



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ANCIENT AND MODERN IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND VIOLENCE IN INDIA

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Abstract: *There has been little dialogue between academic communities studying ancient India and scholars working on violence in modern India. Part of the reason has been suspicion concerning the ideological foundations of Indology amongst social scientists and modern historians. To better understand religious violence in today's India the historical perspectives need to be taken into account.*

Keywords: *Ancient India, Modern India, Religion, Violence*

I have spent a good part of my academic life over the past years trying to understand the role of religion in the political life of India. I have approached the issue partly from the point of view of ancient history and partly from the point of view of modern history and social science. In my experience, it seems that there is too little communication and mutual recognition between scholars working on Indian culture with the methods of history and philology, on one hand, and those working with the methods of the social sciences, in which I include sociology and social anthropology, on the other hand. My thesis in this essay is that there is almost complete disconnection between the Indological and the social scientific approaches to religion and violence in India.

The ethics of war and the religious regulation of war is a relevant topic for scholarly debate in different sub-disciplines of Indology. For example, recent advancement has been made in Arthashastra studies with the new translation of Kautilya's Arthashastra by Patrick Olivelle (2013). Arthashastra is the classical statescraft of Hindu India and the texts in this tradition are pragmatic advice to political leaders about how to run a state. The edited volume by Greg Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Nicole Hartwell, which is the point of departure for our roundtable discussions, contains a more recent Arthashastra text, Kamandaki's Nitisara, a basically amoral treatise about politics. Alongside the Arthashastra, scholars of pre-modern Hinduism publish works on violence in the Vedas; the debate about the origins of non-violence has been important to several Vedic scholars. In addition, there is the study of the great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, both essentially tales about just or dharmic war.



At the same time there is a lot of research going on in the social sciences about Hindu violence in India today. This scholarly debate often has a focus on aggressive nationalist movements like the RSS and the VHP. These movements and their activities are studied through the lenses of modern history, economy, politics and religion. If we look at these two scholarly conversations, one about pre-modern Hindu India and the other about Hinduism and violence from the early twentieth century, we see that nothing really connects them.

So, whereas conversations about religion and violence in Christianity and Islam seem to have been successful in an attempt to connect ancient historical perspectives with modern ones, reflected in debates about the “traditions” of just war or *jihad*, there is a disconnection between ancient and modern in the study of Hinduism and violence. I want to discuss the possible reasons for this and reflect on whether there is any use in trying to look for ways to connect the two.

INDOLOGY’S BAD REPUTATION

An important reason for the disconnection is the suspicion that Indian social science has harbored against Indology. Indology, the study of ancient Indian languages, especially Sanskrit, and culture, is an academic discipline that was born out of the colonial encounter between Europe and India. The roots of the discipline are often traced to the famous speech about the relationship between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin given by William Jones in 1786, but it was really from the mid to late nineteenth century that Indology became a fashionable subject in Europe. From the 1870s Friederich Max Muller was a key person in establishing the Orientalist congresses that gathered in European capitals to develop this new subject and from the same time he started publishing the book series Sacred Books of the East. Early on, Indology was closely allied with ethnography and connections were made between Indo-European linguistic theories and theories about race.

The academic disciplines making up the social sciences and modern history in India have to a large extent focused on class and caste. For example, the subaltern school of modern history established by Ranajit Guha has been celebrated for its attempts to study history from below, from the perspectives of the subalterns, marginalized or oppressed groups like low castes and women. From the point of view of Indian social science, the academic discipline of Indology is a relic of an imperialist and Orientalist approach to India. When anthropologists, sociologists or modern historians in India have had something to say about



classical Indology they have mostly wanted to reveal the imperialistic, even racist, roots of the subject.

There is one other reason why social scientists and modern historians have been suspicious of, or even looked down on, Indology: they strongly dislike the way that the study of ancient history and languages is used by Hindu nationalists in their construction of exclusivist and aggressive modern Hindu identity. The important Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the RSS and VHP, tend to make arguments about India's past based on pseudo-scientific evidence that sometimes looks very much like the kinds of arguments debated in Indology proper. Classical Indology appears as deeply reactionary, even right-wing, and racist discipline from the perspective of an Indian academic community of social scientists and modern historians that has been left-leaning and concerned with India's enormous problems related to poverty and social inequality. With the counter-jihadist movement on the rise, classical Indology seems to have obtained another unwanted "ally" because Islamophobic ideology often perceives Indo-Aryan culture as a counterweight against Islam in South Asia. It does not help Indology's reputation when the present nationalist government in Delhi wants to introduce more Sanskrit and ancient Indian history in the curricula of Indian children and youth in an attempt to bolster a national identity that many see as exclusivist and chauvinist.

There seem to be several reasons, then, why Indology looks politically compromised from the point of view of the social sciences and modern history. This is at least part of the reason why social scientists and modern historians often ignore the academic debate about pre-modern India when they study what they call the communal violence of different religious and ethnic groups today.

CONTINUITY BETWEEN ANCIENT AND MODERN INDIAN CONCEPTIONS OF LEGITIMATE VIOLENCE

If we want to develop a more interesting, more relevant and more precise comparative academic approach to religion and violence I think this disconnection between ancient and modern poses a problem. The study of the Christian just war tradition is premised on a perceived continuity between ancient and modern, between on the one hand Augustine and Aquinas and on the other hand thinkers like Paul Ramsey (esp. 1968) and Michael Walzer (esp. 1977). I think something could be gained from exploring similar lines of continuity in



India, but that would require overcoming suspicion between scholarly communities in Indology and in modern subjects. I think that the social sciences and modern history might deepen their perspectives on religion and violence by bringing in perspectives from Indology. Let me give a brief example of what I mean by this.

Some of the communal violence that India has witnessed after 1947 is clearly associated with deep cultural and religious ideas about the duty to protect. The duty for men to protect the honor of the family, and particularly of women, is important to high-caste Hindu culture. At least one ethnographic study of high-caste Hindus in the city of Banaras showed how the concept of protection is a major factor in gender relationships. A majority of the men in this study believed it was important to protect girls and young women against impulses from the outside world, and most of the men said they are careful not to let their daughters or young wives leave the house unaccompanied. Shame (*lajjā*) is a Hindu woman's most important ornament, according to both men and women in this study, and the shame and modesty of the individual girl or woman is closely linked to the honor of the larger family.

Our understanding of ideas of protection in modern India can be deepened considerably by taking in an Indological perspective. In Hindi, the common translation of "security" is *surakṣā*. *Surakṣā* is the word used in the official Hindi of the Indian government as equivalent to "security," while *rakṣā* is the equivalent of "defense." Both of these words come from Sanskrit, from the same root: *rakṣ*. In Sanskrit, the words *rakṣaṇa* and *surakṣā* are nouns that refer to a number of different practices, ideas, and states of affairs. They can mean "security," but other important meanings are "safety" and "protection." I will use the English word "protection" to translate both the Sanskrit word *rakṣaṇa* and the modern Hindi word *surakṣā*, keeping in mind that for Hindus who speak Hindi and related languages these words will carry shades of meaning that also fall under English ideas of "guarding," "defense," and "safety."

The Sanskrit word *rakṣaṇa* and the modern Hindi word *surakṣā* are used to convey concepts concerning protection, both in a public and in a private sense. It was used in classical statecraft to refer to the protection offered by a king and his army to society and subjects. The concept of protection is at the core of a Hindu concept of state security. At the same time, in everyday Indian languages spoken in South Asia today these words also refer to the protection offered by private individuals to members of their family. A father has a duty to



provide protection for his family, and his daughters in particular; a brother has a duty to offer protection to his sister or other female members of the family who have similar roles; and sons have obligations to protect their mothers. These duties indicate that Hindu ideas of security, specified here as the concept of protection, enter social reality on many levels.

To understand this we can look at the Hindu literature about *dharma*. Here we can see that the Hindu concept of security/protection is not only about protecting people from external threats but also about guarding them against the evil inclinations in their own minds and hearts. This aspect of protection becomes especially relevant when the Hindu legal thinkers turn to the issue of gender relations. In chapter nine of *The Laws of Manu*, for example, Manu explains that it is the duty of men to guard or protect women. "Her father guards (*rakṣati*) her in her childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her sons guard her in her old age." *Laws of Manu* is the most famous of the classical Indian works dealing with the issues of dharma, which can be translated as "religion," "cosmic order," "duty" or "law." As in the case of most Indian literature there developed an extensive commentarial tradition around *The Laws of Manu*. One of the commentators to compose detailed expositions of the verses in *The Laws of Manu* was Medhatihī who lived in the ninth or tenth century. Medhātithi explains that guarding or protecting women means averting that which is bad or unprofitable (*anartha*). Medhatihī also points out that all the men in the household are responsible for the protection of women in all stages of life, although fathers, husbands and sons are assigned special responsibilities during the three stages of a woman's life. Medhātithi states that women are not strong enough to protect themselves and therefore must rely on the protection of others.

In Medhātithi's commentary on *Manu* 8.2, he draws a parallel between a householder's authority in the home and the king's authority in the kingdom. He says that the householder is entitled to inflict punishment (*daṇḍa*) in minor cases in the household. In the case of minor offenses (*aparadha*) the householder (*grhastha*) acts like the king, while in serious cases he must report to the king (Jha, 2:72). We should note here that the word denoting punishment (*daṇḍa*) of family members is the same as the word denoting punishment of criminals or punishment of hostile kingdoms by military action. Of course, one word may refer to different concepts in different contexts, but other important treatises on



dharma assume the same parallel between the king's authority over his subjects and the householder's authority over the members of his household.

It seems, then, that the concept and norms of protection are present from the top to bottom of society, according to Hindu political and social ideology and practice. The king is at the very top of the hierarchy of protection. His primary responsibility is to protect beings in his realm. At the lower end of the hierarchy is the father, the head of the Hindu household, and he is responsible to protect the members of the family.

This vision of security seems to have two implications. First, the distinction between public and private security is far less clear in the Hindu tradition than in modern Western thought. The "public" security offered by the king is simply seen as a higher form of the "private" security given to members of a household by the ideal father and householder. Second, it seems reasonable to say that the Hindu concept of security is gendered on all levels. The King is the man and the punisher, in the words of Manu, and he is often talked about in the literature in gendered terms. For instance, sometimes he is thought of as "married" to his kingdom as a bridegroom to a bride, and he punishes his subjects as a man should punish unruly members of his household. Kauṭilya says in several places that the king should behave as a father towards his subjects. Women are, at least in theory, dependent on male guardianship through their lives both in order to avert external dangers and to suppress dangerous urges within themselves.

If we look at the Sikh tradition of warfare we see that ideas about *dharma-yuddha*, or just war, is present from at least the early eighteenth century and is alive and well today, too. If we do not take this long historical perspective into account our understanding of modern Sikh ideas about violence will lack depth. The same can be said about all the Indian religions. Buddhism and Jainism developed from a broad movement of ascetics in north-India in the fifth century BC, while Sikhism grew out of a culture of poets and philosophers in northwest-India in the fifteenth century and differentiated itself gradually from Hinduism during the seventeenth century, although the nature and pace of this differentiation is a matter of disagreement among scholars. The important point is that all these traditions, in contradistinction to Islam in India, shared a very large part of their political worldviews and norms with the broader and more diffuse culture that we call "Hinduism." Thus, Buddhists and Jaina political leaders would generally take Hindu political ideals as their own.



Perhaps most importantly, these religious traditions growing out of Hindu-ism shared an intense interest in the concept of dharma. Although this concept goes through changes through the centuries, and comes to mean slightly different things to different communities and different ages, Buddhists, Jainas and Sikhs have shared a vision of politics according to which the world should be ruled according to dharma and in which war (yuddha) must be fought according to dharma. Thus, the idea of the just war (dharmayuddha) is shared by all the Indic religious traditions and this gives a certain degree of cohesion in the conceptual world of war ethics in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. For example, T. J. Bartholomeusz has traced the Buddhist idea of dharmayuddha (2002) and I have looked at dharmayuddha in Sikhism (2011).

The ancient concept of dharmayuddha is not obsolete in Indian debates about ethics today. Among present-day Hindus, among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, and among Sikhs in India, there are debates trying to clarify the moral basis for the use of violence with reference to dharmayuddha. In short, Hindu political ethics in a wide sense has contributed to the shaping of Buddhist, Jaina, Sikh and other traditions of political ethics for at least two millennia and will continue to do so.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that there is a disconnection between the subject of Indology and the social scientific study of religion and violence in India today. I suggested that part of the reason has been the association of Indology with unpalatable political ideas, like imperialism and racism, and more recently Hindu nationalism and perhaps even counter-jihadism. Let me say clearly that this association today is completely undeserved. For example a large number of eminent Indologists have thrown themselves into unpleasant political and legal conflicts with Hindu nationalists in the USA over the teaching of ancient Indian history. Many Indologists in India are vocal critics of the political abuse of ancient history.

I believe that it might be beneficial for our understanding of the role of religion in today's conflicts in India to use the insights of Indology to enrich some of the studies that are done within disciplines of the social sciences and modern history. I have suggested two examples to explain how Indological issues might inform understanding of modern conflicts: the interconnected concepts of protection and *dharmayuddha*. This is not to say that these concepts and all the ideas connected to them are static and ancient relics of a Hindu



past. They are transformed and adapted to new circumstances. However, if we want to understand why, for example, ideas of *dharmayuddha* were seen to give legitimacy to the Sikh insurgency in the Punjab in the early 1980s, or why the duty to protect can make certain kinds of interpersonal violence rational among Hindus today, we need to take notice of how these concepts were treated philosophically or applied to politics in ancient times. Moreover, if done in a sophisticated way, a better integration of the academic study of ancient and modern topics of religion and violence might make the comparison with other cultures easier.

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