



Early Sanskritization and the Emergence of Brahmā: Indo-Gangetic and Videha Contexts of Brahmanical Textual Production

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Abstract:

The essay will explore the evolution of Brahmā based on two key temporal factors: first, the period of emergence; second, the locations where both Brahma and Brahminism emerged in Indo-Ganges (Kuru-Pāñchāla) and Videha. The influence of Brahmanical text creation and developing cosmological conceptions will also be examined. The study argues that the process of Sanskritization was not just a linguistic expansion; it was rather a social stratification and the means of establishing social hierarchy and other cultural constructs through the creation and distribution of ritual authority. Further, it discusses the role played by the Kuru state in establishing a unified system of Vedic ritual and its contribution to the creation of Brahmana literature, providing a historical context for what we know today as Brahma and how sacrificial cosmology, along with the deities such as Prajapati emerged. Lastly, will discuss how Videha developed and evolved as a site of philosophical creativity, where rituals were interpreted and internalised, leading to the development of Brahman as an abstracted form of a non-personal metaphysical principle, thereby bringing forward the concept of Brahma.

Keywords: Early Sanskritization, Brahmanical Tradition, Brahmā, Brahman, Videha, Kuru Polity, Prajapati, Sacrificial Cosmology, Vedic Religion

Introduction

The Indo-Gangetic plains represent the most crucial geopolitical and cultural stage of the analysis of initial waver of the Brahminical tradition and ritual-intellectual circumstances, which, at a later stage, preconditioned the emergence of the conceptual form of Brahmā. This area and western Gangetic basin in particular were a site of radical shift in social structure, ritual activity and text production in the late Rigvedic and early post-Rigvedic periods. The early Sanskritization has to be seen therefore not only as the

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extension of Sanskrit language or even Vedic traditions, but as the process in history, which has been institutionalized, in other words the planification of ritual authority and cosmological thinking and social hierarchy. The Indo-Gangetic and Videha areas of India, which played a critical role in transforming the previously established Vedic theological classifications. Rather than viewing the emergence of Brahmā/Brahman as separate and individual occurrences, these occurrences happened within similar conceptual spaces developed from multiple earlier Vedic worldviews, especially those associated with Prajapati. Within the Brahmana literature, Prajapati serves as both a generating and self-reflecting force, embodying both creative force and entire sacrifice. The discursive and ritual structures in which the abstracting of brahman is developed into a neuter, impersonal, and ontologically bound principle, and wherein Brahma is developed into an active creator deity, provide the context within which conventional means of understanding the two developments can be established. These developments should be viewed as being developed simultaneously and therefore share a co-relation within a context of changing ritual priorities, speculative inquiry, and regional manuscript production.

Brahmā the creator figure of Hindu tradition evolves paradoxically from an impersonal Vedic cosmological principle into a personal creator-deity of the epics. Brahmā's status is very complex and striking; he is counted among the Trimurti (the trinity of creator, preserver, and destroyer), yet historically he has drawn far less devotion or theological prominence than Vishnu and Shiva. Indeed, Brahmā "plays no part in the oldest texts and is no figure of considerable prominence in the younger Veda". This study maintains a strict ontological difference between Brahman and Brahmā (Brahmā is the first embodiment knower of the Brahman, not its source). The possible idea of cosmic being in the ancient Indian philosophy and mythology blends through multiple narrative threads or what we can say a set of layers, each adapting and reshaping similar types of characters to suit diverse theological and philosophical contexts.

When we study the Brahmā we could encounter a very common problem to differentiate between the brahma, brahman, Brahmā these all originate from the same Sanskrit root. But the actual meanings of these are different from one another.

Brahma arose as the first among gods, as the creator of all,

as the guardian of the world.

To Atharvan, his firstborn son, he disclosed

the knowledge of brahman,

of all knowledge the root.

The knowledge of brahman,
which Brahma taught him —
both the higher and the lower —
Atharvan of old disclosed to Arigir,
Arigir, to Bharadvaja Satyavaha,

Bharadvaja, to Arigiras. (MuU 1.1.1-2)

The above excerpt From Mundaka Upanishad (MuU) presents Brahmā as the first-born among the gods and the primordial transmitter of brahma-vidya. However, Brahmā does not function as the metaphysical absolute but as the initial mediator of knowledge concerning Brahman.

Methodology

The goal is to trace how the text is evolved by breaking it into pieces based on date, place, author, style, vocabulary, and religious layer. While doing so shall keep in mind to also analyse the narrative meanings. The four conceptual methods based on Black and Geen's narrative figures in South Asian religious literature, are employed. The framework of stability, flexibility, intertextuality, and demonstrability serves as conceptual tools to evaluate Brahma's Development, functions and adaptation across texts, integrating literary, hermeneutical, and historical analysis.

The Kuru-Pāñchāla region: Ritual sacrifices

The Kuru state became the earliest fairly stable, supra-tribal, state in early India, produced as a result of the unification of the previous traditions of Bharata at the end of the Rigvedic period. This was not purely a political growth, a highly ritual, intellectual one. Vedic ritual was consciously restructured by the Kurus who chose, standardized and canonized certain forms of ritual which would be standard in later Brahmanical tradition. The Indo-Gangetic plains, then, emerged as the most important area where Vedic culture was turned into a less flexible and more performative tradition, into a more text-terminate system. The impact of this on Brahmanical textual production was extensive. The collection of the Yajurveda Samhitas and the further spreading of the Brahmana prose literature are signs of growing interest in ritual accuracy, inner integrity, and authoritative explanation. Ritual was no longer considered to be an incident dependent upon the situation or extempore, but is a holistic and self-contained system with pre-determined injunctions. In the Indo-Gangetic plains, Sanskritization was therefore a process of making Sanskrit the



sole source of religious knowledge and ceremonial power. Knowledge of Sanskrit formula, Sanskrit meters, and even ritualistic language had become the new hallmark of the Brahmanical status. Such consolidation of language supported the social power of the Brahmin whose proficiency now reached the axiomatic expression of cosmic order instead of a priesthood. The writings of the Vedic period, can be interpreted as the tape-records of the ritual culture to maintain not the liturgical content only but the suppositions, the hierarchy, and intellectual priorities of the society at which these texts were produced (Witzel 1995, p. 2). The creation was not recounted as much using mythic narration but using ritual action and exegesis. The Brahmanas keep on claiming the similarity between the primordial acts of cosmogony and the current performance of the ritual. One of the tropes of the Sātapathā Brahṃāṇa is that the sacrificial act that man engages in is a replay of the Gods acting in the dawn of time. This principle breaks down the time space and makes creation the process of constantly repeating and constant creating that is being maintained by the correctness of the rites instead of the one-time event.

Prajapati, in the Brahmana literature, does not just happen to be a creator deity, he is the typical model sacrifice whose disintegration or change results in the appearance of the cosmos. His creativity can never be distinguished out of ritual action; even the cosmos itself is organized in a manner that represents the product of sacrificial activities. This pattern is a wider ideological imagining of the universe as a body, as the ritual altar and the human body are similar in that they are both structured wholes that are ordered. Sacrificial arena is thereby created as a microcosm whereby the cosmic creation is recurrently played in it.

The Indo-Gangetic ritual system is characterised by its high degree of internal coherence and the defensive nature of its symbols. Each part of the sacrifice had a precise cosmological counterpart: altar, fire, offerings, priests. The fire altar (Vedi) is equivalent to the cosmos; the scarifier is Prajapati; and the order of the rites corresponds to the temporal flow of the creation. These correspondences support the idea that cosmic order (ṛta) can be maintained and re-generatively created in and through the ritual. The classical Srauta ritual has a set of rules that govern it. The Srauta ritual has an internal logic of its own and is generally closed off from influence by the social and political aspects of life. The Srauta ritual's claim to universal truth and transcendent validity is a naive view, although it is carried out within an arena that was designed to exclude conflict and uncertainty and prevent moral ambiguity that may occur during the course of human experiences. The highest sacrifice temporarily leaves the social order to give himself (the whole-self) to the law of the ritual taboos.



The Brahmin was, in a sense, the only person capable of controlling the divinity and thus regulating the universe. However, the Brahmin's ability to do this is based on an external concept (a disconnection from feeling "worldly"). Heesterman refers to this conflict as "The Inner Struggles of Ritual" which exist where the timeless world of the ritual exists in contrast with and throughout the time that is relevant to the social order and existence (Heesterman, 1985, pp. 1-10). Thus, as the Brahmins faced more political institutions and more intellectual issues of the time, the intensity of the struggle would gradually increase through the years. Although Prajapati's original role was the 'creator' of the world, and the central figure in sacrificial cosmology, he began to serve primarily as a placeholder for ritual creativity.

Videha as a Zone of Philosophical Experimentation and Speculative Transition

During the latter part of the Vedic era, the Kuru-Pāṅchāla area was traditionally seen as the centre of Brahminism, and although this region had been of some intellectual importance throughout the entire course of early Brahmin thought, the eastern frontiers of the Indian subcontinent had specific areas where Brahminism was particularly strong; for instance, the capital of Mithila within the Vedic Metropolis of Videha. References in the Śātapathā Brāhmaṇa and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad depict the linkage of Videha and Mithila as more closely aligned with philosophical thought as compared to Kuru state, and if there is/was any connection to Brahmin control and the acceptance of Brahmin worship by Kuru (the Kuru people) hence, the interest in ultimately exploring whether there was/has been, an intent to pursue the rejection of the Brahmin's reliance upon a rigid form of ritualism.

When Brahmanical groups migrated east out of the Kuru area, they began to enter areas with different ecological conditions, political structures, and intellectual encounters. This process was imbued with new forms of Brahmanical authority as a result of the patronage of kings, particularly those such as Janaka of Videha, who created new settings in which the Brahmanical authority was able to negotiate rather than presuppose authority. As Brahmanical groups began to arrive in Videha, they began to encounter the loosening of ritual orthodoxy and a willingness to engage in speculation. One of the key texts providing evidence of this transition is the Śātapathā Brāhmaṇa. In the Śātapathā Brāhmaṇa The ritual tradition of the Śukla Yajurveda is deeply rooted, yet focuses on eastern locations to describe important parts of the text. The usage of these eastern locations as the basis of important discussions suggests that the understanding of ritual is no longer simply limited to the technical performance of rituals, but also includes symbolic interpretation and philosophical contemplation.



The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BAU) relates closely to the Court of Janaka with Janaka as an ideal "sacrificial king." Janaka's identity as a king is not measured so much by his sacrificial acts, as those of other kings, as it is by his interaction with Brahmins and philosophers regarding ultimate reality. The Court of Janaka is an inquiry-driven space rather than a place to present oneself through the performance of rituals; it makes clear that there has been a complete transformation in the connection between political power and religious authority. The dialogues contained in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad continue to ask questions regarding the ritual system. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (I.4.1) famously begins, "In the beginning this universe was but the Self (atman) He first uttered 'I am He'". In this passage the primal reality is the impersonal Viraj (the cosmic Self), who acknowledges Aham ("I am") before becoming the manifold world. The Text dissolves Personal gods into metaphysical inquiry, Here Brahma becomes Philosophically redundant, making it difficult to trace continuity. The Primary focus of BAU is the neuter Brahman, not in relation to the masculine Personified god. The BAU is geographically centred in the eastern region of Videha (the court of king Janaka), it portrays the local sage Yajnavalkya defeating the established theologians of the kuru-pancala region (the traditional geographical centre of ritual Brahmanism) (Olivelle, 1998). This suggests that the text was intended to demonstrate the rising importance of the eastern frontier and may distort or polemicize the views of the western orthodoxy. There are very few representations of Brahman to correlate with the later Brahma in the later Upanishads, the Aitareya Upanishad (1.1) opens with "In the beginning all this verily was Atman only, one and without a second. There was nothing else that winked. He thought to himself: 'Let me now create the worlds'". The creator is simply the Self (atman/Brahman) thinking itself into the universe. These texts displace the notion of a separate personified god: creation is an internal act of the universal consciousness. In all three of these Upanishads-Brhadaranyaka, Aitareya, Chhandogya there is no reference to a distinct Brahma. Instead, the focus is on Brahman/atman as the sole origin. Thus, philosophically the "personal Brahma" is dissolved into the abstract Brahman; the creator-principle has become inner awareness rather than a mythic being.

The ritual is being relocated to the "sacrifice's" body, and the correlations between altar, universe, and sacrificer are being interpreted psychologically and metaphysically. With the internalization of the ritual activity, the meaning of the ritual activity changes by emphasizing internal knowledge rather than external performance. This transformation is evident in the figure of Yājñavalkya, the most prominent philosopher of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad.

In the Brāhmaṇas, both Prajāpati and Hiranyagarbha are described as the paradigmatic sacrifice whose body produces the cosmos; Prajāpati's creative role, as such, tends to be subordinated to other more abstract



explanatory principles like Hiranyagarbha's cosmic embryo and continues to denote origination. Brahman is used in the Upaniṣadic discourse available for Videha as the underlying reality that provides for both the "efficacious" function of ritual and the cosmological structure of the universe. Brahman is described as beyond limit, unconditioned and beyond any physical descriptions. Brahman cannot be described as a creator either in the anthropomorphic sense or narratively, but is rather the ontological ground from which everything differentiates. Patrick Olivelle highlights that there were increasing degrees of association between Brahmanical authority and intellectual capacity to understand philosophical (speculative) concepts versus just mastering the performance of rituals. The location of this evolution is the eastern area of Videha where Brahmanical traditions came into contact with many other kinds of thought. Thus, this caused those Brahmanical traditions to create ways to articulate their beliefs in more abstract formats than in the past.

Heesterman explains, the closed nature of sacred ritual has created an ongoing conflict between transcendent (beyond the limits of experience) and social realities. While ritual claims universality, it lacks moral or existential value for the experience of life. The people of Videha began to solve this problem by locating the cosmic order in themselves, thus establishing a new connection between transcendence and human beings. As a result of this new location for cosmic order, new thoughts were generated regarding cosmology. Creation was now seen not primarily as a ritual process occurring through sacrifice, but as an outflow from some fundamental metaphysical principle. Therefore, the cosmos is no longer just the result of an act of sacrifice, but rather it is an expression of Brahman's essence.

Sacrificial Cosmology and the Reconfiguration of Creative Principles

One of the main conclusions of early Brahmanical philosophy is the notion that creation is ultimately sacrificial in nature. This is why the figure of Prajapati as creator is so celebrated, and his body (the cosmos) has been seen as being destroyed in a gruesome act of sacrifice.

Herman Tull posits that the cosmogony as portrayed in the early Brahmanical literature reflects a deep-seated belief in a cosmos created as an extension of the masculine human body, the masculine sovereign human body and the cosmos being reflections of one another. One such example of this correspondence is the Agnicayana sacrifice. Here, the entire concept of the cosmos as an extension of the masculine human body is developed through the construction of the Agni altar, as the physical dematerialization of the cosmic principles of the ritualized space that comprise the universe. In addition to the above, the notion of creation as occurring through death and dismemberment represents a genuine issue for this sacrificial cosmology. According to Heesterman, sacrifice represents a certain kind of controlled death and destruction as well as



a certain risk of entirely involving the sacrifice in the process of simulation of destruction by way of the primordial creation event.

To counterbalance this, Brahmanically oriented philosophers created models of an alternate creative genesis, focusing more on "creating" instead of "destroying." They created a more holistic vision of creation in Hiranyagarbha ("the golden womb"), which is driven by gestation and emergence and not by violent sacrifice. Creative acts done by Prajapati are also increasingly being viewed as imaginative acts (through the lens of desire, heat, and sexual union) rather than purely creative acts, thereby preserving the destructive implication of sacrificial cosmology, but not altering the fundamental logic of the correspondence of the cosmology of sacrifice.

This leads to Brahman serving as a unification of these various creative principles into a more abstract whole. When used to refer to ritual power and sacred speech, Brahman eventually came to refer to a cosmic entity that is the source of all creativity. Moreover, it is innately impersonal, making it difficult to fully anthropomorphize. This distinction underscores the inevitable transformation of Brahma into a personalized creator-deity during later times.

Courts, Itinerant Brahmins, and the Circulation of Cosmological Knowledge

The regularisation of Brahmanical cosmology, and extending its reach, occurred through both text and social relationships of patronage and travel. Brahmanical experts depended for their very survival on the patronage of regional courts, particularly those in the Kuru-Pancala and Videha areas. This patronage allowed for the preservation and transmission of knowledge associated with rituals. Itinerant Brahmins travelled through these regions sharing their ideas with local people, resulting in the creation of a common cosmological vocabulary throughout these areas.

Witzel indicates that the Kuru state's organization was associated with the emergence of specific Vedic (Sakhas) schools, which were responsible for maintaining particular groups of texts and rituals. The institutionalization of this organization promoted both the continuity and competition among the various schools through their claims of authority based on the purity of their texts and the correctness of their rituals. The movement of Brahmins between different courts is another factor contributing to the establishment of these types of relationships, as it brought local traditions into contact with those from outside the Kuru region. In addition, the philanthropic activity at the court in Videha created an environment conducive to philosophical innovation and experimentation while the standardization of ritual practice remained



dominant in the Indo-Gangetic region. This interplay between the two different types of contexts helped to generate constructive tension; however, it did not prevent the development of some innovations in the form of various text types. As a result, the principles of creation associated with both Prajapati and Brahman were utilized to create multiple layers of meaning used to articulate different types of intellectual concerns across multiple regions.

Conclusion

To understand Brahmā's emergence, we need to view it as the culmination of a long historical and intellectual trajectory rather than as the simple continuation of one Vedic god. In its earliest formulations, creation was conceived of in a sacrificial context based on the figure of Prajāpati and was ritually organized as the universe. In the Brāhmaṇas, particularly the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the sacrificial act of creating was transformed by establishing a cosmological system of how the universe is ordered; the Upaniṣads then transformed these ideas by reorienting to internalized knowledge, the unity of the metaphysical universe, and abstracting the creative power into brahman. Thus, the Brāhmaṇas and Upanishads reflect the gradual movement of Brahmanical thought from ritual action to philosophical reflection. The Kuru polity provided a focal point for stabilizing this ritual process, while the Videha offered speculative opportunities and new interpretations for Brahmanical cosmology. The travel of courtiers, patronage by royalty, and the mobility of Brahmins allowed for ideas about the cosmos to be shared across multiple regions, resulting in standardization and adaptability to the Brahmanical authority structure. This movement was toward creation being conceptualized increasingly through abstraction and as opposed to a singular mythic explanation. The establishment of this new creator figure occurred when sacrificial cosmology, philosophical abstraction, and regional transferences developed into a single new creation. Therefore, the history of Brahmā does not reflect a straightforward creation story; rather, it represents a layered evolution of early Indian religious beliefs.

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