

Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe

Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives

Edited by

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KINGS, ASCETICS, AND BRAHMINS: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF ANCIENT INDIAN RELIGIONS

Patrick Olivelle

This paper is partly substantive – I want to explore the major contours of the history of religions in ancient India – and partly methodological – I want to argue for a particular way to study this period of Indian history and especially to argue against some ways in which that history has been studied in the past by some scholars. I want to examine how we should research this period, how we should teach this period to our students, and how we should encourage the educated public to envisage this period of ancient Indian history.

When we deal with the religions of ancient India we have first of all to deal with the problem of labels. What do we call them? Two easy terms have become current: Hinduism and Buddhism. But such labels are not without their problems. They reflect to varying degrees modern and often scholarly classifications. Projecting them into the distant historical past, especially in reified form, can cause historical distortions and anachronistic conclusions. The dynamic nature of all human realities, including religion, is often hidden behind these essentialized designations.

The categories “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are, of course, extremely problematic. In their current usage with regard to the majority religion in India, they are categories invented within the colonial context with the need felt by colonial powers to classify the people they ruled. The term “Hindu” or a parallel indigenous category is absent in pre-colonial India. Some scholars have thrown up their hands in despair and advised us against using the term at all. But that is not feasible, given the ubiquity of this category not only in scholarship but also as a term of self-reference among millions of contemporary Hindus, and the practical need for a short-hand term. The term has also become part of Indian constitutional law, which defines “Hindu” negatively – anyone who is not a Moslem, Christian, Jew, or Parsi is a Hindu by definition, or rather by exclusion, thus making Sikhs, Bud-

dhists, and Jains legally Hindus.¹ The fact that a colonial and scholarly term has become an emic term of self-reference should not blind us to the problems inherent in such a category. Once we go beyond the 19th century, the category “Hinduism” poses great difficulties, even though we continue to use it in scholarship as an umbrella concept or a shorthand. But it is clearly unwise to use this category as a tool of analysis for the period under discussion in this paper. People talk, for example, about the Buddha being a Hindu before he became a Buddhist!! Or say that the Buddha preached against Hinduism!! These statements make no historical sense. The problem with such a label is that it makes us assume that a sociologically and demographically identifiable group answering to that label existed at that time, an assumption that is clearly untenable. Such a category makes sense only within the mind of the scholar who looks at a large spectrum of data, demarcates some of them, and then gives them a label. Such category formation is quite legitimate as a scholarly enterprise, but the danger is that we often think that those categories were actual historical realities. Today we have a demography within India and the Indian diaspora that answers to the identification “Hindu”. But it did not exist even four hundred years ago, let alone two thousand.

“Buddhism” may seem a less problematic category, especially because it is what can be called a “founded religion”, and we are used to dealing with such religions that we think have definite historical contours and identities. Yet, if we are attempting to describe, much less analyze, the religious landscape of northern India in the middle of the first millennium BCE, we would be hard pressed to find “Buddhism” there in the way we conceive it as a category today. There were ascetics, often living in communities, who professed faith in the preachings of Siddhārtha Gautama; there may have been even some public monuments associated with him, and lay individuals who showed partiality toward this ascetic sect. But it was one among many ascetic groups vying for influence and patronage among rich and politically influential people. “Buddhism” has to be understood and analyzed within its on-the-ground historical context and its multi-faceted interactions with other religious and societal groups.

¹ See The Constitution of India, Part III, Article 25: “the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina, or Buddhist religion”. See also The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956.

If we could for a moment give up grasping, as the Buddha would say, grasping at labels as a vehicle for understanding, then perhaps we can more fully understand the variegated tapestry that Indian society and religion was. I want to focus here on the intersection between the realms of the socio-political and the religious with the strong implication of the dynamic nature of this interaction and of the intimate connection between religion, society, and political formations. I want to lay special emphasis on the dynamic and changing nature of ancient Indian religions and to counter the implicit, and sometimes explicit, assumption of a “changeless India” fostered by colonial and orientalist discourse.

As we look today at the ascetic and world-renouncing ideologies at the heart of the religious reformations in northern India in the middle of the first millennium BCE, it is well to take note of the kinds of rhetoric on this topic we have heard from modern scholars and to not fall into the same trap. The convenient category Hinduism has often been used as a reality out there rather than as a category for organizing our own thoughts; it has often been reified and essentialized so as to make it immune to change and diversity. It has been made a-historical. We need to put history back into Hinduism. History implies change, change that is not natural or automatic but created by human agency. Unfortunately, this is the type of change that is far too often either explicitly or implicitly denied to India with the projected image of the “changeless India”. It has been exacerbated by the western image, often absorbed by Indians themselves, of a mystical east in contrast to the materialist west. The mystical is timeless and eternal and transcends history and historical vicissitudes. This attitude is typified in Albert Schweitzer’s book *Indian Thought and its Development*. He writes about the “world negating” thought of India which he believed was at the heart of Indian religions: “When Hellenistic thought turns towards world and life negation, it is because in the end it begins to have misgivings about the world and life affirmation which for centuries had seemed a matter of course ... In the thought of India, on the other hand, world and life negation does not originate in a similar experience. It is there from the very beginning, self-originated, born as it were in a cloudless sky:”² nice poetry, but historically inaccurate. This sort of rhetoric is infrequent, although not totally absent, in con-

² Schweitzer, Albert, *Indian Thought and its Development*, New York: Beacon Press 1960 (1936), 19.

temporary scholarly discourse; yet attitudes underlying Schweitzer's statement are discernible even among serious scholars.

We may excuse this sort of exaggeration and essentialism in a Christian theologian like Schweitzer, but surely we have a right to expect better from the pre-eminent sociologist of the 20th century, Max Weber. But that is not the case. The category he uses is "Buddhism". In his excellent recent book on religious nationalism in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan anthropologist H. L. Seneviratne³ has drawn our attention to the insidious propensity of Max Weber to slide down the slippery slope from his "ideal-type" to historical reality in the context of Buddhism.

Weber's "ancient Buddhism" was more an extrapolation from an essentialized Buddhist doctrine than an abstract of monastic life as it was actually lived ... His typology of world religions needed an "other worldly mysticism", and he invented one in his conception of "ancient Buddhism". In Weber's work, "ancient Buddhism", logically meant to be an ideal type, expresses itself as an empirical reality. This indeed is the general problem with the ideal type as an analytical construct: those who work with ideal types sometimes proceed as if they were real.

This is a problem similar to the one I mentioned about the category of "Hinduism" – once you have constructed a category, even with appropriate caveats, it is a slippery slope to considering it as something out there. An ideal type becomes an objective reality, and a constructed category becomes a historical religion.

Coming to contemporary times, the well-known anthropologist McKim Marriott⁴ edited a widely read and cited volume *India through Hindu Categories* with the assumption that there is out there within a three-thousand-year history in a vast subcontinent a set of "Hindu categories" that can be recovered. "Hindu" here is an essentialized and monolithic category, resistant to change and enduring unchanged through the centuries.⁵ Another anthropologist, R. S. Khare⁶, in many

³ Seneviratne, H. L., *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999, 1–2.

⁴ Marriott, McKim, *India through Hindu Categories. Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Occasional Studies, 5. New Delhi: Sage 1990.

⁵ Olivelle, Patrick, "Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of the Dharma Literature", in: *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32 (1998) 190–216.

⁶ Khare, R. S., *The Hindu Hearth and Home: Culinary Systems Old and New in North India*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House 1976; Khare, R. S., *Culture and Reality: Essays on the Hindu System of Managing Foods*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study 1976;

of his fine writings on food speaks of the “Hindu ideology of food” as if such an ideology remained intact from the Upaniṣadic writings several centuries before the common era to the comments of a modern taxi driver in Delhi.⁷ The very influential book *Homo Hierarchicus* by the French social-anthropologist Louis Dumont⁸, likewise, assumes an unchanging caste structure based on an immutable ideology of purity throughout the millennia of Indian history.⁹

Interestingly and ironically, this view of an eternal and unchanging religion is taken straight out of the Brahmanical play book. Mīmāṃsā, the dominant tradition of exegesis within Brahmanism, sees the Veda not only as eternal but also as without an author, human or divine (*apauruṣeya*). It sees all other authoritative texts, such as the Mahābhārata, the texts on Dharma, and the Purāṇas – all the texts comprehended in the amorphous category called *smṛti* – as deriving their authority from the Veda in so far as they reflect the memory of Vedic injunctions now lost but recalled by the sages who composed the *smṛti* texts. Thus the entire Vedic tradition can be presented as eternal, agentless, and outside human history. The complex of doctrines, duties, rites, and practices comprehended under the term *dharma* also participates in this eternity; *dharma* is found in the Veda. The Veda thus stands as the mythical font – unchanging and eternal – of the tradition, every change and every new doctrine or institution being “discovered” within it through laboriously elaborated techniques of interpretation. It is unfortunate that modern scholarship that should deconstruct these theological constructs have instead often adopted the same strategies.

1. Ideology of Varṇa and the Vedic Value System

I now turn to the historical development of the religious traditions of ancient India. Given the constraints of space, I will select one significant element of the ancient Indian world as seen through Brahmanical eyes for

Khare, R. S. (ed.), *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1992.

⁷ See my review: “Food in India: A Review Essay”, in: *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 23, 367–380.

⁸ Dumont, Louis, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Revised Edition. Tr. M. Sainsbury, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980 (1966).

⁹ See my critique: “Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of the Dharma Literature”, in: *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, 190–216.

comment and analysis, along with the values underlying it and the entire Brahmanical world view. And that is the system of *varṇa*, the classification of human society into four groups: Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. Even though this classification is presented in ancient Brahmanical texts, including the oldest, the Ṛgveda, as a descriptive formulation – that is, as a faithful depiction of ancient Indian social stratification – we must not be deceived; behind the descriptive and disinterested rhetoric lies hidden a prescriptive ideology based on the supremacy of the Brāhmaṇa within a hierarchical arrangement of society. The famous Purṣua Hymn of the Ṛgveda (10.90) presents the four *varṇas* as originating at the very moment of creation from different parts of the primeval Man sacrificed and dismembered:

His mouth was the Brāhmaṇa his arms were made into the Rājanya;
his thighs were made into the Vaiśya; and from his feet the Śūdra was
born.

These four social classes of human beings are presented as different species, distinguished by their very origin within the creative process. They are as distinct from each other as horse and cow, and sun and moon, which also originated through the same process:

From it horses were born ... The cows were born from it ... From his
mind was born the moon; from his eye the sun was born.

Here we find a clear example of the process of “naturalization” whereby contingent humanly created categories are presented as natural and therefore unchangeable realities.

Whenever the specter of *varṇa* is raised, or whenever in the Dharmaśāstras – the books of religious and civil law authored by Brahmins – the duty to uphold the *varṇadharmā* is enunciated, we can see the Brahmanical ideology of hierarchy at work. This is especially evident in the middle and late Vedic texts, the Brāhmaṇa and Upaniṣads, in which the ideology of the *brahma-kṣatra* alliance – between the priestly power and the political power – is formulated. This relationship, at once fraught with danger and contestation, was yet presented as beneficial to both; the two flourish only when allied to each other and wither when separated. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.11) locates this complicated yet intimate relationship between the two once again within the very creative moment:

In the beginning this world was only *brahman*, only one. Because it was
only one, *brahman* had not fully developed. It then created the ruling

power, a form superior to and surpassing itself, that is, the ruling powers among the gods – Indra, Varuṇa, Soma, Rudra, Parjanya, Yama, Mṛtyu, and Īśāna. Hence there is nothing higher than the ruling power. Accordingly, at a royal anointing a Brahmin pays homage to a Kṣatriya by prostrating himself. He extends this honor only to the ruling power. Now, the priestly power (*brahman*) is the womb of the ruling power. Therefore, even if a king should rise to the summit of power, it is to the priestly power that he returns in the end as to his own womb. So, one who hurts the latter harms his own womb and becomes so much the worse for harming someone better than him.

Here the Kṣatriya is presented as arising from the Brāhmaṇa, who is the womb and mother of the Kṣatriya. It is the special duty of the Kṣatriya to protect the Brāhmaṇa, as pointed out in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (8.17) significantly within the rite for anointing a new king:

Do ye proclaim him, O men, as overlord and overlordship, as paramount ruler and father of paramount rulers, as self ruler and self rule, as sovereign and sovereignty, as supreme lord and supreme lordship, as king and father of kings. The *kṣatra* (royal power) has been born, the *kṣatriya* has been born, the suzerain of all creation has been born, the eater of the commoners (*viś*) has been born, the slayer of foes has been born, the guardian of *Brāhmaṇas* has been born, the guardian of *dharma* has been born. (Tr. Keith with modification)

As Brian Smith¹⁰ has shown, the metaphor of food and eater is commonly used in Brahmanical texts to show the relationship of power and dominion among the upper and the lower *varṇas*. The *Brāhmaṇas* and Kṣatriyas together represent the eaters and the Vaiśyas (and by extension the Śūdras) the food.

The value system underlying this Brahmanical world view is one centered on the married householder and is expressed in the theology of debts articulated in several texts from this period. The *Taittiriya Saṃhitā* (6.3.10.5) says that a Brāhmaṇa at his very birth is born with three debts to the seers, the gods, and the ancestors. He is freed from these debts by studying the Vedas during his Vedic studentship (*brahmacarya*), by performing sacrifices, and by procreating offspring to continue the family line.

¹⁰ Smith, Brian K., "Eaters, Food, and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India: A Dietary Guide to a Revolution in Values", in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990) 177–205.

At the center of these obligations stands the married householder who is the only person entitled to perform a Vedic sacrifice, which requires the participation of the wife, and to beget offspring. Going back to an old conception of the son as the father's immortality, the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (7.13) proclaims:

A debt he pays in him
And immortality he gains,
The father who sees the face
Of his son born and alive.

The married householder thus represents the ideal religious life within the Vedic world. He is the *homo religiosus*.

Both these ideological cornerstones of the Brahmanical world – the supremacy of the Brāhmaṇa articulated in the *varṇa* system and the centrality of the married householder enunciated in the theology of debts, which are precisely the kind of “world and life affirmation” that Albert Schweitzer would deny in the case of India – will be challenged by the new religions and the new political formations arising in the eastern regions of the Ganges valley in the subsequent centuries.

2. *Shifting Geography of Power: Magadha*

Between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE we see an important geographical shift in socio-political and religious formations from the north-central region of the Ganges-Yamuna Doab, the area of the old Kuru-Pañcālas (today's Uttar Pradesh), farther east to an area centered on what came to be known as Magadha (today's Bihar). We already see this shift in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that presents the philosopher-king Janaka and his favorite Brāhmaṇa priest-theologian Yājñavalkya, both located in the region of Videha in north-eastern India. It is this region that gave birth to the major ascetical religions of Buddhism, Jainism, and the Ājīvika sect. The recent book by Johannes Bronkhorst¹¹, appropriately entitled *Greater Magadha*, argues for the dominant role played by this region in the religious, philosophical, and political developments in India during the middle of the first millennium BCE. Without repeating Bronkhorst's detailed account, I

¹¹ Bronkhorst, Johannes, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India*, Leiden: Brill 2007.

want here simply to enumerate some of the major innovations that occurred during this period in the north-eastern region of India, innovations that at one level challenged the western Brahmanical ideology and at another contributed some of the best known features of ancient Indian religion and culture.

These include the major features of the emerging ascetic culture centered around the wandering mendicant to which we will turn shortly. The ascetic culture of Magadha presented a value system that was in stark contrast to the core values of the Brahmanical religion. Ascetic values included the following: celibacy with the attendant rejection of the centrality of marriage, family, and procreation; mendicancy implying poverty and abstention from economic activities; itinerant mode of life, rejecting stability of domicile and social structures including caste; abandonment of fire and ritual activities that were central to the Brahmanical religion; distinct ochre-colored garments or even total nudity; and the cultivation of mystical knowledge through various techniques of physical and mental training.

On the ideological side, we see the rise of novel doctrines that were to characterize later Indian religion and civilization. These include the following: belief in rebirth and the ethicization of the rebirth process through the doctrine of *karma* and karmic retribution; the doctrine of *saṃsāra* that saw rebirth as an essentially negative condition defined as suffering and bondage; and finally the belief in the possibility of escape from the bondage of *saṃsāra* into a state of absolute freedom (*mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*) through techniques of moral, physical, and mental discipline, yogic techniques that came to define the ascetic cultures and much of later Indian religions.

On the sociological side, we see the development of urban centers, formation of complex and large monarchical states, economic development, facility of travel and trade, and the rise of what we would call today an affluent middle class. The surplus economy permitted a class of economically unproductive people including religious mendicants.

3. *The Rise of New Religions: Buddhism and Jainism*

What happened in Magadha during the middle of the first millennium BCE was seminal and changed the future course of Indian religious history. The most visible way in which this period was to mark the rest of Indian history was the emergence of new religious movements,

two of which, Buddhism and Jainism, were to become major Indian and world religions.

What distinguished these two religions, especially Buddhism, was the institutionalization of asceticism into monastic orders, especially the Buddhist *saṅgha*. This permitted the development of religious institutions and monumental buildings, the creation of a literary corpus of sacred texts that paralleled the older Vedic canon, and in a special way the flow of patronage both economic and political into the new religions. In all these areas the new religions were able to challenge effectively the Vedic religion and the Brahmanical religious monopoly on many fronts. We also see the emergence of language politics, with the new religions rejecting the sacred language Sanskrit in favor of the vernaculars in their preaching and textual composition. For the first time in India, we have multiple scriptural traditions, the Vedic being no longer unique, and multiple kinds of religious virtuosi, Brahmins being no longer unique.

Although each of these ascetic traditions developed monastic rules and doctrinal tenets that were distinct, it is clear that both inherited the general ascetic culture and many of the ascetic practices discussed above. Yet each presented in novel ways the uniqueness of its own founder, Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha, and Mahāvīra, the Jina. They were clearly charismatic personalities who drew large ascetic followings. In opposition to the practice of the Vedic tradition, however, these religions ascribed to their founders unique and absolute authority with respect to doctrines, morals, and the path to liberation they discovered. For the first time in Indian theological history, a single person was invested with absolute authority with respect to truth. In Buddhist exegetical theology, for example, the doctrine of *buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha, prevailed as the litmus test for the authenticity of any scriptural passage.

One way in which the founders and their doctrines were exalted was the use of royal or imperial symbols and vocabulary with respect to them. The founders of these ascetic groups were called *jina*, “conquerer”; they were called *cakravartin*, “roller of the wheels” or universal emperor. The Buddha’s doctrine was compared to a wheel, a metonym for the war chariot and conquest; and his first sermon is the *dharmacakrapravartanasūtra*, “the Sūtra that set the wheel of *Dharma* rolling”. The Buddha’s teaching is *sāsana*, the counterpart of a royal edict. These are all clearly royal symbols used, deliberately I think, to define new ascetic groups and new religious ideologies as better suited

for a new royal age. Siddhārtha Gautama and Mahāvīra are, of course, given royal pedigrees. The strategy is obvious: the new religions are presented as the ones best suited to the new age of royal power, large states, an affluent mercantile community, and urban centers.

Why these two traditions, the Buddhist and the Jain, among the many ascetic sects that existed at that time, succeeded in surviving and even flourishing until contemporary times, while other ascetic groups either never organized themselves to an extent that permitted them to become historically identifiable traditions or, like the Ājīvikas¹², withered over time, cannot be answered with any degree of certainty. One factor in their development, however, was their success in attracting patronage, especially political patronage, an issue to which I will turn shortly.

There are indications in the Buddhist Vinaya, the corpus of Buddhist monastic rules, itself that the Buddha or the formulators of these rules were keenly aware of the importance of public perceptions; it contains elements that we would today call PR. Many of the occasions for the Buddha promulgating particular rules are the negative reaction of the lay public to the behavior of some of the Buddhist monks. The Buddha is depicted as reacting to this negative perception and forbidding that behavior. The Buddha's "middle path", the desire to avoid extremes, also plays into this public perception. The reasons why the Buddha or the early Buddhist community wanted to cater to public sensibilities remain unstated; but at least one of these reasons was without doubt the need for public support and patronage, especially the support of the urbanized upper and middle classes, for the community of Buddhist monks.

4. *Aśoka: Religious Reforms and Imperial Formation*

Unfortunately, apart from Buddhist and other religious texts, whose dates are at best uncertain, we do not have independent evidence of state formations, political ideologies, or royal patronage of religious communities prior to the edicts and inscriptions of Aśoka in the middle of the 3rd century BCE. The invasion by Alexander the Great of the far north-western region of the Indian subcontinent in 327–324 BCE was followed by the rapid rise of the Maurya empire located in the

¹² Basham, A. L., *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas*, London: Luzac 1951.

eastern region of Magadha, to which we have already referred, with Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna) as its capital. Aśoka's grandfather, Candragupta, founded the empire in 320 BCE, which was greatly expanded and consolidated by Aśoka (268–233 BCE).

Aśoka left us the first extant writings of India in the extensive edicts recorded on rocks and pillars. These are the first firmly datable and localizable texts from ancient India. Their language, like that of the early Buddhist writings, is also a kind of vernacular *koine* (Prakrit) and not Sanskrit. In these edicts we find clear indications of royal interest and patronage of various religious traditions. The seventh Pillar Edict, for example, mentions that his Dharma-Mahāmātras, the Ministers of Dharma, were to look into the affairs of Brāhmaṇas, Ājīvakas, and Nirgranthas (Jains), as well as other ascetic communities. We know from other inscriptions that Aśoka considered himself a Buddhist and actually endowed several sites sacred to Buddhists. The inscriptions in the Barābar and Nāgārjunī Caves show that they were constructed and donated for the use of Ājīvakas ascetics.¹³

The major Aśokan reform that reverberated down the centuries, however, was the elimination from his imperial ideology the concept of “Brahmanical exceptionalism” most evident in the ideology of *varṇa* and of the *brahma-kṣatra* alliance that was central to the Brahmanical conception of society and kingship. To what extent the ideology of Brahmanical exceptionalism was adopted on the ground by early rulers is impossible to tell; but later Brahmanical reflections on the abandonment of this ideology by kings during the subsequent centuries clearly indicate that Aśokan reforms marked a turning point in the intersection between the political and the religious in ancient Indian society. The challenge to Brahmanical exceptionalism is most succinctly enunciated in the oft-repeated phrase in Aśokan inscriptions: *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa*, ascetics and Brāhmaṇas, as two classes of religious people worthy of respect and support. The Brāhmaṇa is now put on a par with the ascetic; they are mentioned, so to speak, in the same breath.

Aśoka's adoption of the ethics of *ahiṃsā* – not killing, not injuring living beings – also undercut one of the major factors underpinning Brahmanical exceptionalism and the special relationship between the Brahmin and the king. The Vedic sacrifice, which was at the heart

¹³ Basham 1951.

of what made the Brahmin exceptional and of indispensable service to the royal power, often involved the immolation of animals, especially the horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*) where a horse was immolated to enhance royal power and prestige. The use by Aśoka of the technical term *prahotavya* in prohibiting the killing of animals in Rock Edit 1, a term used specifically with regard to the killing of animals within the context of sacrifices, is a clear indication of imperial displeasure at animal sacrifice. The recent work of Harry Falk¹⁴ indicates that many of the Aśokan edicts were placed strategically near sites that had local religious significance and where animal sacrifices may have been carried out.

The Aśokan inscriptions also opens a new window into the society and religion of that period. A remarkable feature in these documents is that they do not mention the central tenet of early Brahmanical view of society, the system of *varṇas*. The term itself does not occur in the inscriptions, and nowhere is the division of society into four classes mentioned. Even the Brahmin is presented not as a social class but as a religious group paralleling the ascetic groups collectively called *śramaṇa*. This is a salutary warning to us not to see Brahmanical presentations of social reality as descriptive, but to see them as prescriptive and as ideologically driven.

The Aśokan reforms had broken the link between *brahma* and *kṣatra*, between priest and king. New religious formations were emerging requiring imperial attention and patronage. New ideologies were emerging with different conceptions of human life, morality, and society. This was the complex social, political, and religious dynamic in the period I have called “Between the Empires”, between the Aśokan empire of the 3rd century BCE and the Gupta empire of the 4th century CE.¹⁵

The period is vast and its history too complex to review within the compass of this presentation. As a way of getting a handle on this period and to highlight the centrality of the interaction between religion and politics, let me take up for comment undoubtedly the most central term and concept in the whole of Indian civilization. That term is Dharma.

¹⁴ Falk, Harry, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts: A Source-Book with Bibliography*, Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern 2006.

¹⁵ Olivelle 2006.

5. *The Emperor and the Ascetic: Political History of Dharma*

Because I have written several articles on the history of the term Dharma,¹⁶ and edited a volume containing studies by 18 scholars on the semantic history of this term¹⁷, I will only present here a synopsis of those findings. Briefly, then, the term emerges as a neologism (it is not found in cognate Indo-European languages, including Avestan) in the *Ṛgveda*, where it is used 68 times with a somewhat wide semantic range: foundation, institute, moral order.¹⁸

One would have expected that this term, which made such a promising start in the *Ṛgveda*, would grow in significance and centrality in the vocabulary of the middle and late Vedic periods to become the central concept it became in later Indian history. And this is precisely how it is presented in most studies of Indian religions. This, however, was not to be the case. Except for changing its gender from the neuter *dhárman* to the masculine *dharmah*, it became a marginal term in the later Vedic lexicon. Indeed, its use within the other Vedic Saṃhitās, the Brāhmaṇa, and even the Upaniṣads, which together form an enormous corpus of literature, is infrequent. Parallel to its relative infrequency, we can detect also a semantic restriction of the term. It is used most frequently with reference to Varuṇa, the heavenly king par excellence, and to his earthly counterpart. If we exclude verses cited from the *Ṛgveda* and repetitions, all the Yajurvedic Saṃhitās combined use it 28 times; in the enormous corpus of the Brāhmaṇas, it occurs just 13 times; and in the four ancient prose Upaniṣads, it is found in only 9 passages.

¹⁶ Olivelle, Patrick, “The Semantic History of Dharma. The Middle and Late Vedic Periods”, in: Patrick Olivelle (ed.), *Dharma: Studies in Its Semantic, Cultural, and Religious History*. Special issue of *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004) 491–511; Olivelle, Patrick, “Power of Words: The Ascetic Appropriation and the Semantic Evolution of dharma”, in: Patrick Olivelle, *Language, Texts, and Society: Explorations in Ancient Indian Culture and Religion*, Florence: University of Florence Press 2006; Olivelle, Patrick, “Explorations in the Early History of Dharmaśāstra”, in: Patrick Olivelle (ed.), *Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE*, Oxford University Press, New York 2006, 169–190.

¹⁷ Olivelle 2004.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the semantics of *dharma* in the *Ṛgveda*, see Horsch, Paul, “From Creation Myth to World Law: The Early History of *Dharma*”, in: Patrick Olivelle (ed.), *Dharma: Studies in Its Semantic, Cultural, and Religious History*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 2005, 1–26. English translation of 1967 German article; and Brereton, Joel, “*Dhárman* in the *Ṛgveda*”, in: Olivelle 2005, 27–67.

A startling statistical fact emerges from this: the term Dharma occurs 68 times within the relatively short *R̥gveda*, whereas it is used in just 51 independent passages in the vast literature of the middle and late Vedic periods. The semantic range of Dharma is by and large restricted to the sphere of the king, occurring most frequently within the context of the consecration of the king (*rāūjasūya*). The term is clearly not central to the theology and ritual exegesis of these Vedic texts. I think we need to rethink our assumptions regarding the centrality of Dharma within the cultural history of India. The term is also conspicuous by its marginality in the post-Vedic ritual literature of the Śrauta and the Gṛhya Sūtras.

By contrast we see that Dharma is employed by Aśoka as the pivotal concept in a new imperial ideology articulated in his brief edicts, where term is used over 100 separate times (excluding copies of the same edict given in different locations). I believe that Aśoka used Dharma as the central concept to construct an imperial ideology – one may even call it an imperial theology – that gave legitimacy to his rule and a religious/moral foundation to his empire. I think one can justifiably present Aśoka’s activities as an attempt to institute a civil religion to which not only all the citizens of his empire, but also people living in other parts of the world, could subscribe. The central concept in this new civil religion is Dharma.

Unlike the Vedic texts, however, Aśoka gives us quite a clear picture of what he meant by Dharma. In Rock Edict 3 he instructs his ministers to teach the Dharma in the following words: “Obedience to mother and father is good (*sādhu*). Giving (*dāna*) to friends, acquaintances, and relatives, and to Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas is good. Not killing is good. Spending little and possessing little is good.” Other lists add the proper treatment of slaves and servants. Similar sentiments are expressed frequently in the edicts, which he frequently refers to as “*dharmalipi*” – “inscriptions relating to *dharma*”, or perhaps “dharmic inscriptions”. In the long Pillar Edict 7, which was to be his last and where he uses *dharma* 30 times, he defines the practice of Dharma as consisting of compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness, and goodness. For Aśoka, then, Dharma was an essentially moral concept; and teaching Dharma, which Aśoka looked upon as one of his major imperial obligations, meant teaching his subject how to lead a good and moral life. For the first time we even have the translation of this term into Greek and Aramaic in Aśoka’s bi-lingual Minor Rock Edict IV of Kandahar, where the Greek *eusebeia*, meaning something

like piety, and the Aramaic *qsyt*, with a meaning related to truth, are used as equivalents of Dharma.

The semantic development of Dharma within the middle and late Vedic period that saw it closely associated with kingship made it a likely candidate for adoption by an ancient Indian emperor. But how did a term that had a restricted semantic compass, referring to social order and laws, become a broad ethical concept in the Aśokan inscriptions. I think for this we must look at the ascetic communities, especially Buddhism, that predated Aśoka.

This semantic transformation and the central position he accorded to Dharma, I believe, suggest that Aśoka's use of Dharma was mediated by its appropriation sometime before Aśoka by the emerging ascetic communities. This appropriation was probably part of the broader adoption of royal symbols and vocabulary by ascetic leaders and communities that I discussed above; remember that Dharma had become part of the royal vocabulary especially in the context of the royal consecration.

Within the historical religion of Buddhism, Dharma stands at the very heart of its theology, defining the very essence of what the Buddha, the Universal Emperor (*cakravartin*) of a new moral universe, is thought to have discovered. Dharma here defined the truth discovered by the Buddha, the truth that conferred authority on him. It forms part of the Triple Gem (*triratna*) that defined the core of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. In this transfer from king to ascetic, however, Dharma came to be redefined in terms of doctrine, especially moral doctrine, and it was given a centrality within religious discourse that it lacked in the Vedic lexicon. Especially in its use with regard to the non-monastic life of the Buddhist laity, one can see how Dharma came to acquire an essentially moral meaning, as in the five *śīlas*, or moral precepts, that they were expected to follow.

The term and the concept of Dharma acquired such a prominence and centrality through both Buddhism and the Aśokan imperial ideology and civil religion that it was impossible even for the Brahmanical tradition to ignore it. My hypothesis is that the emergence of the Dharmaśāstric literature, a genre of technical texts devoted to the concept of Dharma, first in the form of prose *sūtras* and then in metrical treatises beginning with Manu, was a direct consequence of Buddhist and Aśokan reforms. That a *śāstra*, an expert tradition of knowledge, be devoted to *dharma* would seem improbable from its marginal use within the theologies expressed in the middle and late

Vedic texts. Since the time of Aśoka Dharma came to define the very essence of the Brahmanical religion, and the term *varṇāśramadharmā*, the Dharma of social classes and orders of life, became a synonym for this tradition.

We have come a full circle. A brand new term invented by ancient Brahmanical poets of the Ṛgveda has become the central and defining term for the Brahmanical religion and way of life with considerable help from their rivals for religious authority and influence, the ascetic communities, and from an emperor with dreams of conquering the world through and for Dharma.

6. Foreign Emperors and the Resurgence of Brahmanism

The Maurya empire rapidly disintegrated after the death of Aśoka, and it came to an end in 185 BCE with the assassination of the last Maurya emperor, Bṛhadratha. Numerous political formations followed in northern India, but the ones that most influenced the religious and cultural history of the period were the kingdoms established by foreigners. There were, of course, the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms in the far north west resulting from Alexander's military expeditions. But in the centuries immediately before and after the beginning of the common era we have invasions by people from central Asia who established kingdoms in the western and central parts of north India; these were the Śakas and the Kushanas.

Kushana rulers became Buddhists and strong patrons of Buddhist institutions. We find this especially in the public visual presence of Buddhism in the architecture of the Kushana period, a time when few Hindu/Brahmanical structures were present. Foreign rule and Buddhist rule represented by the Kushanas, including the in-your-face challenge of Buddhist public monuments, were a double challenge to the Brahmanical conception of society, kingship, and the place of the Brahmin community within society.

It is within the context of the historical memory of the Maurya reforms, always recreated and re-imagined, and the contemporary reality of foreign rulers with strong Buddhist leanings that we much consider the major Brahmanical literary monuments of the period, especially the two Epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the major Dharmaśāstric texts such as that of Manu. Recent scholar-

ship represented by Madeline Biardeau¹⁹, Alf Hiltebeitel²⁰, and James Fitzgerald²¹ has seen the Brahmanical epics as implicit answers to the challenges posed by Maurya and other political reforms, as well as by Buddhism. I have argued that the legal text of Manu should also be seen as a Brahmanical response to this challenge.²²

This Brahmanical resurgence was directed especially at the ruling class to teach the proper way of being a king and to reestablish the old *brahma-kṣatra* alliance with the concept of Dharma now formulated in terms of *varṇa*, the ideological classification of society, and *āśrama*, the new theological formulation that accommodates asceticism within a scheme where the married householder still occupies the center stage. The recent study by Sheldon Pollock²³ on what he terms the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” where Sanskrit was adopted as the court language both in inscriptions and in court poetry (*kāvya*) also points in the direction of Brahmanical influence within new state formations. One question that Pollock does not ask or answer is why at this particular juncture in history the rulers found it necessary or advantageous to use a language that had until then been principally a language of liturgy and scholarship. One possible answer is that this may have been part of the Brahmanical resurgence represented by the Sanskrit epics; use of Sanskrit would clearly have given them greater access to and influence in the ruling courts. How they convinced the rulers that adopting Sanskrit was a good imperial strategy to consolidate power remains unclear. But the Brahmanical influence in this Sanskritization of court culture is unquestionable.

It is broadly within this period also that the recasting of the major ancient text of political science and statecraft, the *Arthaśāstra* ascribed to Kauṭilya, was carried out. As Mark McClish in his recent doctoral dissertation has shown, the ancient core of the *Arthaśāstra*, the so-called Prakaraṇa text, was devoid of the ideology of Brahmanical exceptionalism. It was the Brahmanical redaction of the work carried

¹⁹ Biardeau, Madeleine, *Le Mahābhārata: Un récit fondateur du brahmanisme et son interprétation*, Paris: Seuil 2002.

²⁰ Hiltebeitel, Alf, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2001.

²¹ Fitzgerald, James, *The Mahābhārata: 11. The Book of the Women, 12. The Book of Peace*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004.

²² Olivelle, Patrick, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, New York: Oxford University Press 2005, 37–41.

²³ Pollock, Sheldon, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2006.

out in the early centuries of the common era that saw both the division of the text into Adhyāyas (chapters) and the insertion of passages espousing Brahmanical exceptionalism.

What happened in northern India around the turn of the millennium from BCE to CE was historic in nature. Sheldon Pollock²⁵ refers to the rupture in cultural time that occurred as the birth of what he calls the Sanskrit Cosmopolis that would within a few centuries stretch from today's Pakistan and Kashmir in the west to Cambodia and Indonesia in the east, from Nepal in the north to Sri Lanka in the south, a cosmopolis that was much larger than any the world has seen in pre-modern times, a cosmopolis united not by political power but by the power of a language, Sanskrit, and a culture carried by it.

Quite counter-intuitively, this entry of Sanskrit from the religious to the public sphere was caused or at least facilitated by foreign rulers: the Śaka and Kushana rulers, who came from central Asia within a couple of centuries on either side of the turn of the millennium to put down Indian roots.

The Brahmanical resurgence was complete when the next major empire in ancient India, that of the Gupta dynasty, arose in 320 CE. Often called the Golden Age of ancient India, the Gupta Empire was not only rich but also the driving force in various areas of cultural and religious expression, including art, architecture, poetry, and law. In all these areas we see a strong Brahmanical imprint. In an interesting way we have come a full circle with Brāhmaṇas at the center of kingly power, directing and controlling it through ministerial appointments and acting as judges in courts of law. The *brahma-kṣatra* alliance has been re-instituted once again.

I will end this tour of the cultural landscape of ancient India with where I began. I have argued for a particular way to study this period of Indian history and against some ways in which that history has been studied in the past by some scholars. I hope these somewhat scattered thoughts will help us rethink how we should research this period, how we should teach this period to our students, and how we should encourage the educated public to envisage this period of ancient Indian history.