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AFTERWORD

Afterword, Provincializing brahmans

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Ever since Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincialising Europe*, the task of 'provincializing' has involved the identification of one big idea that various actors treat as both hyper-real and universally held. The one big idea that brought together the scholars in this special issue was brahmans, and all that was associated with them—the texts of the *Dharmaśāstra* composed by some of them (datable from around late third century BCE until the third century CE), the technologies of composition and language associated with them, and the consequential four-fold *varṇa* hierarchy imagined by such brahmans (with themselves on top, and the *kṣatríya, vaiśya*, and *śudra* on a progressively decreasing scale of dignity below).

The articles in this special issue offer both deeper temporal histories as well as models of dialogical reading. Caley Charles Smith starts off the process by reading early Vedic enunciations of *kṣatríya, rājaṇyà*, and *yajamāna* in a novel way, suggesting forms of seasonal offices of leaders and patrons of public rituals. But even more revolutionary is his argument that from the perspective of the sponsor of the ritual (*yajamāna*) in the *Aitareya Brahmāṇa* onwards, the brahman was as much a dependent as was the *vaiśya* and the *śudra*.

Seema K. Chauhan's article goes further. Reading first the Prakrit-language texts from Jaina texts composed around the same centuries as the earliest *Dharmasūtra*s, the article reveals that the Jaina writers used brahmanhood first as a descriptor of the ascetic Jaina as distinct from the Jaina householder. Then she reads tales narrated in three key Jaina texts between the third and the sixth centuries CE. These explain the origin of brahmanhood in specific historical circumstances when one group of householders became associated with state patronage, and another group that did not adhere to Jaina beliefs left the court empty-handed. The early history of these tales reveals not only the ways in which Jainas imagined brahman identity but also the ways in which Jainas reimagined Vedic and Jaina householder identities in response to inter-religious dialogues and competition for political patronage. Her careful tracking of the terms *māhana* and *baṃbhaṇa*, which are Prakrit renderings of the Sanskrit *brāhmaṇa*, in Jaina texts between the fourth century BCE and the fifth century CE, reveals that the oldest Jaina texts too placed householder brahmans among other groups that begged

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for alms, like *samaṇas*, beggars, and *caṇḍālas* ('Dalit' in contemporary India). Like the others, brahmans too appeared to subsist on the food and shelter provided by the local population.

Both Smith and Chauhan provincialize the ascetic as well as the householder brahmans at the same time as they deepen our comprehension of Indic (not just Hindu) kingship. From the third century BCE, according to Lubin, various ruling powers appeared to have delegated judicial, administrative, and ritual authority to brahman males.[1] In return for their services, they were given different kinds of tax-exempt lands and various honours and offices. If brahmans enjoyed precedence over the other social groups on a progressively decreasing scale of dignity, it is because of their prior service-relationship to the chiefs and clan-heads.

Early medieval commentaries, written by scholar-philosopher brahmans, had sought to establish a distance between their own ranks and those of dependent brahmans 'granted lands, homes, and other kinds of material support by a king [who] have obligations to that king'.[2] The *Dharmaśāstra* characterize these as 'settled brahmans' and 'employees' of the king, who are 'obliged' to perform 'the constant and occasional duties, as well as the propitiatory and welfare rites for the citizens, and, in cases of doubt, they should make decisions (for them) as well'. In the eyes of the scholarly brahmans, those brahmans who served the king and citizens were of lesser standing. Brahmanhood, in other words, was graded and ranked as well.

Yet the scholars' own dependence on similar patrons appears to be disguised by the ideological construction of caste articulated by the *Dharmaśāstra*. The scheme that was first described there as '*varṇa*' was ideological in the sense that John Cort defines ideology: as a mode of 'interpreting reality based upon a systematic, idealist quest for order. It is systematic in that it seeks to provide a single perspective from which a wide array of data can be brought together and harmonized within a single intellectual framework'.[3] Its proponents present it as a timeless, universal truth, to that extent they *erased all reference* to specificities of time, place, and actors in the production of such ideology. They also deny change, or the changeability, of the supposedly universal truth. Changes that do occur are interpreted simply as restatements of earlier formulations or clearer perceptions of the truth. This is precisely what we find both in the enunciations of the *Dharmaśāstra* texts about the conduct of others towards the brahman's body, as well as a silence around the dependence of the brahman on his patron.[4]

[1]Timothy Lubin, 'Religious Endowments in Ancient India and the Institutionalization of Brahmin Caste Status', *American Journal of Legal History*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2023, pp. 97–114; for his study of a later period, see Timothy Lubin, 'The Polity of the Philosopher-Bureaucrat: Brahmanical Virtue as a Qualification for Public Office', in *World View and Theory in Indian Philosophy*, (ed.) Piotr Balcerowicz. Warsaw Indological Studies Series (Delhi: Manohar, 2012), vol. 5, pp. 299–326 and Appendix; also see Benjamin Fleming, 'Making Land Sacred: Inscriptional Evidence for Buddhist Kings and Brahman Priests in Medieval Bengal', *Numen*, vol. 60, no. 5–6, 2013, pp. 559–585.

[2]Donald R. Davis, Jr., 'Intermediate Realms of the Law: Corporate Groups and Rulers in Medieval India', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* (hereafter *JESHO*), vol. 48, no. 1, 2005, pp. 92–117.

[3]John E. Cort, *Jains in the World: Religious Values and Ideology in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 10.

[4]The first to point to this silence was Bernard Kolver, 'On the Origins of the Jajmani System', *JESHO*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1988, pp. 265–285.

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In the peninsular context of burgeoning commercial life, it was hardly surprising then that both Hindu kings and Muslim sultans from the fourteenth century onwards used the same groups of literate men as dependable agents to either supplant over-mighty officers of a previous regime or reign in recalcitrant local chieftains.[5] Yet, despite the integration of brahman groups into the fabric of Muslim sultanates and Mughal ruling regimes as translators, clerks, letter-writers, accountants, or scholars, Truschke argues, they did not directly acknowledge this fact about themselves.[6] If one reads the hagiographic literature of the same period, however, this silence becomes legible: it was rooted in the very haptic sensibilities of brahmanism itself.[7] In other words, it was the operation of the ideology of *varṇa* and the *Dharmaśāstra* that may explain the silence of brahmanical texts regarding their service to *yajamānas* of a completely different ritual order. This was the work that ideology performed.[8]

Other scholars before these authors have asked *why* the ideological order of *varṇāśramadharma* persisted in the face of social and ideological challenges. Their answers have varied. Some like Louis Dumont earlier and, more recently, Donald R. Davis have suggested that the persistence rests on a fundamental commitment to hierarchy that is characteristic of Hindu texts.[9] Other scholars, like Lubin, sought an explanation in donative actions of patrons.[10]

The articles in this special issue offer a third and more complex answer. They demonstrate that even as workers and mercantile groups were empowered in various courtly and coastal centres of the medieval and early modern past, they participated in institutions and processes that *secured* the universalization of *varṇa* ideology. Eric M. Gurevitch especially outlines the work that skilled groups of engravers and artisans, considered *śudra* in the *Dharmaśāstra* texts of the earliest centuries, contributed to this process. Both as groups, and as individuals, artisans did not spurn the *varṇa* schema so much as reinscribe themselves into it at more elevated levels. The conclusion is inescapable. Caste identity in premodern and early modern India was energized

[5]A fuller explication is in Sumit Guha, 'Serving the Barbarian to Preserve the *Dharma:* The Ideology and Training of a Clerical Elite in Peninsular India, 1300–1800', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2010, pp. 497–525.

[6]Audrey Truschke, 'Contested History: Brahmanical Memories of Relations with the Mughal', *JESHO*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2015, pp. 419–452.

[7]For a textual treatment of clerical (*kayastha*) servants of Bengal sultans, written by a Vaiṣṇava brahman in the fifteenth century, see Edward C. Dimock (trans), *Caitanya Caritamrta of Krsnadas Kaviraja* (Boston: Harvard University, 1999), pp. 611–631; for the punishment feared by such figures as 'loss of caste', see pp. 771–783.

[8]For two radically different explorations of service in relation to caste identities, see Donald R. Davis, 'Slaves and Slavery in the *Smṛticandrikā*', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2020, pp. 23–43; and Pankaj Jha, 'Securing the Naukar: Caste and "Domestics" in Fifteenth-Century Mithila', in *Servants Pasts: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia*, (eds) Nitin Sinha et al. (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2019), vol. 1, pp. 133–152.

[9]Donald R. Davis, Jr., '*Pratiloma* Paranoia: Class Hierarchy, Conservatism, and Ethics in Classical Hindu Law', *Religions*, vol. 15, no. 7, 820, 2024, pp. 1–15.

[10]Timothy Lubin, 'Dignity and Status in Ancient and Medieval India', in *Human Dignity in Asia: Dialogue between Law and Culture*, (ed.) Jimmy Chia-Shin Hsu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 285–307.

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when occupational groups organized around a local ethno-political identity in order to secure economic and social claims vis-à-vis imperial powers.[11]

What then of the role that devotional traditions (*bhakti*) played in puncturing this ideological façade? Scholars of religious literature and historians of the medieval and early colonial subcontinent have long argued about the ways in which *bhakti* did or did not dilute differences of caste.[12] Earlier this debate focused on the growth of Vaiṣṇava devotionalisms from the early medieval centuries on. Lately, the same debates have extended to the Śaiva and Vīraśaiva traditions and texts.[13] Particularly significant in this regard has been Florinda de Simini's work on the *Śivadharma* and *Śivadharmottara*, texts of the Śaiva tradition from *circa* the sixth–seventh century.[14] The anonymous authors of these texts claimed that the initiated Śaiva ascetic (*yogi*) orders welcomed as initiates men from groups identified as *śudra* (working groups), *caṇḍāla* (modern term 'Dalit'), *mleccha* (translated as 'foreigners'; during the fifteenth–seventeenth century, this term would also refer to 'Muslims'). Dominic Goodall's work on the seventh century *Śivadharmottara* also suggested that rather than birth identity as the guarantor of 'liberty', it would be devotion to Śiva that guaranteed spiritual liberation.[15] Peter Bisschop, Niranjan Kafle, and Timothy Lubin modify this picture.[16] On the one hand, they suggest, the *Śivadharmottara* addressed the lay householder-devotee to cultivate faith in the Śaiva teachers (*ācarya*) and ascetics (*yogi*), and to feed the latter on ritual occasions, and so replaced the Smārta brahmans as recipients of homage, gifts of food, and land with Śaiva ascetics, regardless of their *jāti* (birth-group) origins. In those verses where the devotee was to feed the ascetic, the latter is proclaimed as 'the best brahman'. It would appear then that, far from critiquing *varnāśramadharma*, such Śaiva teachers and texts had implicitly upheld the hierarchy in *varṇa* ideology. Studies of

[11]Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia: Past and Present* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016).

[12]See John S. Hawley, *A Storm of Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); John S. Hawley, Christian L. Novetzke and Swapna Sharma (eds), *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019); for an overview of the debate, see Patton Burchett, 'The Rise of Vaisnava Devotion in North India: On the Origins of a Mughal Bhakti Sensibility', in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Religions*, (ed.) Knut Jacobsen (London: Routledge Press, 2020), pp. 151–171; for Burchett's own analysis of Dalit hagiography, see P. Burchett, 'Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of "Untouchable" Saints: Discerning Bhakti's Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2009, pp. 115–141; for supporting positions on peninsular bhakti formations, see Christian L. Novetzke, 'The Brahmin double: The Brahminical Construction of Anti-Brahminism and Anti-caste Sentiment in the Religious Cultures of Precolonial Maharashtra', *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2011, pp. 232–252; Jon Keune, 'Pedagogical Otherness: The Use of Muslims and Untouchables in Some Hindu Devotional Literature', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 84, no. 3, 2016, pp. 727–749.

[13]For Śaiva polemics against Vaiṣṇava brahmans and Jains in the thirteenth century, see Gil Ben-Herut, *Siva's Saints: The Origins of Devotion in Kannada According to Harihara's Raga.lega.lu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); also see Ben-Herut, Jon Keune and Anne Monius (eds), *Regional Communities of Devotion in South Asia: Insiders, Outsides and Interlopers* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[14]Florinda De Simini, *Of Gods and Books: Ritual and Knowledge Transmission in the Manuscript Cultures of Premodern India* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

[15]Dominic Goodall, 'Rudraganikas: Courtesans in Siva's Temple: Some Hitherto Neglected Sanskrit Sources', *Cracow Indological Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 91–143.

[16]Peter Bisschop, Nirajan Kafle and Timothy Lubin, *A Saiva Utopia? The Sivadharma's Revision of Brahmanical Varnasramadharma* (Napoli: Unior Press, 2021).

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texts and epigraphia for the period between the seventh and the tenth centuries, when initiated Śaiva sages in turn became teachers of kings in many parts of northern and central India, put this ideological construction on even more solid ground.[17] Tamara Sears' art historical and epigraphic study of one lineage of the Śaiva Siddhānta, the Mattamayūra (the Drunken Peacock), reveals that the gurus and ascetics had a command of Sanskrit, the premier language of the courts of the medieval subcontinent, and even composed commentaries on Vedic smārta rituals and manuals of conduct.[18]

Such manuals of conduct come closest to what, modifying Foucault, can be called 'monastic governmentality'—the shaping of conduct of lay followers by ascetic and monastic teachers.[19] Wherever ascetic or initiated monks acted as teachers and spiritual-religious guides, both providing models of moral conduct and judging and enforcing it by a range of different means at their command, there emerged 'subjects' fashioned by such a monastic governmentality. Therefore, when such teachers identified an initiate by their family lineage either to deliver *jāti*-specific initiations or in order to assert the guru's authority to legitimate a particular initiate's claim to *kṣatriya* identity, there the ideological mainframe of *varṇa* was grounded by the invested ritual and political actions of figures of authority.

Elaine Fisher's analysis of a sixteenth-century Kannada hagiography of a Vīraśaiva teacher called Maruḷa gestures at just such a monastic governmentality, even as it suggests a continuation of trends from the Saivism of the sixth–seventh century found by de Simini. Devakavi, a sixteenth-century author, writes about a twelfth-century 'untouchable' saint who transmitted 'a mastery of the Sanskrit Saiva Agamas and Upanishads' to his disciples. Later hagiographies of Maruḷa suggest that he also composed a new Sanskrit commentarial treatise, the *Dārukabhāṣya*. Fisher's goal here is to show that non-brahman communities, including those initiated to Vīraśaivism, consumed, transmitted, and produced knowledge in Sanskrit from the twelfth–thirteenth century: that Vīraśaiva teachers never rejected Sanskrit even though they rejected Vedic ideologies of caste.

Given this picture of multiple proprietors of linguistic-cultural capital, we might contemplate their effects on those scholarly or courtly brahmans who claimed Sanskrit as their monopoly. The issue is relevant only if we consider the persistence of scholarly polemics in the region since the thirteenth century. Fisher herself has noted the sectarianization of public philology in the sixteenth century.[20] Did the

[17]For an excellent geographical sense of the phenomenon, see Elizabeth Cecil, *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape: Narrative, Place and the Śaiva Imaginary in Early Medieval North India* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

[18]Tamara Sears, *Worldly Gurus and Spiritual Kings: Architecture and Asceticism in Medieval India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

[19]Indrani Chatterjee, 'Monastic Governmentality, Colonial Misogyny, and Postcolonial Amnesia in South Asia', *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 57–98; for support from Buddhist Southeast Asia, see Patrice Ladwig, 'Thinking with Foucault Beyond Christianity and the Secular: Notes on Religious Governmentality and Buddhist Monasticism', *Political Theology*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2021, pp. 60–67; for another study of the nexus of the court, monastery, and temple through the career of a monastic leader in early modern Vijayanagara kingdom, see Valerie Stoker, 'Darbār, Maṭha, Devasthānam: The Politics of Intellectual Commitment and Religious Organization in Sixteenth-century South India', *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 130–146.

[20]Elaine Fisher, 'Public Philology: Text Criticism and the Sectarianization of Hinduism in Early Modern South India', in *Scholar Intellectuals in Early Modern India*, (eds) Christopher Minkowski, Rosalind O'Hanlon and Anand Venkatakrishnan (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 50–69.

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proliferation of multiple Sanskrits provincialize the brahmans or arouse their determination to put their rivals in their place? The evidence of western India suggests the latter: there, in the late fourteenth–fifteenth century, a Saiva brahman, Gopinātha, composed a defence of *varnāśramadharma* in his *Jātiviveka* ('Discernment of Jātis').[21] Yet, the text omitted the *kṣatriya* completely, while actually listing the parentage, proper occupation, and ritual entitlements of some 85 local *jātis*—encompassing every rural and urban service community of the region. The absence of the *kṣatriya*, and the enumeration of local *jāti*s, implied that the material and regional social order was made up of a mass of service groups, which the *brāhmaṇa* author of the text had relegated to the edges of the *śūdra* fold, or put beyond the *varṇa* system altogether. Similar brahmanical invective emerged in texts composed in the commercially vibrant Malabar region during the fifteenth–seventeenth century.[22] Read together, such brahmanical texts suggest a profile of variously placed brahmans, besieged by occupational and ideological rivals, all vying for the resources of office, lands, and entitlements.

During these centuries, it should be remembered, both southern and western India had seen the arrival of the Portuguese, Dutch, and English, Christians of various denominations, as well as Muslim clerics of the Shafei tradition, Shi'i courtiers and kings in central India, and Sufi mystics and their followers. Along with the many non-brahman clerical and artisanal groups that our authors gesture at, all these men could provide comparable literary, accounting, and medical services to both kings and commoners. Both the scholarly and the householder brahman now needed fresh patrons. Thus, as Kruijtzer puts it, in most parts of the peninsula after the seventeenth century, brahmanhood became synonymous with financial administration and bookkeeping. In the material of the East India Companies many references can be found to 'the Brahmin of so and so', meaning his or her bookkeeper or representative.[23] European colonial commerce, far from provincializing brahmans, may just have thrown them a lifeline.

Haunting silences: Marriages, 'casta', and non-Hindus

This special issue marks a significant step forward in historicizing brahmans and helps us identify them not as socially homogenous or as social isolates but in relationships with other groups in a changing landscape. Yet even as they add temporal depth and nuance to the scholarship on brahmans, the articles remain silent on histories of gender and kinship that were the crux of many of the brahmanical formulations of caste rank and status. In what follows, I will lay down some directions in which future research might go to further deepen the relational studies of brahmans and non-brahmans alike.

[21]Rosalind O'Hanlon, Gergely Hidas and Csaba Kiss, 'Discourse of Caste over the Longue Duree: Gopinatha and Social Classification in India ca 1400–1900', *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 102–129.

[22]P. K. Yasser Arafath, 'From Batuta to Makhdum: Savarna Habitus, Corporeal Shields and Caste Acoustic on the Malabar Coast', in *Textual Lives of Caste Across the Ages: Hierarchy, Humanity and Equality in Indian History*, (ed.) Prathama Banerjee (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), pp. 195–210.

[23]Gijs Kruijtzer, 'Madanna, Akkanna and the Brahmin Revolution: A Study of Mentality, Group Behaviour and Personality in Seventeenth-Century India', *JESHO*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2002, pp. 231–267, esp. p. 243.

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Such a relational study is all the more necessary given the ubiquitous evidence of women of non-brahman households of the ancient and medieval periods who fed and supported such brahmans. For instance, a fifth-century inscription proclaims that the 'wife of' (*bhāryyā*) an unnamed householder (*grihastha*) had given ten *dinars* to ensure that ordinary brahmans were fed at a perpetual almshouse.[24] Some almshouses were well established enough to receive multiple gifts of money where donors clearly identified such feeding as a means of accumulating merit for themselves.[25] Since such almshouses are also identified in inscriptions of the same time and region with residential complexes called *munivasati* (lit. 'abode of sages') one may infer from this that the sages were the same ascetic brahmans who were fed by the generosity of householders.[26] Scholars such as Anjali Varma, Leslie Orr, Padma Kaimal, and Cynthia Talbot, who have studied epigraphs from the eighth–thirteenth century and beyond, have named women as the builders of temples, monastery complexes, and shrines dedicated to Jaina teachers (*basadis)*. They have tracked the ways in which gifts by such propertied women constituted a 'special hinge' that linked royal and commoner traditions in the Indian subcontinent.[27] Had colonial European and post-colonial Indian historians been less androcentric, these women's sponsorship and donation activities would long ago have placed them in the category of *yajamāna* as well. And such reclassification would in turn have impelled the scholars to re-read the minutiae of marriage and kinship prescriptions of the *Dharmaśāstra* in a different light—perhaps as discussions of the transfer of wealth belonging *to* the non-brahman women, and of all young women's labour, to dependent, brahman men.

Feminist historians such as Jaya Tyagi and classicists such as Stephanie Jamison have indeed suggested that the eight-fold taxonomy of marriage rituals and forms found in the *Dharmaśāstra* constituted an implicit acknowledgement of existent

[24]Gadhwa Stone Inscription of Chandragupta II, year 88, in John F. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indiarum*, 3rd rev. edn (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1970), no. 7, pp. 36–39.

[25]Ibid., no. 9, pp. 40–41.

[26]Bilsad Stone Pillar Inscription of Kumaragupta, year 96, in ibid., no. 10, pp. 42–45.

[27]For a female sponsor of a shrine who is described not as 'wife', but as 'a favourite', of a ruling Pallava king, see E. Hutsch (ed. and trans.) *South Indian Inscriptions* (Madras: Government Press, 1890), vol. 1, no. 29, pp. 23–24; see also Padma Kaimal, 'A Man's World? Gender, Family and Architectural Patronage in Medieval India', *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2003, pp. 26–53; Leslie C. Orr, 'The Vaisnava Community at Srirangam: The Testimony of the Early Medieval Inscriptions', *Journal of Vaisnava Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1995, pp. 109–136; Leslie C. Orr, *Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamil Nadu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Leslie Orr, 'Women's Wealth and Worship: Female Patronage of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism in Medieval Tamilnadu', in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India*, (ed.) Mandakranta Bose (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 124–147; also Leslie Orr, 'Chiefly Queens: Local Royal Women as Temple Patrons in the Late Cola Period', in *The Archaeology of Bhakti*, (eds) Emmanuel Francis and Charlotte Schmid (Pondicherry and Paris: Institut Francais de Pondicherry and Ecole Francais d'Extreme-Orient, 2016), vol. II, pp. 385–422; for a sister of a Kakatiya ruler who acquired a 'proprietary claim' in Andhra country through marriage and built tanks for irrigating and cultivating land, see Cynthia Talbot, *Precolonial India in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 95–99: Anjali Varma, *Women and Society in Early Medieval India: Reinterpreting Epigraphy* (London and Delhi: Routledge India, 2018); for the further implications of this pattern, see Indrani Chatterjee, 'Women, Monastic Commerce and Coverture in Eastern India, circa 1600–1800 CE', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2016, pp. 175–216.

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practices that brahman priests legitimated ritually.[28] Certainly from the first centuries CE right down to Vedic and Smārta commentaries in the thirteenth century, next-of-kin marriage practices adopted among people served by the 'Maga-Brahmans' or the Zoroastrian priests (*magi*) received considerable attention.[29] The Geniza records too suggest a range of cohabitation practices among avunculineal Nair communities on the Malabar coast and patrilineal Tunisian Muslim and Jewish merchants in the twelfth century.[30] This was the 'unstated lived context' of medieval literary-legal production.[31] So the brahmans who composed early *Dharmaśāstra*s may have worried about marriage between close kin as well. Thus they appear to have recommended marriage outside the *gotra* while accepting it as an 'unlearned' practice found in societies in which they lived and served.[32]

However, this bewildering variety of marriage forms also suggests that the monogamous marriage considered normative in the Roman empire—and inherited by almost all European legal systems—was absent as a valued form in the early subcontinent. Equally remarkable is the evidence of brahman males, required to accept gifts, apparently acquiring wives from other *jāti-varṇa* statuses—thus the same brahman scholars had allowed sonship and inheritance to those born of cross-*varṇa* unions (*varṇasaṃkara)*, such as 'the son of a *śudra* woman and a twice-born man'.[33] When brahmanical texts had left provisions for non-endogamous unions for all the men governed by such prescriptions, when and why did endogamy become the characteristic feature of caste?

A previous answer to this question suggested that this occurred only after members of an occupational group (*jāti*) were recognized as a corporate entity by the local governor of the territory in which they resided, for purposes of his own. In other words, *jāti*-endogamy was only to be expected when a particular *jāti* entrenched in its relationship to a political authority sought to restrict access to its gifted resources of lands, labours, offices, and emoluments. As in the instance of a seventeenth-century widow of a brahman district accountant, who challenged her affines as they tried to

[28]Jaya Tyagi 'The Dynamics of the Early Indian Household: Domesticity, Patronage and Propriety in Textual Traditions', in *Looking Within, Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through Time*, (ed.) Kumkum Roy (Delhi: Primus Books, 2015), pp. 137–169; Stephanie Jamison, 'Marriage and the Householder', in *The Oxford History of Hinduism. Hindu Law: A New History of Dharmaśāstra*, (eds) Patrick Olivelle and Donald R. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 125–136; Donald R. Davis, *The Spirit of Hindu Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 89–107; also see Christopher G. Framarin, 'The Householder as Support and Source of the Asramas in the Manava *Dharmaśāstra*', *International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–22.

[29]Jonathan Silk, 'Putative Persian Perversities: Indian Buddhist Condemnations of Zoroastrian Close-kin Marriage in Context', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2008, pp. 433–464.

[30]For a detailed re-examination of the evidence, see Ophira Gamliel, 'Asu the Convert: A Slave Girl or a Nayar Land-Owner?', *Entangled Religions: Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Religious Contact and Transfer*, vol. 6, 2018, pp. 201–246.

[31]Alexis Sanderson, 'How Public Was Śaivism?', Keynote Lecture at the Symposium Tantric Communities in Context: Sacred Secrets and Public Rituals, Vienna, 2015; revised for publication 2018, academia.edu, [last accessed 14 February 2021].

[32]See David Brick, 'The Debate on Cross-Cousin Marriage in Classical Hindu Law', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1–2, 2021, pp. 1–54.

[33]Donald R. Davis, 'Children', in *Oxford History*, (eds) Olivelle and Davis, pp. 151–163, esp. p. 155, n. 16.

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usurp the lands and rights attached to her dead husband's office, the predictable corollary of such a dispute was a direct challenge on the 'purity' of the marriage itself. Thus Rosalind O'Hanlon notes, the 'largest seventeenth century gathering of named Brahman scholars that we know of assembled together not in intellectual debate but to assure themselves of the *purity of their marriage relationships*'.[34] This assembly occurred in a city that had recently seen the establishment of a provincial Mughal administration as well.

Obviously in time the particular relational and intersectional location of the corporate group (*jāti*) determined the lengths to which it would go to limit the access of other groups to the resources which the group alone claimed. The Sisodia lineage of Marwar, for instance, entered Mughal administration in the sixteenth–seventeenth century and imitated their Mughal overlords by practising a range of ritual forms of marriage (such as *dola, khanda vivaha*, and *nata*), taking women from lesser-status lines into their own houses, as well as sending princesses of their own lineages to the households of Mughal princes (born of Sunni Muslim fathers and, at least in some cases, of Rajput Hindu mothers).[35] Such sexual unions would hardly have qualified as examples of 'caste-endogamy' at work.[36]

At least one such ruler of Marwar in the mid-eighteenth century, albeit an initiated Vaiṣṇava, one whose temple-rituals were performed only by brahman priests and whose Vaiṣṇava mercantile groups weaponized *Dharmaśāstra* in order to enforce the touch and distance taboos against working groups in his domain, nevertheless found that he could not name his own concubine-born son as his heir and successor.[37] The ruler's kinsmen wasted no time in having the concubine assassinated.[38] The threat to the corporate group's access to the resources commanded by the state was the key here, not any particular infringement of *Dharmaśāstra*. Given this evidence, leaving marriage, concubinage, and sonship out of the consideration of brahmanical judicial

[34]Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Gotmai's Suit: A Brahman Woman of Property in Seventeenth-century Western India', in *Science and Society in the Sanskrit World*, (eds) Christopher T. Fleming, Toke Knudsen, Anuj Misra and Vishal Sharma (Leiden: Brill, 2023), pp. 448–466.

[35]Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines: Female Slaves in Rajput Polity, 1500–1850', in *Slavery and South Asian History*, (eds) Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 136–161; Shivangini Tandon, 'Elite Households and Domestic Servants', Geetanjali Tyagi, 'The Invisible Lives of Davris and Badarans', and Priyanka Khanna, 'Service, Sex and Sentiments', in *Servants' Pasts*, (eds) Sinha et al. vol. 1, pp. 153–227; also see Heidi Pauwels, *Voice of the Indian Mona Lisa: Gender and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Rajasthan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), esp. pp. 64–189.

[36]For similar issues in western Indian societies, see Indrani Chatterjee and Sumit Guha, 'Slave-Queen, Waif-Prince: Slavery and Social Capital in Eighteenth-century India', *IESHR*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1999, pp. 165–186; for probing the eighteenth-century strategies of filiation and genealogical strategies in eastern India, see Indrani Chatterjee, 'Testing the Local Against the Colonial', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, 1997, pp. 215–224.

[37]Divya Cherian, *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); also see Divya Cherian, 'Fall From Grace? Caste, Bhakti and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Marwar', in *Bhakti and Power*, (eds) Hawley et al., pp. 181–191.

[38]Priyanka Khanna, 'The Female Companion in a World of Men: Friendship and Concubinage in Late Eighteenth-century Marwar', *Studies in History*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2017, pp. 98–116.

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administration leads us into a serious epistemological and methodological lapse—of mistaking a Roman law of descent and 'legitimacy' as the law of the eternal and impermeable *Dharmaśāstra*.[39]

It also leaves unchallenged an implicit coloniality of 'casta' thinking. From the sixteenth century onwards, Iberian and Latinate Catholic thought converged with the secular powers of the conquistadores to systematize a singular hierarchy based on birth-identity alone. Transferred to the South American colonies, this hierarchy put creoles on top, and graded mulattos, mestizos, and others in a hierarchy below. This ideological grid organized and assigned to members in each strata their specific political, economic, and social privileges.[40] It was in this context that Iberians used 'casta' as a collective noun for biologically distinctive species organized in a singular, all-encompassing hierarchy. Iberian 'casta' swallowed up the multitudes of *jāti*s and *śreni*s of the subcontinent and merged them into a single unified structure called the 'caste system'. Though superficially reminiscent of the *varnāśramadharma* ideology, it was vastly different in its premises, especially when it came to blood-based ontologies—and the understanding of descent.

Blood was key to the Iberian and successor European projects. But as another article by Gurevitch, not included in this volume but germane to it, establishes, blood had been explicitly denied as relevant by both Jaina and Buddhist philosophers.[41] The latter focused on actions and their consequences in the cycle of rebirth. In Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, it was clearly stated that unrighteous, cruel, or evil actions in one lifetime led to rebirth in an inferior birth-group (*hīnajāti*). Their contemporaries, those brahmans who composed the Upanishad, established what Lindquist refers to as a 'hierarchy of brahman-ness' in which birth by itself was insufficient qualification for high status: Vedic learning was necessary to qualify for the highest rank of brahmans.[42] Such insistence on the secondary importance of birth-generated brahmanhood appears to be logical in a historical context in which there were many different communities and marital preferences—acknowledged in the very taxonomies found in the *dharmaśāstra*s and *purāṇa*s. So when and why did blood and birth become the characteristic feature of the highest-ranked brahmans (*kulin*), as we learn, in eastern India in the nineteenth century?

Obviously, something of the European legal and sexual order was exported into the subcontinent from the seventeenth–eighteenth century onwards. Thus concepts relevant to 'casta' have haunted the discussion of the subcontinental *jāti-varṇa* order since the seventeenth–eighteenth century. The results are twofold. One is an implicit and ahistorical racialization, or 'casta' thinking, which appears due to the silence on women and kinship in much of the historiography on caste. The second is the

[39]For elaborations on this, see Ravi Gangal and Ravi Shankar Pandey, 'Illegitimacy Under Hindu Law: A Case for Its Abandonment', *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–35.

[40]Magali Marie Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Ilona Katzew, *Casta Paintings: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Nasheli Jimenez del Val, '*Pinturas de Casta*: Mexican Caste Paintings, a Foucauldian Reading', *New Readings*, vol. 10, 2009, pp. 1–17.

[41]Eric Gurievitch, 'The Epistemology of Difference: Caste and the Question of Natural Kinds in the Courts of Medieval India', *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2023, pp. 217–251.

[42]Steven E. Lindquist, 'The Social Background: Caste and Gender in the Upanisads', in *The Upanisads: A Complete Guide*, (ed.) Signe Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 81–92.

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silence on the Muslim premodern in the historiography of *jāti-varṇa* orders of the subcontinent—in contrast to post-colonial ethnography.[43] Both leave unchallenged a European colonialist separation of (implicitly Hindu) caste from (subcontinental) Islam.[44] This is unfathomable given that historians of premodern Muslim sultanates from the thirteenth century onwards have identified particular occupational groups (*jātis*) from whom each sultan recruited in order to loosen the grip of previous regimes. Freeborn Persian-writing chroniclers invariably spoke of groups such as elephant mahouts, wine-distillers, barbers, cooks, and gardeners as men 'of low social standing', or even as base and impure (*najinsan wa khabisan*).[45] Clearly, these were 'low-caste' Muslims who rivalled both Turkish slaves and Persian literati for administrative posts. Therefore *jāti*-formation among Muslims (such as *julahas* or weavers, *khojas, memons bohras* as traders) must be treated within the conditions of state-formations of the early medieval period as well. This is especially relevant given recent scholarship that establishes that many Muslim craftspeople and workers in the 'creative economies' (such as performers) were bound by the same *jajmani* relationships that had earlier been limited to brahmans alone.[46] While a few scholars of colonial and post-colonial India have recognized the *jajmani* relationships that Muslim *jātis*/*zāt* also established with local brahmans, scholars of early medieval or early modern 'caste' societies have yet to probe the temporal depth of such relationships.[47] Only by reading Muslim artisanal and crafts-workers into the subcontinental premodern can we South Asianists break with the image of the slave-based plantation of the Atlantic that appears to hang over all scholarship on 'caste'.

[43]For a representative sample, see among others, Mattison Mines, 'Muslim Social Stratification in India: The Basis for Variation', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1972, pp. 333–349; Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.) *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (Delhi: Manohar, 1973); also Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Is there Caste among Muslims in India', *The Eastern Anthropologist*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–14; Sylvia Vatuk, 'Identity and Difference or Equality and Inequality in South Asian Muslim Society', in *Caste Today*, (ed.) C. J. Fuller (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 227–262; Yoginder Sikand, *Islam, Caste and Dalit Muslim Relations in India* (New Delhi: Global Media Publications, 2004); Carla Bellamy, 'Being Muslim the Chhipa Way: Caste Identity as Islamic Identity in a Low-caste Indian Muslim Community, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2021, pp. 224–253; for a historically informed probe of the same debates, see Julien Levesque, 'Debates on Muslim Caste in North India and Pakistan: From Colonial Ethnography to Pasmanda Mobilization', Pondicherry and New Delhi, Institut Francais de Pondichery and Centre de Sciences Humaines, Working Paper, 2020, hal.science/ hal-02697381/document, [last accessed 9 January 2025]; also J. Levesque and Soheb Niazi, 'Caste Politics, Minority Representation and Social Mobility: The Associational Life of Muslim Caste in India', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2023, pp. 413–425; Muzaffar Assadi, *Colonial and Post-colonial Identity Politics in South Asia: Zaat/Caste Among Muslims* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[44]See Joel Lee, 'Caste', in *Encyclopedia of Religions: Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism*, (eds) Z. R. Kassam et al. (London: Springer, 2018), pp. 167–176.

[45]Shaikh Abdul Latif, 'The Indian Elements in the Bureaucracy of the Delhi Sultanate', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 54, 1993, pp. 155–162; Sunil Kumar, 'Service, Status and Military Slavery in the Delhi Sultanate: Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', in *Slavery*, (eds) Chatterjee and Eaton, pp. 83–114; also Shireen Moosvi, 'The Medieval State and Caste', *Social Scientist*, vol. 39, no. 7–8, 2011, pp. 3–8.

[46]Anna Morcom and Neelam Raina (eds), *Creative Economies of Culture in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 1–12; see also Amanda Lanzillo, *Pious Labor: Islam, Artisanship, and Technology in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

[47]Partap C. Aggarwal, 'A Muslim Sub-Caste of North India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1966, pp. 159–161.

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In the Atlantic context from the seventeenth century, miscegenation roused fear of creoles, born of 'white' men and 'African/Amerindian' mothers, who could demand emancipation of the colony from metropolitan control.[48] The subcontinental textual discussions about children born of cross-caste unions (*varṇasaṃkara*) appear to be about claims to honour, office, related subsistence—and forms of ritual action that people of mixed birth could, or could not, make. Such claims would have required that brahman priests be employed to provide the requisite ritual services to these households, and in turn, find themselves dependent on those very groups they considered of lesser ritual rank.

Certainly, such a situation is presented in documents datable to approximately the seventeenth–eighteenth century in eastern India, where purohit brahmans admitted their dependence when they wrote 'in such and such a village, I have many ancestral *yajamān*'.[49] Substantial peasant households—identified with *jāti* names such *as chāshā* (cultivator), *kaivartta* (fishermen), and *tāntī* (weavers)—patronized brahman-gurus with small sums of money that together made up the maintenance (*yajamānī vritti*) of the latter.[50] These relations of service and dependence were secured by charters granted by superior authorities of the region. As one such charter showed, a hereditary right of presiding over an assembly, held by a line of brahmans, had to be shared between two sets of holders: for every ritual conducted, whether for a cremation or a tree-planting or pond-excavation, a share of the earnings had to be given to the other lineage of brahmans claiming to provide the same services.[51]

As all the articles in this volume collectively allow us to understand, the apparent changelessness of *varnāśramadharma* ideology papered over a constantly changing socio-economic reality marked by the inversion of economic dominance and ritual-social rank, the increasing differentiation of lineages and sub-groups of brahmans from the earliest centuries until the eighteenth. If Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, all of who belonged to the same landscape from the eighth century in southern India, and the thirteenth century in northern India, are absent from the volume—either as *yajamānas* or as clients of brahmans—at present, perhaps future generations of scholars will fill out the picture.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

[48]Joan-Pau Rubies, 'Were Early Modern Europeans Racist?', in *Ideas of 'Race' in the History of the Humanities*, (eds) A. Morris and D. Rupnow (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 33–87; for a recent analysis, see Guido van Meerstergen, *Ethnography and Encounter: The Dutch and English in Seventeenth-Century South Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 221–236.

[49]Undated letter of Ramagovind Sarmman and Krishnachandra Sarmman to Srijut Ramdulal Tarkabagish Bhattacharya, in *Chhithipatre Samaj Chitra*, (ed.) Panchanan Mandal (Calcutta: University of Santiniketan, 1952), document no. 398, vol. 2, pp. 290–291.

[50]Document no. 619 a, in ibid., pp. 469–70.

[51]For one *kabuliyat* dated 1803 (1210 sana), listing the dues shared between two brahman lineages involved in a fight over *jajmani vritti*, see document no. 618, in ibid., pp. 468–469.

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