

“At the Shores of the Sky”

Asian Studies for Albert Hoffstädt

Edited by

Paul W. Kroll
Jonathan A. Silk



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India's Past Reconsidered

Johannes Bronkhorst

The Brahmanical tradition has exerted a profound influence on India, from an early time onward.¹ This tradition, like all traditions, had a certain vision of the past, and its enormous success has given it ample opportunity to impose that vision. The task of the historian, here as elsewhere, is to verify the prevailing vision of the past, and correct it where necessary.

One of the features of Brahmanism is that it has always presented itself as old and unchanging. Indeed, the claim was made, at least since the grammarian Patañjali in the second century BCE, that Sanskrit, the language of Brahmanism, was not just old but beginningless. The same view came to be held with regard the Veda, the literary corpus connected with Brahmanism: the Veda was not just old but beginningless.

Inevitably, Brahmanical civilization was also thought of as tremendously old, and as the background of other cultural and religious movements in India. This view came to prevail and has survived until today. Buddhism, in particular, was thought of as a reaction against Brahmanism; it was taken for granted that when Buddhism arose, Brahmanism had been around for a very long time, also in the region where the Buddha preached.

My research over the years has convinced me that this vision of the past is not correct. It is true that Brahmanism had existed for a long while when Buddhism arose, but not in the region where the Buddha preached, nor in many other regions of India. Brahmanism is an ideology that in due time spread all over India and over much of Southeast Asia, but this spread had hardly begun at the time of the Buddha. At that time Brahmanism was largely centered in one part of the subcontinent, its northwestern corner. At the time of the grammarian Patañjali in the second century BCE, some two and a half centuries after the death of the Buddha, the term Āryāvarta was used, and Patañjali gives a rather precise description of the extent of this Āryāvarta, which shows that it covered only a part of the Ganges plain. (GM, Introduction)

¹ This contribution lays out some conclusions based on evidence presented in three books: *Greater Magadha* (Leiden: Brill 2007; henceforth GM), *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (Leiden: Brill 2011; henceforth BSB), *How the Brahmins Won* (Leiden: Brill 2016; henceforth HBW).

Brahmanism, then, was a *regional* ideology, still during the last centuries preceding the Common Era. All this changed in subsequent centuries, but we do not know in detail just how, when, why, and where. We only know that the spread of Brahmanism owed nothing to conquering armies, as was the case much later with Islam. Nor was it imposed by an existing empire, as happened to Christianity during the days of the Roman Empire. It was also not spread by religious missionaries. Indeed, the spread of Brahmanism had very little to do with religious conversion. No one converted to Brahmanism in the ordinary religious sense of the term. In fact, it is not very useful to think of Brahmanism as a religion at all. Brahmanism was primarily a socio-political ideology, with clear ideas as to the correct order of society and the correct way of running a state. In this ideology the role of Brahmins was central (GM, ch. II; BSB, ch. 2).

It is true that some of the activities that Brahmins engaged in, especially ritual activities, can rightly be considered religious. But accepting the elevated position of Brahmins in society and making use of their ritual and other services did not require a change in belief. Numerous inscriptions testify to the fact that many Indian kings made use of these services without rejecting movements such as Buddhism and Jainism (BSB, p. 64). On the religious level, Brahmanism was not, or barely, in competition with these alternative movements. We have the names of scholars who were Buddhists and Brahmins at the same time, without the slightest awareness of a contradiction: socially these scholars were Brahmins, philosophically they were Buddhists. Note that the reverse situation is impossible, and therefore never recorded in our sources: one cannot be socially a Buddhist while at the same time a Brahmin by conviction. This, incidentally, is an asymmetry that historians of Indian philosophy rarely take into consideration: in the debates between Brahmins and Buddhists, Brahmins could be convinced by Buddhist arguments and yet remain Brahmins; Buddhists who were convinced by Brahmanical philosophical arguments, on the other hand, did not become Brahmins, nor could they remain Buddhists. (Remember that there was only one way to become a Brahmin, viz. through birth to parents who are both Brahmins.)

The spread of Brahmanism is a historical phenomenon that is, as yet, only little known and poorly understood. At the same time, it is a phenomenon of a vast scale that does not appear to have any parallel in world history. Invaders before and after the Maurya Empire, and the Maurya Empire itself, had been little sympathetic to Brahmanism, and often hostile. And yet, in as little as six or seven centuries, this threatened regional ideology spread over the whole of the Indian subcontinent and into Southeast Asia right up to Vietnam and the farther reaches of Indonesia. That is to say, an area as large as, if not larger than, the Roman empire and with presumably more inhabitants underwent, for a

varying but substantial number of centuries, the determining imprint of an ideology that had succeeded in imposing itself without the help of armies, an empire, or religious conversion (HBW, ch. IV). Future research, I hope, will tell us more about how this could happen. All I can do here is draw attention to some specific developments.

Consider first the use of Sanskrit. Sanskrit was the language of Brahmanism. Others did not use it. The oldest texts of Buddhism and of Jainism used different forms of Middle Indic, languages different from Sanskrit. The oldest inscriptions in India are not in Sanskrit either: for some four hundred years inscriptions were made, but virtually none of them in Sanskrit. The reason is obvious: Sanskrit was the language of a regional ideology, i.e., of Brahmanism, that exerted little influence (BSB, ch. 3.3).²

All this changed around the second century CE, in northwestern India. All of a sudden, political inscriptions in Sanskrit make their appearance. What is more, the Buddhists of that part of the subcontinent change to Sanskrit. They already possessed an extensive literature in different languages but decided there and then to translate much of that into Sanskrit. What had happened? It appears that Brahmanical ideology had succeeded in gaining the upper hand in the political centers of northwestern India. Accepting the Brahmanical socio-political ideology implied using the language of Brahmanism, namely Sanskrit. The Buddhists of this region may initially not have accepted this ideology, but they did need the support of the royal court and this, it appears, induced them to start using Sanskrit.

The adoption of Sanskrit, both in political inscriptions and in Buddhist scriptures, implied far more than a mere change of language. It implied the adoption, at least in part, of the Brahmanical vision of society. Most of the early political inscriptions, which are not in Sanskrit, show no sign of being aware of the most fundamental Brahmanical social doctrine: that society is divided into Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras. Aśoka's famous edicts, for example, mention Brahmins on a number of occasions, most often together with Śramaṇas, but they never ever use the terms Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. Clearly, society in his time and in most of his empire was not divided into these four so-called *varṇas*, "caste-classes." These are a Brahmanical superimposition, part of their social ideology, to which Aśoka did not feel beholden, and that he presumably was not even aware of. Brahmanism subsequently imposed this division of society wherever it could, not because society was really divided in this manner, but because Brahmanism maintained that it should be. As a

² See also Vincent Eltschinger, "Why Did the Buddhists Adopt Sanskrit?" *Open Linguistics* 3 (2017): 308–26.

result, we find these four classes only mentioned in Brahmanical inscriptions (BSB, p. 42).

I pointed out above that Brahmanism, even where it innovated, maintained that nothing had changed, that the world had always been like it is. Brahmanism had always been there and was the background for all other developments that had taken place. Brahmanism, seen this way, was the background from which Buddhism arose. We have already seen that this is not correct, historically speaking. Buddhism arose in a part of the Ganges plain that had not been brahmanized, and that would remain outside the core area of Brahmanism for at least three further centuries. However, when Buddhism started using Sanskrit, around the second century CE, it adopted along with this language other Brahmanical notions. It came to think of *itself* as having arisen in Brahmanical surroundings. We see this most clearly if we contrast the accounts of the Buddha's life composed in Sanskrit with those composed in other languages. Aśvaghōṣa may have been one of the first Buddhists to write in Sanskrit. His "Life of the Buddha" (*Buddhacarita*) describes the life of the Buddha before his enlightenment. In its initial chapters it speaks in most laudatory terms about the kingship of the Buddha's father, Śuddhodana. Kingship and society are here presented as pervaded by Brahmanical ideas and customs. Not only does his kingly father receive Brahmins to pronounce on the future greatness of his newborn son. Śuddhodana has the birth ceremony (*jātakarman*) carried out, and performs Vedic murmuring (*japa*), oblations (*homa*), and auspicious rites (*maṅgala*) to celebrate the event. All this is followed by a gift of a hundred thousand cows to Brahmins. Later in the story he pours oblations into the fire and gives gold and cows to Brahmins, this time to ensure a long life for his son. He drinks soma as enjoined by the Vedas. He performs sacrifices (even though only non-violent ones). He has a Purohita, described as being "in charge of the sacrifices" (*havya ... adhikṛta*). Brahmanical elements show up in other chapters as well, though less frequently. When King Śreṇya of Magadha gives friendly advice to the Bodhisattva, he counsels him to pursue the (Brahmanical) triple end of life (*trivarga*), i.e., pleasure (*kāma*), wealth (*artha*), and virtue (*dharma*). King Śreṇya further points out that performing sacrifices is his *kuladharmā* "family obligation." Māra, the Buddha's archenemy who tries to prevent him from attaining liberation, calls upon him to follow his *svadharmā*. These are all Brahmanical terms and concepts. All this shows, not just that Aśvaghōṣa was familiar with Brahmanism (which has been known to scholars for a long time), but that he and his readers situated the Buddha in brahmanized surroundings (BSB, p. 154, with detailed references).

Our reflections so far show that the process of brahmanization was both subtle and profound. Buddhism did not disappear in the early centuries CE.

Quite the contrary, it went on to flourish in India for many centuries to come. And yet, it had changed the way it perceived itself. Perhaps this is a general feature of brahmanization: it does not necessarily replace other movements and worldviews, but it affects them from within.

How did Brahmanism succeed in exerting such a profound effect on other worldviews and ideologies? I pointed out already that Brahmanism did not spread through armies, imperial imposition, or religious conversion. The question of Brahmanism's success requires more study, but some observations can already be made.

We start from the observation that Brahmanism, though it may not have had an army or an empire of its own, was no stranger to political power. Indeed, one of the mechanisms of its spread, probably the most important one, passed through the various royal courts in South and Southeast Asia. Inscriptions in both these areas mention kings who invite Brahmins to their courts, sometimes from afar. Once established at the royal courts, Brahmanical influence could filter down, helped by royal largesse (HBW, ch. IV).

The comparison with Christianity can yield some further insights. The conversion of Emperor Constantine imposed this religion upon the Roman Empire. Brahmanism, too, was introduced from above, but not in one single empire. Brahmanism passed through numerous kingdoms of relatively limited size. And there is a further difference: Constantine personally converted to Christianity, but no king needed to convert to Brahmanism. Brahmanism is quite simply not the kind of thing one could convert to. As I said earlier, calling it a religion is stretching the meaning of this term, and I prefer to call it a socio-political ideology, with a variable religious dimension. Central to Brahmanism is a vision of society, in which Brahmins occupy a preeminent position. This vision covers ideas as to how society is or should be organized, about rituals that must be performed, and much else, but deities play at best a marginal role. Some of the most orthodox (or rather orthoprax) Brahmins were or could be atheists—among them early Mīmāṃsakas and Lokāyatas. Brahmins expected that others accepted their superiority and their vision of society. In principle there was no expectation that people change their mode of worship. Indeed, one might combine sympathies for Brahmanism and, say, Buddhism. Inscriptions confirm that certain rulers had such combined sympathies (BSB, p. 64).

So, if kings did not convert to Brahmanism, why did they bother to invite Brahmins and promote their vision of society? Why should they accept the claim that Brahmins are superior to everyone else, including the king himself?

The problem that confronts historians of early India is that most of our information is profoundly one-sided. Most early literature is Sanskrit literature, and most Sanskrit literature is Brahmanical literature. As such it will give us

little information about what went on in the heads of kings. Most of the remaining literature belongs to Buddhism and Jainism, and that does not help us much either in this respect, especially since these religions became profoundly brahmanized themselves. The only textual sources that present us, usually indirectly, with the point of view of rulers who supported Brahmins, are inscriptions. Many inscriptions concern gifts to Brahmins, usually in the shape of *agrahāras*, tax-free land for the benefit of Brahmins, frequently inhabited by people who were expected to provide the Brahmins with their needs. Such gifts were meant to provide a reliable source of support to Brahmins for the pursuit of their sacral responsibilities.

What were such gifts expected to bring the donor? A theme that often recurs is increase of merit. To some extent this begs the question. Why should a ruler wish to obtain the kind of merit that Brahmanism promised? They hoped for a better afterlife, to be sure. But clearly, they had to believe first that gifts to Brahmins were the way to attain this. As usual with claims about the afterlife, there was no way to verify their efficacy. We may assume that rulers expected also more visible results from their largesse—such as the magical protection of their kingdom and kingship. But even such practical expectations were and had to be built on a reputation that preceded the Brahmins. Somehow it should be “known” that the presence and support of Brahmins was good for a kingdom before a ruler would get involved with them.

How did Brahmins succeed in building such a reputation for themselves? The details of this process will probably forever remain unknown. We may surmise that pure chance played a role, perhaps followed, after initial successes, by a snowball effect. The early Buddhist texts tell us that there were Brahmins traveling beyond their core area who promoted their vision of society to whom-ever was ready to listen to them. Most of the discussions of Brahmins with the Buddha, if the texts are to be believed, turned around the superiority of Brahmins. These Brahmins combined this missionary activity with certain services they provided to the population: the sages who predicted the future of the newly born Bodhisattva were Brahmins. Other services involving access to higher knowledge and higher powers were also no doubt part of their arsenal.

Brahmanical access to higher powers was clearly an attribute that would interest many, including rulers. It is also an attribute that is given much emphasis in stories that Brahmins succeeded in bringing into circulation and in which they play important roles. Many of these stories were or became part of the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. These are epics about warriors and fighting, but one cannot read them without being struck by the powerful Brahmanical figures that play prominent roles in them without participating in the fighting. Stories that illustrate this Brahmanical power are

numerous. My favorite occurs in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2.84 ff.) and tells how the Brahmanical sage Bharadvāja entertains King Bharata and his army. To cut a long story short, Bharadvāja invokes the help of a number of gods, and offers the soldiers the best meal they ever ate, including meat and alcoholic drinks. Following that, there are pleasures for all the senses, including music, and, last but not least, beautiful damsels, fifteen for each man. Not surprisingly, the soldiers have the time of their life, and express their intention never to return to the capital, nor to move on, saying: “This is heaven.” Bharata only gets his army back because Bharadvāja’s hospitality comes to an end the next day.

There are numerous other stories in the Sanskrit epics and elsewhere that emphasize Brahmanical power. Presumably such stories spread and were appreciated, creating in many the conviction that one should not cross Brahmins, and that it was always better to have them on one’s side. This would be a good reason for rulers to support Brahmins, and if there were none around, to invite them to come to their kingdom.

Brahmanism, as it presented itself, was not a new phenomenon, and had never been. Brahmanical literature is at pains to point out that it had been around for a long time. The main events of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* are situated in an imprecise but remote past. Quite apart from the main story, the *Mahābhārata* reminds its readers and listeners of the fact that a Brahmin (Paraśurāma) had killed off all warriors, i.e., kings, seven times over because they had misbehaved. Clearly Brahmanical power was already superior to royal power in the remote past, and it was in the interest of all to maintain good relationships (HBW, ch. IV).

Brahmins therefore pose a threat. But they can also be of great help. Once again history as presented by the Brahmins can illustrate this. The great Maurya Empire—that to the modern historian looks like something that had been a disaster for Brahmanism—was presented as a Brahmanical creation. The founder of this empire, Candragupta, had succeeded in creating this empire, supposedly by following the advice of his Brahmanical counsellor, Cāṅkya. What is more, this same Cāṅkya, who had as much as created the Maurya Empire, was also thought of as the author of the classical Sanskrit text on statecraft, the *Arthaśāstra*. All the wisdom united in this work was at the disposition of rulers who were ready to appoint a Brahmin as chief advisor. None of these claims are confirmed by modern scholarship (BSB, pp. 66–74).

If it slowly becomes clear what risks can be avoided and what advantages gained by pleasing Brahmins, there is one other factor that must have played a role in their extraordinary success. At least in theory, Brahmanical advisors do not aspire to kingship. Brahmins are therefore not only the most competent and most powerful advisors, they are also safe in the sense that they will not try to replace the king they advise.

Our reflections so far explain more or less why a king might wish to be assisted by Brahmanical advisors. It does not yet explain why he would reward Brahmins with *agrahāras*, that is, estates, with sources of steady income away from the capital. Clearly *agrahāras* were often rewards for services rendered, but not only that. Many *agrahāras*, it appears from the inscriptions, were given to Brahmins who were not involved in the running of the state, but who excelled in this or that aspect of traditional Brahmanical learning. The recipients of *agrahāras* were supposed to live lives dedicated to ritual practice and Brahmanical learning, following the example of the Brahmanical sages in their hermitages (*āśrama*) depicted in the epics and elsewhere. This, as we have seen, was deemed to increase the merit of the donor or of those close to him. We may conjecture that kings somehow felt they could harness Brahmanical power in this way (even though I am not aware of any texts that explicitly put it this way).

It appears, then, that Brahmins often came to be asked by local rulers to settle in their kingdoms. In such cases they were most typically provided with the usufruct of a village and land, which allowed them to concentrate on other matters. These “other matters” would normally involve performing rituals, reciting their holy texts, i.e., the Veda, teaching their *śāstras*, “sciences,” and other such things. The underlying supposition was that the presence of a ritually active community of Brahmins would be advantageous for the kingdom. Some Brahmins, moreover, would play a role at the royal court, as advisors in both ritual and political matters (HBW, p. 411).

There is another reason why rulers may have been keen to have Brahmins at their courts. We know that the political history of South and Southeast Asia during the first millennium CE saw the rise and decline of numerous regional kingdoms. Inscriptions report *ad nauseam* the military feats of rulers, who conquered and destroyed each other's territories without restraint. Assuming that these inscriptions are to at least some extent reliable, the military competence of many of these rulers left little to be desired. But more is required than mere military competence for acquiring and maintaining a kingdom. What these rulers needed, once they had won their battles, was practical advice as to how to run their kingdom, and how to protect it against unforeseen dangers. Brahmins were specialized in these two realms. Their undisturbed ritual occupations provided the best supernatural protection imaginable, and they combined that with theoretical competence in matters of polity.

It is interesting to compare these Brahmanical skills with those that Buddhists had on offer. Buddhism had begun as a religion of people who had left society, and who had therefore very little to say about how society should be run. It is true that Buddhism did not remain for long a movement exclusively

of renouncers. It may still have been like that during the realm of Aśoka, but there are clear indications from northern India that this changed during the last centuries BCE. Buddhism at that time came into the possession of monasteries and much else, and this is no doubt a reason why it came to depend ever more on the active support of political rulers. We have already seen one of the consequences of this new dependence: Buddhism adopted the language of the Brahmins, Sanskrit, because like the Brahmins it sought access to the centers of political power.

Buddhism, then, needed the support of political rulers. What could it offer in return? The Brahmins could offer a lot, enough to convince most rulers that they could not risk *not* to support Brahmins. How about the Buddhists?

It appears that the Buddhists had a hard time competing with the Brahmins at the royal courts, and that this became, in the long run, one of the reasons why Buddhism did not survive in India (BSB, ch. 3.8). Brahmanism offered, apart from supernatural protection, much practical advice to rulers: how to organize society, how to run their kingdom, etc. Buddhism, still during the early centuries of the Common Era, offered nothing of the kind. As stated earlier, Buddhism had no vision of society and of how it should be run. True, there are a number of Buddhist texts that proffer advice to rulers, but close inspection only shows how useless this advice is. Kings should give money to the poor and avoid violence. This is hardly the advice that will assure a king long control in the ruthless environment of incessantly competing kingdoms characteristic of India during those centuries. Some of these Buddhist authors admit, though implicitly, that their advice is totally unrealistic, by recommending kings to become monks instead. With regard to the ritual protection offered by Buddhism to rulers we can be brief: during the early centuries of the Common Era they offered next to nothing of the kind (BSB, ch. 3).

An inspection of the sources has led me to conclude that for a long time, say during the first five centuries of the Common Era, Buddhism left many of the skills that might be useful for rulers to Brahmins. We saw that Buddhism came to adopt a semi-Brahmanical vision of society. This implied that certain activities were left to Brahmins. These included, of course, ritual activities and political counseling, but many other activities as well, among which are predicting the future on the basis of various indications and astrology. One of the surprising consequences of this is that there are practically no surviving names of Buddhists who engaged in astronomy and mathematics, this in spite of the fact that Buddhists were active in other sciences, such as medicine and, of course, philosophy. Astronomy and mathematics, in the Indian context, were inseparable from astrology, and astrology was the domain of Brahmins, not of Buddhists. In short, for a number of centuries Buddhism in India did not intrude

into the realms of activity that the Brahmins considered their own. By the time they tried to change this, with the advent of Tantrism, it was too late. Buddhism had not been able to compete credibly with Brahmanism, and its decline may be looked upon as its inevitable consequence (BSB, pp. 244–46).

In contrast to Buddhism, Brahmanism offered advantages that rulers could scarcely do without. This was not the result of historical coincidence. It can be argued that to at least some extent Brahmanism during the last centuries preceding the Common Era had prepared the ground, that it had developed the tools and methods which in due time turned out to be very efficacious. It is possible to look upon the Brahmanical literature composed during the centuries around the beginning of the Common Era as playing a role in the project Brahmanism was entering upon. This literature shows that the Brahmins of that period had two major concerns. On the one hand, they were concerned to create a separate identity for themselves: Brahmins are expected to follow a lifestyle that is different from all others. Purity plays a central role in this lifestyle and finds expression in the observance of numerous rituals and sacraments, through the Brahmins' purity of descent both on the paternal and maternal side, and through the distance maintained from persons and things that are considered polluting. This concern finds expression in those texts that were primarily meant for internal consumption, among them various texts on *dharma* and ritual. Beside this, there are Brahmanical texts from this period that concentrate on the image that Brahmins were concerned to project onto society at large. A text like the *Mahābhārata* projects an image of Brahmins as sometimes wise, sometimes unpredictable, but always powerful and scary; Brahmins like to live in peace in their hermitages, and may seem in this way inoffensive, but numerous stories remind us that they can be deadly if crossed. Political advice is given much attention, as are indications of how to fit into the social hierarchy that is the hallmark of Brahmanism (HBW, ch. 11).

It would be worth a detailed study to analyze the model of Brahmanism that arose during the crucial centuries around the beginning of the Common Era. This model referred back, at least in part, to the Vedic tradition, but other aspects were quite new. Even new notions—such as the idea of the Brahmanical *āśrama* “hermitage,” an idea that is absent from Vedic literature—were presented as old, as having been in existence from time immemorial. This model was to become surprisingly successful in subsequent centuries.

Such a detailed analysis has not yet been undertaken. I hope that scholars will take up the challenge and join me in rethinking India's past along the lines here suggested.

By way of conclusion I wish to draw attention to some independent evidence showing the profound influence that Brahmanism exerted on Indian society. I had occasion to mention its emphasis on purity of descent. Strict rules applied not only to Brahmins, but also to other groups in society. Numerous texts warn that not abiding by these rules has dire consequences, in that offspring will not be accepted in the social groups to which their parents belong.

These warnings had their effects. Genetic research shows “that the practice of endogamy was established almost simultaneously, possibly by decree of the rulers, in upper-caste populations of all geographical regions, about seventy generations before the present, probably during the reign (319–550 CE) of the ... Gupta rulers.”³ Other studies appear to confirm this, so that it seems safe to conclude that a shift to endogamy took place during the first half of the first millennium CE in northern India. We are permitted to assume that the growing influence of Brahmanism played a role in this.

3 Analabha Basu, Neeta Sarkar-Roy, and Partha P. Majumder, “Genomic Reconstruction of the History of Extant Populations of India Reveals Five Distinct Ancestral Components and a Complex Structure,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113 (2016), 1595. The fact that “Steppe ancestry in modern South Asians is primarily from males and disproportionately high in Brahmin and Bhumihar groups” (Vagheesh M. Narasimhan et al., “The Formation of Human Populations in South and Central Asia,” *Science* 06 Sep 2019: Vol. 365, Issue 6457, eaat7487) does not of course demonstrate that Brahmins practiced strict endogamy already before this date.