

Meeting 24: Hymns, songs, & lineage

The Vedic priesthood

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Why a Vēda discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
 - Sāmhitā-s
 - Brāhmaṇa-s
 - Others?
- Vēda-s vs. Vedānta, Upaniṣād-s, Purāṇá-s
 - Later monism (ádvāita) vs. earlier dualism
 - Moral–political subtexts
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature

What is there to discuss?

- History & linguistics
- Metaphysics of religion
- Exegesis (e.g. western vs. Eastern narratives)
- Moral principles
- Nuances of Śrāutá ritual
- How we can apply Vedic principles to our lives

Our plans

- Weekly “general audience” meetings on Sundays at 1200 EDT
 - Followed by in-depth literature meeting at 1330 EDT
- Different topic/aspect/angle discussed every week
- Format:
 - Præsentation
 - Free-form discussion
- Eventually something more
 - Children's books
 - Poëtry collective
 - Documentation
 - Actual rituals

WhatsApp group

<https://chat.whatsapp.com/IXCQEkhfrcwHI7CNY8Fgat>

Let's introduce ourselves!

- Briefly!
- Name
- School (if student)
- How you found this group
- Background/interest in Hinduism & Vedic literature

Some questions to consider

- What is the role of the clergy in Vedic society? in modern societies?
- How might the Vedic priesthood have evolved and developed over time?
 - in response to ritualistic development?
 - in response to political pressures?
- To what extent is the Vedic priesthood alive today?
 - What benefits are there to “reviving” it?
 - How can it be revived?

What is a priest?

- A conduit between Gods & other men
 - Or a “messenger”, if you will
 - AB 8.24: “Verily, the Gods do not eat the food offered by the king who is without a puró-hita.”
 - Agní Himself is a priest (ṛtvij), the conduit (dūtá)
 - between Gods & men
 - between Gods
- Protector of the natural order (go-pá Ṛtásya)
 - Jamison: “conjurer” of the Truth by his “formulation” (bráhman)
- Beseecher for material, worldly success

What is a priest's role?

- In IE society: the first estate (V1)
 - Placed at the front: puró-hita
 - *Joint rule* with V2: bráhma-kṣatrá
 - Over the freemen & serfs
- Many attributes not unique to Vedic or IE society
 - Patrilineal descent: Lēvīyyīm, Kōhănīm
 - Association with (e.g. wearing) white: Christianity
 - Much later: emphasis on celibacy
- Priestly conceit: brahma-varcasá

The priest as bard

- Traveling priests in a nomadic society: esp. war-bands
 - Besought the Gods for success in war
 - Praised the *Ārya* war-heroes and kings
 - In return: gifted prizes of kine, gold, slaves (cf. *dāna-stutí-s*)
- *2-way interaction* with the Vedic texts
 - Ongoing composition of “newest hymn” by seers (*ṛṣi-s*)
 - *Inventive* poetic devices, variances in meter & language
 - Constant collation, organization, commentary, analysis
- Bardic composition reduced in post-Vedic æra

The priest as custodian

- Custodian of spiritual lineage
 - Passed down the Véda over millennia
 - Maintainers of ritual orthopraxy
 - Teaching: important part of priest's role
- Custodian of *literal* lineage
 - All priests descended patrilineally from Vedic seers (cf. gotrá)
 - System of agnatic descent as model for general Ārya society
 - Traditions of ancestor-worship
- Custodian of morality (profane orthopraxy)

The 4-fold Vedic division

- All priests are Brāhmaṇá-s: -a derivation from *brahmán*
- Brahmán
 - Sometimes generic term for priest, synonym for Brāhmaṇá or ṛtvij
 - Overseer of the sacrifice
 - Corrects any mistakes made
- Hótr
 - In one sense the “main” priest
 - Recites hymns of praise and prayer to the Gods

The 4-fold Vedic division (contd.)

- Ud-gātṛ
 - *Sings* hymns of praise in the background
 - Cascading melodies with “lullaby”-like sacred particles
 - Originally: had instrumental assistants in the background?
- Adhvaryú
 - In another sense the “main” priest
 - Performs most of the physical actions of the sacrifice
- Keith: “a superabundance of technical terms”
 - Póṭṛ, praṣāstṛ, &c.

4 priest & 4 Véda-s

- Straightforward associations:
 - The hótrṛ recites hymns from the Véda of hymns (Ṛg-vedá)
 - The ud-gātṛ sings songs from the Véda of songs (Sāma-vedá)
 - The ad^hvaryú chants formulæ from the Véda of formulæ (Yajur-vedá)
- The brahmán later becomes associated with the At^harva-vedá
 - Not an absurd connection: “healing” of sacrifice with magic

Auxiliaries in the sacrifice

- Detailed system of assistants outlined in Śrāuta-sūtra-s (AŚS, ŚŚS):
 - Assistants of hótr: maitrāvaruná, achāvāká, grāvastút
 - Assistants of ud-gātr̥: prastotṛ, pratihartṛ, subrahmaṇyá
 - Assistants of adhvaryú: pratiprast^hātṛ, néṣṭṛ, unnetṛ
 - Assistants of brahmán: brāhmanāchamsín, agníd^h, pótṛ
- Many likely not præsent in early (or even later) Vedic times!
- Rituals generally smaller-scale and less elaborate

Developments

- Clear evolution of ritual & priesthood
- Ritual becomes more formalized & fossilized
- Early Vedic: Gods can appear in much more ordinary circumstances
 - Rituals shorter, more localized with fewer people
- Lexical reïnterpretation (viz. puró-hita, krátu)
- The “Brahmanical ascendancy” model
 - Greater dependence → greater privileges
- Often associated with the overall (d)evolution of Hindu morality

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