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## Rethinking India's past

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The Brahmanical tradition has exerted a profound influence on India, from an early time onward. 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.

It follows that Brahmanical civilization, too, was thought of as tremendously old, and as the background of other cultural and religious movements in India. This view came to prevail, and 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 researches over the years have convinced me that this vision of the past is not correct. It is true that Brahmanism had been around for a long time when Buddhism arose, but not in the region where the Buddha preached, nor in many other regions of India. Brahmanism is an ideology that spread all over India, and over much of Southeast Asia, to be sure, but this spread had hardly begun at the time of the Buddha. At that time Brahmanism was largely centred in one part of the subcontinent, the part which the grammarian Patañjali and others called Aryavarta. These authors give a rather precise description of the extent of Aryavarta, which shows that only a

part of the Ganges plain was included. This was in the second century BCE, two and a half centuries after the death of the Buddha.

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 with Islam. Nor was it imposed by an existing empire, as happened to Christianity during the days of the Roman empire. It was not spread by religious missionaries either. 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 an ideology, 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.

It is true that some of the activities Brahmins engaged in, especially ritual activities, but not only those, 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 for that matter rejecting movements such as Buddhism and Jainism. On the religious level, Brahmanism was not, or barely, in competition with these alternative movements. We have a number of 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; but Buddhists who were convinced by Brahmanical philosophical arguments did not become Brahmins, nor could they remain Buddhists.

The spread of Brahmanism, then, 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 has no parallel in world history. In as little as ten centuries, a regional ideology had spread virtually 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. Future research, I hope, will tell us more about how this could happen. In this lecture I can do no more than draw your 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 none of them in Sanskrit. The reason is obvious: Sanskrit was the language of a regional ideology, i.e. Brahmanism, that exerted little influence.

All this changed around the second century CE, in north-western India. All of a sudden political inscriptions in Sanskrit make their appearance. What is more, the Buddhists of that part of the subcontinent changed to Sanskrit. They possessed already an extensive literature in languages different from Sanskrit, but they 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 centres of north-western India. Accepting the Brahmanical socio-political ideology implied using the language of Brahmanism, Sanskrit. The Buddhists of north-western India may initially not have accepted this ideology, but they did need the support of the royal court and this, it appears, obliged them to start using Sanskrit.

The adoption of Sanskrit, both in political inscriptions and by the Buddhists, 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, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Ashoka's famous edicts, for example, mention Brahmins on a number of occasions, most often together with Shramanas, but never ever use the terms Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. It is safe to conclude that society in his time was not divided into these four so-called varnas. These four classes are a Brahmanical invention, part of their social ideology. Brahmanism imposed this division of society wherever it could, not because society was really divided in this manner, but because

Brahmanism maintained it should. As a result, we find these four classes only mentioned in Brahmanical inscriptions.

I started this lecture pointing out that Brahmanism, even where it innovated, maintained that nothing had changed, that the world had always been like that. 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 now know that this is not correct, historically speaking. Buddhism arose in a part of the Ganges plain that had not been brahmanized, and 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. Ashvaghosha may have been one of the first Buddhists to write in Sanskrit. His life of the Buddha depicts his father as a truly Brahmanical ruler, who has Brahmanical priests and advisors, performs sacrifices (though no violent ones), and much else. None of this occurs in the lives of the Buddha composed in Middle Indic.

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 on the contrary, it would still 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 world views, but it affects them from within.

How did Brahmanism succeed in exerting such a profound effect on other world views 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 much more study, but some observations can already be made, as it seems to me.

It appears 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 shastras, and other such things. The underlying supposition was

clearly that the presence of a ritually active community of Brahmins would be advantageous for the kingdom. Some Brahmins would play a role at the royal court, as advisors in both ritual and political matters.

Why would local rulers believe that the presence of Brahmins at the court and in the kingdom would be good for both ruler and kingdom? Clearly this conviction preceded the invitation to specific Brahmins to come and settle in the kingdom. In other words, Brahmanical ideology sometimes travelled faster than the Brahmins themselves. How this happened in specific situations is a question that needs further study. However, it seems plausible that Brahmanical ideology responded to a need felt by local rulers both in South Asia and in Southeast Asia.

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 almost 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 for acquiring and maintaining a kingdom more is required than mere military competence. 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 what Buddhists had to offer to rulers. 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 renunciators. It may still have been like that during the realm of Ashoka, 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 seen already 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 centres of political power.

Buddhism, then, needed the support of political rulers. What could it offer in return? We have seen that the Brahmins could offer a lot in return, enough to

convince most Indian 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 main reasons why Buddhism did not survive in India. Brahmanism offered, apart from supernatural protection, lots of practical advice to rulers: how to organize society, how to run their kingdom, etc. 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 a closer 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 secure that a king will stay in charge for long 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 give up on being a king and become a monk 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.

A close 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, political counselling, but lots of other activities as well, among these: 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. 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.

Contrary 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 Brahmins: Brahmins are expected to follow a life-style that is different from all others. Purity plays a central role and finds expression through 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 rather on the image that Brahmins were concerned to project onto society at large. A text like the Mahabharata 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 how to fit into the social hierarchy that is the hallmark of Brahmanism.

It would be worth a detailed study to analyse 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 ashrama, 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 to be able to contribute to it in years to come, but obviously the task is far too great for a single individual to accomplish. I do hope that others, too, will take up the challenge, and join me in rethinking India's past along the lines here suggested.