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► **To cite this version:**

Emmanuel Francis. Brahmadeya/agrahāra. The Encyclopedia of Ancient History: Asia and Africa, 2021, 10.1002/9781119399919.eahaa00519 . hal-03426680

HAL Id: hal-03426680

<https://hal.science/hal-03426680>

Submitted on 12 Nov 2021

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Brahmadeya/agrahāra

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A *brahmadeya*, a term known under several variants, literally means “gift to Brahmins.” Along with synonyms such as *agrahāra* it designates a grant to one or several Brahmin householders, liturgical and scriptural experts, that is to say members of the first of the four orders of the Varṇa-Jāti system (see VARṆA-JĀTI SYSTEM (CASTE)) of ancient Indian society.

Most typically, this type of gift consisted of land, originally as rights to a share in the crops of the donated land and, as the institution developed, in administrative rights over the donated land. The gift was proclaimed by a royal authority, the more so when the recipients enjoyed the share normally imparted to the king. The gift was often made at the request of a local magnate, who also gave parts of his share of crops. The grant was regularly recorded and inscribed on a copper-plate charter (see COPPER PLATE GRANTS), and then presented to the recipients as an enduring title deed. Along with the land, privileges – for instance, on water resources – and exemptions of taxes and other duties were also conferred to the beneficiaries.

The *brahmadeya* can be contrasted with the *DEVADĀNA*, “gift to god,” somewhat similar, except that the recipient was not a Brahmin or Brahmins, but the god of a specific temple. The institution of a *brahmadeya* could lead to the relocation of the recipients near the donated land, although it is sometimes unclear whether the settlement of the Brahmin recipients preceded the gift.

In South India, such lands came to be designated by placenames ending with the term *caturvedimaṅgalam*, “auspicious place for experts in the four Vedas,” that is, the Brahmin householders who were responsible for the transmission and interpretation of the four

Vedas and the performance of liturgies derived from them. Typically, the suffix *caturved-imaṅgalam* was preceded by the name of the donor king who issued the grant.

Various reasons motivated such gifts. They were an act of piety, sustaining the sociocosmic order (*dharma*) and generating religious merit (*punya*) for the donor. They were also a political act, as, by agreeing to the request of a local magnate, the king made him an ally or confirmed his allegiance. Furthermore, such land grants contributed to the agricultural development of the kingdom.

In South India, as the institution developed and the rights conferred expanded, the recipients organized themselves in a local corporate body, an assembly of Brahmins (*sabhā*), managing the locality’s estates. Such local assemblies have left numerous inscriptions on temple walls recording their administrative decisions concerning their lands.

Grants, such as *brahmadeyas* and *devadānas* – both attested from the second quarter of the first millennium, with *devadāna* becoming more common in the second millennium – have been considered by historians as one of the chief factors in the fragmentation of royal authority, as royal prerogatives and administrative power were typically transferred to the recipients, leading to a supposed segmentation of state power. This view, however, has been contested.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The present contribution is a result of the project DHARMA “The Domestication of ‘Hindu’ Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and Southeast Asia.” This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 809994).

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