

*We are renewing the feature 'For a Sociology of India' with this issue. We look forward to seeding new conversations on what this field could look like by widening its scope to include short contributions by scholars from adjacent disciplines, students, litterateurs and others who have a point of view on the subject.*

## **Brahmanism: Its place in ancient Indian society**

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*This article shows how Brahmanism was a regional tradition, confined to the northwestern parts of the Indian subcontinent, that passed through a difficult period—which it barely survived—roughly between the time of Alexander and the beginning of the Common Era. It then reinvented itself, in a different shape. No longer primarily a sacrificial tradition, it became a mainly socio-political ideology that borrowed much (including the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution) from the eastern region in which Buddhism and Jainism had arisen. Its revival went hand in hand with the elaboration of behavioural and theoretical innovations, one of whose purposes was to justify the claimed superiority of Brahmins.*

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**Keywords:** Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Maurya Empire, Veda, purity, reinvention

### ***Introduction***

Misconceptions about Brahmanism in ancient India are many and widespread. This article will try to correct some of these and contribute to a better understanding of the role Brahmanism played and the difficulties it had to overcome. This piece bases itself on, and presents the main

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conclusions of, research carried out over the years and published primarily in the following three books: *Greater Magadha* (2007; Indian reprint 2013), *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (2011; Indian reprint in preparation) and *How the Brahmins Won* (2016). For details and references these three books may be consulted.

In order to situate Brahmanism historically, it will be necessary to say a few words about Buddhism and Jainism. It is widely believed, still today, that Buddhism and Jainism were offshoots of Vedic religion, that to at least some extent they responded to, or even protested against the latter. This is not correct. Buddhism and Jainism arose in a region far from the centre of Vedic religion, and their main concerns were altogether different from those that underlay Vedic religion. Buddhism and Jainism arose in the eastern parts of the Ganges valley, in a region that I call 'Greater Magadha'. This expression finds its justification in the fact that the region concerned covered a number of political entities, one of which, Magadha, became the seat of a large empire—the Maurya Empire—not so very long after the death of the founders of these religions. Greater Magadha was a cultural area in which Vedic religion played no role. An important feature of the culture of this area was the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution, the belief that the present life will be followed by other lives whose qualities are determined by acts carried out in the present or preceding lives. A number of religious thinkers—among them the founders of Buddhism and Jainism—were not happy with the thought of an endless cycle of rebirths, and looked the ways to break out of it. The Buddha and the Jina taught different ways to put an end to rebirth and karmic retribution, that is, they taught different paths to liberation. This was clearly the central concern of these teachers and their followers, a concern that had nothing to do with the concerns that find expression in Vedic religion.

Vedic religion, meanwhile, had its centre in the northwestern parts of the Indian subcontinent, including much of what is now Pakistan. There are, for example, good reasons to think that the famous grammarian Pāṇini lived in Gandhāra, near the border of what is now Afghanistan. A number of Vedic texts were composed in that same region. For our present purposes, it is important to recall that Vedic religion was concerned with elaborate sacrifices, which were carried out by sacrificial priests for the benefit of rulers. In other word, Vedic religion was inseparable from a particular political set-up. Similar to what we know about ancient Egypt

and ancient Mesopotamia, political power in this part of the subcontinent was accompanied by elaborate rituals, Vedic rituals. A largely hereditary group of priests was responsible for these.

Vedic religion did not know the idea of rebirth and karmic retribution. Vedic literature does not mention it, except for one or two very late passages, which only show that at some point in time, Vedic religion did come in contact with the culture of Greater Magadha. These few exceptions merely confirm the general rule that Vedic religion was not concerned with rebirth and karmic retribution but rather with the correct performance of sometimes highly complex rituals in the service of the various royal courts.

This situation did not continue forever. Unfavourable events destroyed the political structures on which the performance of Vedic ritual depended, and signalled the end of Vedic religion as it had existed so far. Among these unfavourable events, the following may be mentioned. Alexander the Great's invasion of the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent confronted him with political entities in which Brahmins played important advisory roles. In some cases, Alexander could reach agreements with the local Brahmins, in other cases, he did not and slaughtered them in large numbers. Soon after Alexander, the Maurya Empire was established, which included those northwestern regions. The Maurya Empire had its capital in Pāṭaliputra in Magadha and therefore in the heart of Greater Magadha. Its rulers were not interested in Vedic ritual. What is more, they replaced local rulers with representatives from the capital, who did not continue local ritual traditions. Some sources mention revolts inspired by counsellors—that is, inspired by Brahmins—against Maurya rule in northwestern cities (especially Taxila), and the future emperor Aśoka is said to have moved there to suppress those revolts. This was the same Aśoka who killed hundreds of thousands in Kaliṅga and who was known, at least before his conversion to Buddhism, for his cruelty. One may plausibly guess that his visit to the northwestern regions did not bode well for the local Brahmins. A few generations after Aśoka, the collapse of the Maurya Empire did not bring relief to many of them either. Invading armies of Greeks and Scythians (Śaka) destroyed what was left of the Brahmanical order of society, so much so that a Brahmanical text (the *Yugapurāṇa*) survives that describes the complete breakdown of society and expects the end of the world to come very soon.

All these horrific events left the Vedic sacrificial tradition in tatters because no ruler would have its sacrifices performed. As a result, the Vedic priests no longer received support (if they were lucky enough to survive). It is yet during this period that Brahmanism reinvented itself. Brahmanism came out of this difficult episode as a socio-political ideology in which Brahmins claimed for themselves the highest position in society. They owe this special position to their exclusive knowledge of sacred texts, and to their extreme ritual purity; the combination of these two, they claimed, provided them with great powers. Texts were produced (Prāṭiśākhya, Śikṣā) to assure the correct preservation of memorised Vedic texts; other texts (Dharmasūtras) contained detailed instructions on how to obtain and maintain purity. Ritual was not abandoned, but now became a largely individual affair. Here too, new texts were composed (Gṛhyasūtras) that concentrated on domestic ritual, different from the big sacrifices that had been current while Vedic religion still profited from political support. All these new texts—along with others, many included in the so-called six limbs of the Veda (*vedāṅga*)—were composed ‘by Brahmins for Brahmins’, describing practices and linguistic analyses that were not meant for outsiders. They illustrate how Brahmanism turned inward. The ideal Brahmin is now depicted as an ascetically inclined individual who concentrates on his personal rites and avoids to the extent possible contact with the outside world.

But Brahmanism did not turn only inward. It also projected a new image of itself outward. One of the ways it did so was through the production of literature that was not exclusively aimed at other Brahmins. The two Sanskrit epics—the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—were composed during this period. A recurring feature of these texts is the presence of Brahmins who live in their hermitages (*āśrama*) in the forests, where they occupy themselves with rites and Vedic recitation. The stories also make clear that these holy men in the forest possess extraordinary powers, which they can, if need be, use for or against others. These extraordinary powers are often presented as resulting from their knowledge of mantras, often mantras from the *Atharvaveda*. It is no coincidence that the *Atharvaveda*, which plays no role in the classical sacrifice, but which does contain numerous spells, gains enormously in importance precisely during this period.

We saw that Vedic religion went through a rough patch. Indeed, it makes sense to say that Vedic religion disappeared and that a new

institution, Brahmanism, arose out of its ashes. Brahmanism claimed to be a continuation of Vedic religion, to be sure. And it is true that Brahmins preserved the skills to perform Vedic sacrifices, if and when a ruler asked them to do so; this actually happened from time to time later on, when certain sacrifices—among them the Horse Sacrifice (*aśvamedha*)—gained a certain amount of popularity among rulers. But in most respects classical Brahmanism was a new creation. It can most usefully be described as a socio-political ideology with a highly variable religious dimension: Brahmanism is not tied to the worship of any specific gods, and even has place for atheism.

Brahmanism was surprisingly successful during the centuries following its difficult beginnings. Half a millennium after the catastrophic events that made certain Brahmins fear that the end of time had arrived, it had spread far and wide, covering now most of the Indian subcontinent and much of Southeast Asia. A full explanation of this remarkable spread, which ended up covering a surface larger than the Roman Empire at its height, will probably remain beyond the reach of scholarship. After all, Brahmanism was not imposed by an empire, like Christianity, or forced upon populations by armies, as was Islam. Nor were missionaries responsible for this spread because one cannot convert to Brahmanism: at least in theory, the only way to become a Brahmin is through birth from Brahmanical parents; all others can only respect Brahmins and accept their claims as to the correct order of society and their role in it. Somehow or other, the image projected by Brahmins, perhaps in considerable part through literature, convinced others—from rulers downward—that their help and advice was essential, and that their specific claims had to be accepted or tolerated along with these.

These claims did not only concern social hierarchy. Based on their claimed guardianship of the Veda, Brahmins developed certain ideas about language. They came to claim that Sanskrit, the language of the Veda, is really the only language there is; all other so-called languages are no more than corruptions of this one eternal language. Sanskrit was therefore the language of Brahmins, which they imposed wherever they went. It is the reason that we find Sanskrit inscriptions all over South and Southeast Asia; they are proof in stone of the strength of Brahmanical ideology in those places. Most striking perhaps is that during the first centuries of the Common Era, north Indian Buddhism—since Brahmanical ideology had now succeeded in gaining access to the centres of political power—turned

to Sanskrit as well. This is more surprising than it may appear at first sight, for Buddhism had been very successful without Sanskrit for some five centuries, during which it composed a variety of text in Middle Indic languages, including some highly complex and sophisticated treatises on Abhidharma philosophy. Buddhism's turn to Sanskrit finds its explanation in its increasing dependence on rulers to finance their monasteries, along with the growing influence of Brahmins at the courts. Interestingly, Jainism, which did not yet build monasteries at that time, did not turn to Sanskrit until centuries later. The use of Sanskrit in political inscriptions, it goes almost without saying, becomes widespread exactly during these same early centuries of the Common Era.

Brahmanism, then, while claiming to continue—or rather, 'be'—Vedic religion, had become something quite different. An important part of these changes had been produced internally, and concerns the new image of the ideal Brahmin—an elaborate vision of society, and sophisticated ideas about Sanskrit (the only language) and its beginningless and authorless expression in the Veda. But other changes were due to external influence. Perhaps the most important complex of ideas that Brahmanism borrowed from outside is the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. This it borrowed from Greater Magadha, where it gave rise to Buddhism, Jainism and other movements. Parallel to the belief in the individual cycle of rebirths, Brahmanism borrowed a cyclical vision of the history of the universe, also from Greater Magadha. The flat shape of the universe, in which continents surround the central Mount Meru, around which the sun and stars move, was another notion that Brahmanism took from Greater Magadha. This list is far from complete, and shows the extent to which Brahmanism came to absorb outside influences, a number of which we can identify as having originated in Greater Magadha.

Brahmanism never admitted that it borrowed anything whatsoever from outside. A small but significant exception to this general rule must be made for the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. Some early Upaniṣadic passages show awareness of this notion, and state, in so many words, that Kṣatriyas had known this before Brahmins; because of this, Kṣatriyas rather than Brahmins had supposedly gained worldly power. This assertion may be the only one in the whole of Vedic literature that admits that there is something worth knowing that had not always been in the possession of Brahmins. We have every reason to accept it, with

the added specification that this ‘knowledge’ had come from Greater Magadha, rather than from some hypothetical group of Kṣatriyas. All the other ideas that percolated into Brahmanism, including the ones mentioned above, were simply presented as ideas that had always been part of it (even where a historical reading of the texts easily reveals that this was not the case).

Brahmanism developed, as a matter of fact, a view of history that had place for little or no change. Sometimes it literally maintained that the world has always been as it is now; sometimes—under the influence of the cyclical vision of history borrowed from Greater Magadha—it maintained that we are part of an immensely long subdivision (*yuga*) of one of those cycles (*kalpa*). Either way historical change was far too slow to have a measurable effect on the present. Either way Brahmanism had been there for a very long time, or even from beginningless time, and everything else had somehow arisen out of it. This, as we have seen above, does not correspond to historical reality but somehow came to be accepted as a self-evident truth. Not only within Brahmanism. North Indian Buddhism, we saw earlier, adopted the language of Brahmanism, Sanskrit, during the first centuries of the Common Era. But it adopted far more than only its language. It adopted the Brahmanical vision of society, to at least a considerable extent. One of the earliest Buddhist Sanskrit authors, Aśvaghōṣa, presents us with a biography of the Buddha that appears to be altogether new, without precedents in earlier texts, but repeated in more recent Sanskrit texts. In this new biography, the Buddha’s father was a king who lived a life in accordance with Brahmanical rules. He invokes the help of Brahmins for various rituals, honours them and richly remunerates them. Other Buddhist Sanskrit authors manifest respect for Brahmanical rules in various other ways. Interestingly, Buddhist authors from north India accept the role in society of Brahmins in other ways, too. We discover, for example, that Buddhists left all forms of predicting the future, including astrology, astronomy and even mathematics to Brahmins; until the arrival of Tantrism, a number of Brahmanical and Jaina authors of astronomical and mathematical treatises are known, but none of them are Buddhists!

Brahmins provided a number of services to the royal courts and to society at large, all in a way based on their superior knowledge; often, but not always, this is supernatural knowledge that gives its possessor supernatural powers. Brahmins considered themselves preeminent

counsellors to the royal courts, and looked upon a king without a Brahmanical *purohita* as being in conflict with the natural order of things. But their activity was not confined to the royal courts, far from it. The implication of Brahmins in all kinds of ritual activities for outsiders is well known and is not in need of elaboration here. Brahmins even came to occupy priestly roles in temples, this in spite of the fact that Vedic religion had no temples and that orthodox Brahmins looked down upon those who engaged in such activities.

The success of Brahmanism has had far-reaching consequences, not only on the subsequent cultural and religious history of South and Southeast Asia. It also misled modern historical scholarship. Recall that Brahmanism maintained that it had always been there, that it was the background out of which other cultural and religious developments arose. This has long been taken by modern scholarship as a kind of axiom, as a fundamental truth whose veracity could not be doubted. The belief in rebirth and karmic retribution is a good example. For a long time, modern scholarship mistakenly tried to derive this belief from precursor elements in Vedic literature, without convincing results of course, for this belief came from Greater Magadha, a non-Vedic area. Among many other examples one might mention the origin of the Sanskrit drama. Attempts were made to discover the Vedic elements out of which this cultural form might have arisen, conveniently overlooking the fact that Brahmanical culture frowned upon such kinds of activities, and worse, that part of northwestern India had been ruled by Greeks, who were known for their fondness of the theatre. Hellenistic influence persisted for centuries after the disappearance of Greek rule.

As I pointed out above, north Indian Buddhism turned to Sanskrit during the first few centuries of the Common Era. Along with this change, it started looking upon itself as having arisen in Brahmanical surroundings. The modern study of Buddhism started with the study of its Sanskrit texts and unsurprisingly concluded that Buddhism was an offshoot of Brahmanism. Historically speaking, we now know, this was not correct, but both scholarship and popular accounts of Buddhism held on to this view for a long time, and to some extent still do so. Once again, the Brahmanical vision of the past managed to impose itself.

Brahmanism, as should be clear from what precedes, rose from rather modest beginnings to an institution whose influence on society can hardly be overrated. However, its influence was not confined to society.

Brahmanism influenced, and to some extent even determined, the way academic scholarship looked at India's cultural and religious past. In the interest of sound and reliable scholarship, scholars have to be aware of this influence and, where necessary, they have to rid themselves of this ideologically inspired approach to their material.

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