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Rehan UR Rehman

Ramanujan College, University
of Delhi, Kalkaji CR Park,
New Delhi, Delhi, India

Brihaspati: Unveiling ancient Indian political thought, justice, and jurisprudence

Rehan UR Rehman

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Abstract

This research paper endeavors to unearth the profound insights of ancient Indian political thought, justice, and jurisprudence as articulated in the writings of Brihaspati. While Kautilya's Arthashastra has dominated discussions of ancient Indian political theory, Brihaspati's contributions have been relatively understudied. This study seeks to rectify this oversight by analyzing Brihaspati's works and exploring their significance in shaping the intellectual landscape of governance and justice in ancient India. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, this research combines textual analysis, historical examination, and philosophical inquiry to unravel the core principles enshrined in Brihaspati's writings. It scrutinizes the philosophical underpinnings of his political thought, emphasizing the interconnectedness of ethics, justice, and statecraft. By delving into the finer nuances of Brihaspati's texts, this paper elucidates his distinctive perspectives on the duties of a ruler, the administration of justice, and the establishment of a harmonious society. Furthermore, this study examines the implications of Brihaspati's ideas for contemporary political discourse and governance. It highlights the enduring relevance of his principles and how they can inform modern political thought, policymaking, and the pursuit of justice. The research also explores the intricate interplay between statecraft, diplomacy, and the maintenance of order, drawing parallels between Brihaspati's prescriptions and their applicability in the current global political arena. In sum, this research contributes to the broader understanding of ancient Indian political thought, justice, and jurisprudence by bringing to the forefront the often-overlooked insights of Brihaspati. By shedding light on his unique perspectives, this paper underscores the lasting significance of his contributions and their potential to enrich contemporary discussions on governance and justice. Brihaspati's legacy, it argues, offers a timeless source of wisdom and guidance for addressing the complexities of modern political and ethical challenges.

Keyword: Indian political thought, justice, jurisprudence

Introduction

Brihaspati was an influential ancient Indian sage and philosopher known for his significant contributions to the field of political thought. His ideas revolved around governance, justice, and the role of the king in an evolving society. Brihaspati emphasized the paramount importance of justice in governance, contending that a king's future depended on its proper administration. He believed that justice should be grounded in established codes and scriptures, with transgressors, even if they were related to the king, not being exempt from punishment.

Brihaspati provided detailed guidelines for the administration of justice, including crime detection, evidence collection, and witness examination. He advocated for a hierarchical court system where judgments should be based on equity arrived at through consensus. Judges were required to possess good character and come from Brahmana or respectable families. His vision of justice aimed at seeking truth, punishing wrongdoers, and alleviating the suffering of the people. Brihaspati identified four sources of law: right (dharma) from scriptures, conduct based on prudence, character influenced by conventions and customs, and, notably, the king's decrees. Brihaspati's unique contribution lay in granting kings the authority to create laws, marking a shift in the king's role from a mere enforcer of external laws to a legislator with the power to shape various aspects of society. His ideas paved the way for the king's significant influence on the legal landscape in ancient India.

Corresponding Author:

Rehan UR Rehman

Ramanujan College, University
of Delhi, Kalkaji CR Park,
New Delhi, Delhi, India

1. Brihaspati's Notable Influence in Ancient Indian Statecraft

Brihaspati, an esteemed teacher of politics in ancient India, gained recognition as a significant authority on statecraft. His influence extended to nearly every writer on Indian polity in that era, including prominent figures like Vyasa and Kautilya. However, it's worth noting that the Brihaspati Sutra, in its current form, might have been compiled by someone who attributed it to Brihaspati—a common practice during the medieval period.

Examining the content of Brihaspati's writings places them in a historical context marked by turmoil and frequent power struggles. His texts reveal a deep concern about the earlier apprehension of anarchy, reflecting the turbulence of his time. Brihaspati acknowledges the existence of a golden age characterized by justice and right, where society operated smoothly without a centralized ruler. This period had a social hierarchy with masters and servants, fostering cooperation and harmony.

However, two significant factors led to the decline of this idyllic era—human ego and cupidity. These vices replaced knowledge, a sense of right and wrong, and social cooperation with a brutal law-of-the-jungle mentality, where the powerful thrived at the expense of the weak. In line with tradition, Brihaspati also invokes the ancient concept of 'the law of fishes,' where larger fish devoured smaller ones. This degeneration eroded agriculture, commerce, trade, and even the caste system. In instances where kings existed, they struggled to establish law and order.

The Emergence of Kingship

Recognizing the chaos and exploitation resulting from the absence of authoritative rule, Brihaspati asserts that without the fear of authority, there can be no societal order. In such a scenario, individuals fight and harm each other, with the strong exploiting the weak. The breakdown of family ties and the erosion of the concepts of rights and duties contribute to anarchy and natural calamities. To escape this dire state, people come together and elect a person believed to possess divine qualities.

Notably, Brihaspati's emphasis shifts from contract-based governance to divine ordination, as he appears to doubt the efficacy of governing based solely on contractual arrangements. His viewpoint aligns with the ancient notion that the state arises from human selfishness and greed, and its purpose is to restrain these negative tendencies and ensure that righteousness prevails in society. Brihaspati contends that the state's fundamental purpose is to maintain order and foster a sense of duty among the populace.

In conclusion, Brihaspati's teachings on governance underscore the historical context of strife and the need for authority to counteract anarchy and human selfishness. His works reinforce the ancient idea that the state emerges to serve specific ends, primarily ensuring that individuals fulfill their station-based duties in a harmonious and ordered society (MEHTA, 1992) ^[1].

2. Brihaspati's Vision of Governance in Ancient India

Brihaspati, the ancient Indian sage, emphasizes the importance of the doctrine of the mean for kings. He dedicates a comprehensive chapter to delineate the duties of a king, firmly asserting that a good ruler is rewarded in heaven while a bad one faces damnation. People, in paying their revenues, enter into a reciprocal relationship with the king, where the ruler is duty-bound to serve his subjects. The king's

flourishing, according to Brihaspati, is intrinsically linked to his service to the people, and any neglect of their welfare is seen as defiance of God's will. He further asserts that the king's divinity lies not in himself but in his actions, particularly those that protect the virtuous and punish the wicked.

Brihaspati's vision of a good king combines elements of Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. A virtuous ruler, in his view, must engage in acts of charity, safeguard the people's wealth, foster economic development, and establish a reign characterized by righteousness, love, and benevolence. This amalgamation of divine attributes highlights the king's critical role in shaping the socio-political landscape in ancient India.

Duties, Responsibilities, and Governance

Within the confines of his framework, Brihaspati outlines the king's requisites, including education, wealth, property, friends, and efficient officials. He places substantial importance on the education of the prince, the coronation ceremony, and the king's duties, all aimed at making the king a leader who inspires the people to fulfill their roles within society. Brihaspati stresses the king's responsibility to protect his subjects from external threats, thieves, and powerful adversaries, with the caste system being a key tool for maintaining order and ensuring that individuals adhere to their societal roles. The king is entitled to one-sixth of the produce to fund these endeavors.

Moreover, Brihaspati emphasizes the need for a proactive ruler who encourages agriculture, commerce, and trade, as well as supports scholars and actively participates in community life. He underscores the importance of capable ministers and officials who are selected on merit through rigorous testing processes, playing pivotal roles in governing the state. In reality, while the king may wield formal power, it is often the ministers who exercise it. This ministerial role is so significant that they are likened to the king's mother and father, essential for the state's proper functioning.

Caste-Based Hierarchy and Elitism

While Brihaspati does emphasize merit in the selection of officials within the upper castes, his approach does not advocate for equality of opportunity. The Sukraniti does not adhere to hereditary office-holding, but it still maintains a caste-based political organization, with Brahmanas enjoying the highest status. Members of the lowest caste are explicitly excluded from becoming ministers, underlining the strong influence of the caste system. While merit is acknowledged within the upper castes, caste boundaries remain significant, making the system inherently elitist. Brihaspati strongly opposes nepotism in politics, advocating for the selection of officials based on rational standards of talent.

In sum, Brihaspati's vision of governance in ancient India revolves around the king's role as a divine ruler who must serve his people, protect their interests, and ensure the maintenance of a structured, caste-based society. His writings illustrate the dynamic intersection of religion, politics, and social hierarchy in early Indian civilization.

The Vital Role of the Treasury in Governance

The treasury holds a crucial place within the state's machinery, and its significance cannot be overstated. Without a robust treasury, no kingdom can hope to endure and prosper. Wealth plays a multifaceted role in state affairs, offering stability, facilitating infrastructural development like dam

construction, stimulating commerce, and fostering loyalty among the citizenry. Just as in the Mahabharata, the protection, growth, and judicious expenditure of wealth represent core principles of effective kingship.

Brihaspati, in line with this tradition, emphasized the imperative of safeguarding the treasury. Neglecting this duty could lead to the invasion of enemies and the potential downfall of the entire kingdom. He went a step further by providing detailed guidelines for the organization of the finance department, ensuring that the state's financial affairs were well-managed.

Furthermore, Brihaspati introduced a system of graded taxation, a mechanism designed to maintain a balanced flow of revenue while simultaneously bolstering the state's wealth. This approach aimed to prevent the depletion of income sources and contribute to the overall prosperity and stability of the kingdom. In essence, the treasury's prudent management and the maintenance of financial equilibrium were indispensable components of effective governance. (MEHTA, 1992)^[1].

3. Brihaspati's Vision of Justice in Governance

Brihaspati's political ideas are distinguished by his comprehensive system of justice, underscoring its vital role in the king's rule. He firmly believes that the future of a king hinges on the proper administration of justice. According to Brihaspati, justice must adhere to established codes and scriptures, and no transgressor, even if they happen to be a close relative of the king, should escape punishment. The ultimate objective of justice is to foster an environment in which the king can satisfy all his subjects' needs.

Elaborate Rules for Justice Administration

Brihaspati provides meticulous guidelines for the administration of justice, including crime detection, evidence collection, and witness examination. He emphasizes that judgments should be the result of a thorough examination of the arguments presented by both sides, supported by credible evidence. Brihaspati advocates for a hierarchical court system and suggests that judgments should be based on equity reached through consensus. Judges are required to possess good character and must either be Brahmanas or come from respectable families, but they should never be chosen from the lower castes. Furthermore, these judges should receive adequate compensation for their service. The justice system is decentralized, with significant importance placed on local assemblies responsible for administering justice at the village and district levels. The highest court of appeal is the king's court, where lower courts can present new cases and review old ones. High courts have the authority to review district and lower court judgments.

The Pursuit of Truth and Punishment of the Guilty

The primary objectives of the justice system in Brihaspati's view are the search for truth, the punishment of wrongdoers, and the eradication of the causes of people's suffering through the lens of truth. He identifies four sources of law: right (dharma), conduct, character, and the king's decree. Right is derived from scriptures, while conduct is guided by prudence. Brihaspati underscores the importance of combining scriptures with prudence to prevent the destruction of right. Character is influenced by conventions, societal customs, and family traditions. The king's decree, however, marks a significant departure from earlier perspectives. In Vyasa's writings, the king was seen as a mere recipient of laws created

outside the political realm. In contrast, Brihaspati grants the king the authority to enact laws, a pivotal shift that empowered the king to influence various aspects of life. This idea later found its most explicit expression in Narada's and Kautilya's works, fundamentally altering the king's role in shaping the legal landscape.

Brihaspati's Vision of Punishment and Caste-Based Justice

Brihaspati introduces a system of proportionate punishment in his political ideology, primarily aimed at ensuring that individuals adhere to their prescribed duties based on their caste status. A pivotal aspect of his system is the principle that no one, regardless of their influence or power, is exempt from the law. However, the nature of punishment varies according to one's caste and status within the social hierarchy.

Brihaspati's scheme underscores the idea that Brahmanas enjoy a more favorable position than members of other castes. For instance, a Brahmana cannot face the death penalty; the most severe punishment for them would involve amputation of their hands and exile from the kingdom. He outlines four categories of punishment: warnings, public humiliation as a reminder of one's responsibilities, fines, and the death penalty. While the first two fall under the jurisdiction of Brahmana courts, the latter two fall within the purview of the king's authority. It's important to note that the category of death penalty included not only capital punishment but also physical suffering and torture, particularly directed toward the lower castes. Some of these punishments may now be considered barbaric, marking a departure from the tradition of compassion and forgiveness.

Brihaspati, however, places a strong emphasis on not only punishing wrongdoers but also on preventing crime and rehabilitating criminals. He suggests measures for crime prevention and criminal reform. Notably, Brihaspati's system grants Brahmanas a role in administering punishment alongside the king, representing a significant shift in power dynamics. This arrangement appears to merge the domains of Brahmanical and Kshatriya authority. However, it remains unclear whether Brahmanas could interfere in temporal matters or administer punishment independently of the state. The doctrine of simultaneous jurisdiction introduced complexities, and Brihaspati's writings do not thoroughly address these challenges. (MEHTA, 1992)^[1]

4. Revealing the True Nature of Ancient Indian Judiciary

India boasts the world's most ancient judicial system, with a lineage of unparalleled historical significance. However, before delving into the intricacies of ancient Indian justice, it is imperative to issue a cautionary note. Numerous British authors, perhaps due to ignorance, imperialistic motives, or a disdain for Indian culture, have portrayed Indian Jurisprudence and its legal system in a grossly distorted light. Statements like Henry Mayne's description of the legal system as "an apparatus of cruel absurdities" or the characterization of British rule as an experiment to govern a foreign population with different traditions and customs are unfounded. An Anglo-Indian jurist made the following remark about what he called "the oriental habits of life" of the Indians before the British turned up in India: "It (British rule in India) is a record of experiments made by foreign rulers to govern alien races in a strange land, to adapt European institutions to Oriental habits of life, and to make definite laws supreme amongst peoples who had always associated government with arbitrary and uncontrolled authority."

(Cowell, 1872) [2] While Alan Gledhill, a retired member of the Indian Civil Service, wrote that when the British seized power in India, "there was a dearth of legal principles." (Gledhill, 1964) [3]

These misrepresentations, often rooted in colonial prejudices, have contributed to a distorted image of the Indian judicial system both within and outside India. To unearth the genuine essence of ancient Indian jurisprudence, one must turn to the original texts. A meticulous study of these texts reveals the following:

1. Indian jurisprudence was firmly grounded in the rule of law, where even the King was subject to legal constraints, and arbitrary power was foreign to Indian political theory.
2. The King's right to rule was conditional on fulfilling certain duties, and the breach of these duties led to the forfeiture of kingship.
3. Judges were independent and bound only by the law, maintaining high standards of ability, learning, integrity, impartiality, and independence.
4. The Indian judiciary was structured as a hierarchy of judges, with a Chief Justice (Praadvivaka) presiding at the apex, and higher courts had the authority to review decisions of lower courts.
5. Disputes were resolved in accordance with principles of natural justice similar to modern-day judicial processes.
6. Rules of procedure and evidence were akin to contemporary practices.
7. Supernatural methods of proof, such as ordeals, were discouraged.
8. In criminal trials, an accused could not be punished unless guilt was proven in accordance with the law.
9. Civil cases followed a four-stage process similar to modern trials, encompassing plaint, reply, hearing, and decree.
10. Essential doctrines like *res judicata* (*prang nyaya*) were integral to Indian jurisprudence.
11. All trials, both civil and criminal, involved a bench of multiple judges, rather than a single judge.
12. Decisions of all courts, except the King's, were subject to appeal or review based on established principles.
13. The core duty of the Court was to administer justice "without favor or fear."

In essence, the ancient Indian legal system upheld principles of justice, fairness, and accountability, challenging the misconceptions perpetuated by certain colonial-era writings. It is crucial to turn to the original sources to appreciate the true depth and significance of this ancient judicial heritage. (Dhavan, 1960) [4].

5. Conclusion

Brihaspati was an ancient Indian political philosopher who made significant contributions to our understanding of statecraft, justice, and the role of the king. His political philosophy was elitist and conservative, but it also contained some progressive elements. Brihaspati believed that kingship was necessary to maintain order and harmony in society. He also believed that the king should be a wise, knowledgeable, and compassionate ruler who promoted the welfare of his subjects. However, he also believed that the king had a duty to punish those who threatened social peace. Brihaspati also believed that the king's authority derived from divine intervention and that the people had no right to disobey or rebel against the king.

Brihaspati also made significant contributions to our understanding of justice and punishment. He believed that justice is essential for the king's success and that it must be administered impartially, regardless of the offender's social status. He also developed elaborate rules for the detection of crime, the collection of evidence, and the examination of witnesses. Brihaspati's system of justice was based on four sources of law: *dharma* (righteousness), conduct, character, and the king's orders. He believed that the king had the authority to create new laws, but that these laws should be consistent with *dharma* and the other sources of law. Brihaspati's ideas about justice and punishment were significant because they represented a departure from the heroic tradition of compassion and forgiveness. He also emphasized the importance of the prevention of crime and the reform of the criminal. However, Brihaspati's system of justice was not without its flaws. For example, he gave *brahmana* judges more power than judges from other castes. Overall, Brihaspati was an influential political philosopher whose ideas continue to be studied and debated today. His work provides us with valuable insights into the ancient Indian political tradition.

6. Methodology

Research encompasses a range of methodologies, including descriptive research, applied research, correlation research, activity research, evaluation research, and explanatory research, among others. Descriptive studies fall under the broader category of analytical research. Specifically, within descriptive research, three distinct types are identifiable:

1. Post-incident investigation: This type involves the study of events or incidents that have already occurred, aiming to provide an account and analysis of what transpired.
2. Historical research: Historical research entails the exploration and examination of past events, developments, and contexts to gain insights into their significance and impact.
3. Analytical research: Analytical research is a subset of descriptive research, characterized by a detailed examination and interpretation of a subject's various facets and characteristics.

In the current work, a descriptive research methodology has been employed. The primary focus of this research is to utilize secondary sources of information, such as published documents, books, and academic journals. This approach ensures a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the subject, allowing for a detailed analysis and understanding of the topic under investigation.

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