does not have an overlord to punish him) may be in a difficult position. He certainly likes to be reckoned a just king and enjoy the loyalty of his ministers and subjects.

Just saying: “I am a just king” will generally not suffice. Here, the Varuṇa clause may help the king to “prove” that he is a good king, a king who would not take property as a fine in order to enrich himself or in order to fill his depleted treasury. The best way to do this would then be a ritual, with Brahmins performing the rites and many onlookers.

The third question: Who exploits whom? Who has power over whom?

- ❖ In every exchange relationship both sides do what they would not have done without the influence (or existence) of the other party.
- ❖ If some rich person A offers person B some money to perform a service and B obliges, does A have power over B? Or, the other way around, because B “forces” A to give him money for some important (to A) service?
- ❖ Everyday usage:
 - ❖ exploitation if A pays “too little” money;
 - ❖ profiteering if B asks for “too much”

The third question: how about power-over?

- ❖ Every fruitful definition of power-over needs a reference point defined by something “usual” or “normal”.
 - ❖ Some measure of arbitrariness
 - ❖ Reference point needs to be defended rather specifically
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- ❖ One exception: where would you be without me?

The third question: how about power-over?

Sociologist Emerson (1962): Relationships tend to be balanced.

Example:

- ❖ Two children A and B often play together. They take turns in playing their respective favourite games. Power-over is balanced.
- ❖ Child B in the A-B relationship finds another playing buddy C. Then, power-over is unbalanced. A would suffer more if B decides not to play with A any more than the other way around.
- ❖ Balancing operations set in that allow B to impose her favorite game on A more often than before.
- ❖ Power-over balanced once again.

The only non-arbitrary reference point is useless in identifying power-over.

Resterampe: Rank Order

Rank order

In premodern India, the priests were recruited from the first class or first *varṇa*. *Puruṣa* hymn from the Ṛgveda (second half of second millennium BCE):

When they apportioned the Man, into how many parts did they arrange him?

What was his mouth? What his two arms? What are said to be his two thighs, his two feet?

The brahmin was his mouth. The ruler was made his two arms. As to his thighs—that is what the freeman was. From his two feet the servant was born.

Resterampe: Teacher

Privileges enjoyed by the first class

Studying and teaching the *Vedas* (control-of-events/action power):

Manu: Wealth, kin, age, ritual life, and the fifth, knowledge—these are the grounds for respect; and each subsequent one carries greater weight than each preceding.

Viṣṇu: Now, vedic knowledge came up to a Brāhmaṇa and said: “Guard me; I am your treasure. Do not disclose me to a man who is envious, crooked, or uncontrolled.”

Privileges enjoyed by the first class

Studying and teaching the *Vedas* (control-of-events/action power):

Permission to study the Vedas is a prerogative (action power in the control-of-events sense) of the three highest classes, while teaching the Vedas can be done only by Brahmins.

In Vedic times, teaching was effected in family clans, but was institutionalized later. The teacher was called a *guru* (cognate with Latin expression of a *vir gravis*, 'a weighty man,' i.e. a man of importance and dignity) or an *ācārya*.

Privileges enjoyed by the first class

Studying and teaching the *Vedas* (power-over/payoff power):

The *ācārya*'s income:

1. Students beg for alms.
2. Students perform all kinds of services in the house.
3. The graduating students give the *dakṣiṇā* to their teacher.

“Do not neglect your private recitation of the Veda. After you have given a valuable gift to the teacher, do not cut off your family line. ...

Treat your mother like a god. ... your father ... your teacher ... your guests”

Revisiting ...

teaching the *Vedas* and performing rituals:

In return for student-generated income, the *guru-ācārya* offers a bundle of goods and services:

- Before the age of 8 years (for a Brahmin), 11 years (for a Kṣatriya) or 12 years (for Vaiśya), one, two, or three *Vedas* are taught and learned, perhaps 12 years for each one of them.
- Rituals:
 - *upanayana* (leading [the student] near [the teacher by his guardians])
 - *snāna* (bath) and/or *samāvartana* (returning).

Revisiting

bed and board:

The students obtain lodging and food at the *guru's* house. In return, the students had to beg for food and to provide personal services to the *guru*. These services and the humility that comes with providing them may also be considered a product given (!) to the students.

Resterampe: Inheritance

Privileges enjoyed by the first class

Inheritance (payoff power):

Viṣṇu mentions this order of inheritance for a man without son: wife, daughter, father, mother, brother, ..., and, finally, the king. But the king is not the final recipient if the dead one is a Brahmin whose property would then go to other Brahmins.

Punishment (payoff power):

The punishment for hurting or killing Brahmins is more severe than the punishment for hurting or killing members of lower classes. Brahmins are punished less severely for a given crime than other classes.

Power matrix with examples

“Power” is an elusive and multifarious concept. In any case: an asymmetric relation between people. More precisely,

1. Power may refer

- to actions (“action power”) or
- to payoffs (“payoff power”).

2. Power may mean

- “power-over” (one actor’s power over another) or
- “control of valuable events”

Resterampe: *Varuna* additional slides

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Varuṇa rule:

Arthaśāstra:

For a king fining someone who does not deserve to be fined, the fine is 30 times that amount. He should place it in water for Varuṇa, and then give it to Brāhmaṇas. By that, the king's sin caused by wrongful infliction of fines is cleansed, for Varuṇa is the one who disciplines kings when they act wrongly with respect to men.

Two-level structure: Varuṇa punishes the king who punishes his subjects.

Brahmin involvement in the trias politica

Varuṇa rule:

Kane: “these prescriptions [...] were counsels of perfection and must have been futile. No king would ordinarily fine himself”. He then refers to medieval texts where the king is understood as a “subordinate chief”. Then, it is not Varuṇa himself who punishes, but the overlord, instead. This is a good explanation, as far as it goes. However, it just pushes up the problem one level. After all, how would, then, an unjust overlord be brought to justice?

Revisiting ...

Varuṇa rule:

Manu version: ²⁴³ A good king must never take the property of someone guilty of a grievous sin causing loss of caste; if he takes it out of greed, he becomes tainted with the same sin.

²⁴⁴ He should offer that fine to Varuṇa by casting it into water, or present it to a Brahmin endowed with learning and virtue.

²⁴⁵ Varuṇa is the lord of punishment, for he holds the rod of punishment over kings; and a Brahmin who has mastered the Veda is the lord of the entire world.

²⁴⁶ When a king refrains from taking the fines of evildoers, in that land are born in due course men with long lives;

²⁴⁷ the farmers' crops ripen, each as it was sown; children do not die; and no deformed child is born.

Revisiting ...

Varuṇa rule:

Remember Kane's assertion that "[n]o king would ordinarily fine himself"

Reply: Maybe, he would not, but he would like to be able to. And he may have to incur some cost to achieve that aim, for example by offering the confiscated property "to Varuṇa by casting it into water".