
Dharmic Histories

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Primer 01

Dharmic Histories

The Histories of India and its Dharma Traditions – an Overview

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Introduction

The Dharma traditions developed over thousands of years in the Indosphere and represent the continuation and evolution of ancient spiritualities. These traditions encourage the seeking of betterment, do not require practitioners to espouse any particular beliefs, and have an inclusive, pluralistic approach to the world and its peoples. Their main goal is to guide humans to manage or free themselves from the repetitive ups and downs of life (mokṣa/nirvāṇa).

The Indosphere includes the lands of ancient India, and those regions whose peoples display cultural continuities with them in various parts of Asia and the Asian Islands. Inhabited by Homo erectus at least as early as 1.5 million years ago, and by Homo sapiens since at least 70,000 years ago, this region has been one of the most diverse on Earth for millennia. There is genetic material in ancient Indian peoples shared with those in Europe from at least 40,000 years ago, however, only a very small proportion of later European mtDNA is found in Indians today.

Much of what most people think they know about Ancient India and Indians largely comes from European theories about the region and its peoples. Colonial-era European scholars made flawed translations of a select few ancient Indian manuscripts, and found references to the term ‘Ārya’ which they misinterpreted as a racial group. From this, some European scholars developed a theory that an ancient lighter-skinned race of “Āryans” invaded the Indian subcontinent and civilized the darker-skin-colored “Dravidians” (speakers of the Dravidian language group) who were claimed to be the original inhabitants. This and other theories were deeply influenced by then-popular European racial pseudosciences such as eugenics, anthropometry, Nordicism, etc. and deeply

skewed models of ancient history. Moreover, the conscious decision to translate only those manuscripts deemed useful to the project of Imperialism also lent to fundamentally flawed historical models. Of the over 40 million ancient manuscripts in a variety of Indic languages that are estimated to exist, less than 5% have been translated.

Today, while the far-reaching legacy of these foundational errors has not fully been acknowledged, there is a growing recognition that colonial narratives were (and still are) largely unscientific, inaccurate, dehumanizing and caricatured representations of colonized peoples that portrayed non-European cultures as inferior, primitive, or stagnant to justify imperial domination or self-perceived European superiority. This recognition has also coincided with scholars from a variety of disciplines, such as archaeology, genetics, linguistics, history, religion, etc., making new discoveries about the Indosphere and its historical reach. This has all led to a better, more accurate picture of who the Ancient Indians were and how they may have lived, though much more remains to be discovered.

Societies

The earliest sources of the Indic historical record do not reveal much about the individual societies of the almost 4,400 ancient tribes and people groups that populated the Indosphere. For as much as is postulated from the archaeological sites such as the ancient Bhimbetka caves (c. 500,000 years before the present), Attirampakkam (c. 385,000 YBP), or the comparatively recent Indus Valley Civilization (c. 9,000 YBP), the details about societies that survive are precious little compared to the information from the Ārya cultures (a grouping of 172 multiethnic tribes). This is because the Āryas, though not leaving much archaeological evidence, left vast bodies of poetic compositions datable to at least the second millennium BCE.

The term ‘ārya’, for example, first appears in the Ṛgveda, the oldest surviving Vedic composition (c.1800 BCE). Ārya was a term of self-designation and marker of a particular culture and worldview. The measure of an Ārya was simply whether one’s traditions and customs adhered to one of the Ārya worldviews. Vedic Āryas, those Āryas who practiced a spiritual tradition that was collated in the compositions known as the Vedas, did not set out to exterminate Dravidians or any of the other 4,400 ancient tribes and people groups they interacted with. Indeed, Dravidian-speaking tribes became part of Ārya societies by approximately 1500-600 BCE. The most common word used by people of different ethnicities and traditions in ancient India to refer to people as a collective was Ārya, problematizing the colonial connection of the word Ārya with any one specific ‘race’.

Contemporary western understandings of the ancient world are most informed by Ancient Greek perspectives (from ~500 BCE), which in turn were informed primarily by Indo-Iranians (who followed the other major Ārya tradition, Zoroastrianism) when it came to knowledge about Ancient Indians. The ancient Greeks called the Sindhu River the Indus, and Persians called it Hindu. The Indo-Iranians and Ancient Greeks, unable or uninterested in describing the diversity and history of the peoples living beyond the Sindhu River, simply treated all of them as if they were one monolithic people. This is where we get the terms “India” and “Hindu.” People known as Hindus today, however, originally identified themselves through their family, clan, tribe, and regional or pan-regional spiritual tradition.

A vyakti (/individual) was usually part of a parivāra, which consists of an immediate family and multigenerational blood relations. A parivāra was usually part of a kula (clan), an extended family or clan with shared ancestry and kinship, whether genetic or otherwise, including relations through marriage. Subclans are often named for any significant individual and their children, or smaller clans that ally with larger clans through treaty or partnership. Many parivāras and/or kulas, when

they shared some kind of distinguishing social features, might form a jāti (tribe). The shared distinguishing features of a jāti might include any combination of commonly accepted origin stories, histories, worldviews, teachings, customs, spiritual traditions, language or dialects, trade or guild affiliation, occupation, profession, etc. While initially a tribe would have many internal variations due to it being composed from many clans, over time a tribe would trend towards synthesizing a more streamlined set of distinguishing features, while still making provisions for any dearly held clan traits to be accommodated. Many kulas and/or jātis would ally through treaty or marriage and form a jana, a clan/tribal confederation, usually with a commonly elected leader and a council made up of the leaders of the other clans. The geographical territory of a jana was called a janapada.

There were originally sixty-four major janapadas in ancient India (c. 1100-600 BCE), in addition to three great Tamil dynasties (the Cheras, Choḷas, and Paṇḍyas). These were mainly formed around cities and connecting trade routes. Thousands of other settlements belonged to tribes that did not join the more expansive confederations.

As janas grew and further governance was required, an elder of each family would form an assembly (samiti). These assemblies selected a leader (rājñā) who had a sabhā, a small group of advisors consisting of purohitas, or chaplains and experts, and the senāni, guards. When a group of janas allied through treaty or marriage, their combined janapada territories were called a mahājanapada or tribal nation. There were sixteen mahājanapadas in ancient India (c. 600-400 BCE), each of them containing one or more urbanized areas serving as economic and administrative centers, and numerous villages or forest settlements wherein resided both Āryas (originally referring to 172 multiethnic tribes, a few of which formed confederations that led to influential janapadas and then the mahājanapadas) and those tribes and confederations choosing to remain

independent from Ārya societies.

As trade between societies increased, those that developed into prosperous cities (nagara) required administration. This led to oligarchic republics (gaṇasaṅgha) like the Vṛji and Malla republics. If based around a major city with a trading network, occasionally several mahājanapadas would ally through treaty or marriage and form a sāmrajya, a nation state or empire. Otherwise, if needs were met with limited trade or if a kula, jatī, or jana was self-sufficient, they could opt to function independently in the rural areas, forests, or hills they inhabited, away from the urban cities that were founded mainly on coastal lowlands or on the banks of navigable rivers. If these independent clans, tribes or their respective confederations were situated near or on trade routes or infrastructure such as ports, they would negotiate relationships with their more powerful neighbors. Otherwise the janapadas/mahājanapadas and other kingdoms respected those independent people groups' decision to enter into trade agreements, or maintain total autonomy. This structure lent itself to a broad, pluralistic society with great diversity within larger unified groups of people. It is also the reason for the survival (until West Asian and European colonial times) of distinct clan and tribe confederations which were later classified as and designated Backward or Criminal Castes and Tribes by the British Imperial administrators.

Sadly, we do not know much about many of the earliest individual groups because of the lack of surviving archaeological evidence. The humid climate was not ideal for the survival of ancient artifacts that would reveal more about the various peoples. There has also been a lack of interest and investment from researchers and scholars in investigating the surviving oral cultures and many are declining and becoming extinct due to westernized education and financial systems.

Language

There are 453 languages surviving in India coming from seven major linguistic families (Dravidian, Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austroasiatic, Kra-Dai, Greater Andamanese, and Ongan). There are also four additional language isolates (Burushaski, Nihali, Hruso, and Shompen) which show that insular peoples from ancient India still survive, but about whom we do not know much.

Additionally, these four isolates were identified from the 1474 languages labeled as ‘other’ by the Indian census (i.e. there were less than 10,000 speakers of them). The majority of these ‘other languages’ are surely related to known languages, but there may be many more language isolates yet to be discovered — which would speak to at least as many ancestral clan groups not related to any of the major known groupings. The earliest pan-regional languages that were spoken in affluent and widespread societies in India were proto-Tamil, Sanskrit, and a variety of Prakrit languages. We know this due to the numerous surviving manuscripts as mentioned above.

In Sanskrit, the most widely observed pan-regional language, āgama refers to ‘received teachings’ or ‘tradition.’ Dharma, from the root which means ‘that which sustains’, when used specifically to refer to a tradition, has the sense of ‘worldview.’ There are numerous other context sensitive usages of dharma in Indic traditions. In countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, etc. that had significant presence of Sanskrit/Pāli, āgama is used to refer to worldview or tradition. It has been made an equivalent of ‘religion’ in the Christian/post-Christian world. Those coming to Asia and the Indian Subcontinent from West Asia, Europe and North America mistook dharma as equivalent to ‘law,’ as the Abrahamic concept of ‘religion’ entails obedience to laws believed to be divinely sanctioned (ie. laws of Jehovah, Allah, etc.). Thus dharma was misinterpreted as religion or law. In fact, dharma, depending on the context, refers to different things, including Dharma, as in spiritual worldview or spiritual tradition. It is in the sense of received spiritual tradition that the word Dharma is used here.

Spirituality

There are two broad categories of ancient Dharmas: regional/tribal Dharmas and pan-regional Dharmas.

Regional/tribal here refers to people groups that remained self-sustaining and independent of pan-regional alliances. Though in some cases they built confederations, they tended to stay in their original geographic region. They also retained their unique languages, cultures, social and governance systems, and spiritual traditions. Colonial scholars disparaged the ancestral and regional Dharma traditions of these peoples and lumped them under ‘folk or tribal religions’ or ‘animist’ for political expediency or targeted missionary activity. Many of these traditions disappeared as a result of conversion, however some regional/tribal Dharma traditions survive in significant numbers, such as Sarna Dharma, Koitur Dharma, Kirat Mundhum, Donyi-Polo Dharma, Yungdrung Bön, Sanamaha Dharma, Khāsī Dharma, Kalāśa Dharma, Satsana Phi, Dao Luong and Dao Mao of Vietnam, Kaharingan of Indonesia, Āgama Jāvā (Kejawen) of Indonesia, and Anito of the Philippines.

Pan-regional Dharmas were practiced by tribes and tribal confederations which formed as a result of alliances or treaties for trade or other strategic concerns (such as trade and defense). This brought different worldviews into conversation with one another. In this new shared culture, they would either negotiate a way for their individual clan or tribal worldviews to continue (pluralism), or discuss and create a new worldview containing salient parts of their respective identities and ideas (synthesis or syncretism).

Pan-regional people groups, while still indigenous and ancestral, spread and settled beyond their original geographic regions. Some pan-regional Dharmas were monotheist (in the sense of credence in a Supreme Being), some were atheist, and some were nontheist (not specifically theist nor atheist).

Monotheist pan-regional Dharmas included Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Kaumāram, Smārta, Gāṇapatya, Saura, and Zoroastrian Dharmas. Gāṇapatya and Saura Dharmas were eradicated by Western/Central Asian colonizers but their practices survive in regional/tribal spiritual traditions, and to some degree in other pan-regional Dharma traditions. And Zoroastrian traditions, though they shared ancestry with the Vedic Dharma tradition, developed a distinct identity sometime before 1200 BCE. This bifurcation is seen in the designation of the two peoples — Indo-Iranian and Indo-Āryan — in scholarly sources. The Baghor Stone Shrine, a still-active spiritually significant site in Madhya Pradesh with a carved and painted stone thought to have been established in 9000-8000 BCE, is the earliest surviving site associated with Śākta traditions. Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva Dharma are the two most popular groups of Hindu traditions with global presences today. Sikhī/Sikh Dharma is also another monotheist Dharma tradition that developed after its original teacher, Guru Nānak (1469-1539 CE).

Nontheist pan-regional Dharmas included Vedic Dharma specifically through the early philosophical traditions of Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. Atheist schools of thought included Lokāyata/Cārvāka (materialism), Ājīvika (determinism or fate), Śāśvatavāda (eternalism), and Ajñāna (agnosticism), all long-extinct as traditions, though their philosophies persist informally; as well as the thriving Jain and Buddha Dharmas.

Whether regional/tribal or pan-regional, these Dharma traditions are all indigenous to the ancient Indosphere.

Though it is popularly presumed that Vedānta and the other five philosophical Dharma traditions (darśanas) based on the Vedas are theist, especially as the Vedas refer to numerous Illumined Beings (devas), none of them attributed creation of the world to a specific being. God/Theos is defined in an academic and theological sense in relation to its capacity as Creator. In all the six

philosophical Dharma traditions, the multiverse is acknowledged to be anādi, or without beginning. The notion of the creator god in these traditions per the Abrahamic meaning thus cannot be equated.

Indian Influence Beyond the Indian Subcontinent

Following the Maurya and subsequent early Indic empires such as those of the Vākaṭakas, Kālābhras, Kuṣāṇas, Guptas, etc., a distinct group of raids and invasions began in 636 CE under the first Caliph of Islam, which started to reshape the cultural and political landscape of the Indosphere. Thereafter, it endured multiple, overlapping colonizations. One set of colonizers were Muslims from Western/Central Asia: Arabs, Turks and Mongols, and then the Ghurid Empire, the Sultanates of Delhi, the Deccan, of Kedah (Malay), Java, Sumatra and other territories of the Indosphere, and the Mughal Empire. The other set were Christians from Western Europe – the Austrian, Swedish, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Danish, and finally the British. Prior to these colonizations, ancient Indian regional/tribal and pan-regional spiritual traditions, while they shared pluralist values and some spiritual and cultural practices, had their own names and distinct identities, definitely having conflicts at various points in history, but none with a view to the complete eradication or conversion of the others. Colonial labels have erased all but the most politically numerical regional/tribal spiritual traditions and widespread pan-regional spiritual traditions. Under these colonizations, where regional/tribal people groups were converted, their unique culture and traditions disappeared over time due to cultural genocide. These people groups were also classified and labeled by British administrators as “tribal Indians” in contradistinction to the Dharma traditions. In fact, in view of the collated latest research these clans, tribes, and confederations are best grouped under a “Regional/Tribal Dharmas” category.

The modern world is comprised of countries whose governmental, legal, educational, and social systems derive from Islamic or Christian empires or reactions to them, such as Marxism. According to both Islamic and Christian thought, Hindus practiced the opposite of the true Religion of God. They called the presumed one Hindu religion heathenism, which over time was referred to as Hindu Heathenism, and then “Hinduism” as a world religion.

The reformationist animosity Protestants held towards Catholic clergy as elitist and corrupt interlopers in the relationship between man and God is well-known. This same acrimony colored Protestant attitudes towards Hindu (and Jewish) spiritual and religious leaders and figures. When Protestant empires were looking at other peoples in lands they wanted to dominate, it was spiritual leaders and figures who became prime targets for sowing division and calling for “reform” (that Protestants could orchestrate) in society. Simultaneously, they were somewhat more lenient to Dharmas that had a specific founder or appeared to them to be more “reformist.” Thus, the ancient Jain and Buddha Dharmas and the medieval Sikh Dharma were accepted as historically wholly separate from other Dharma traditions and thus acceptable as distinct world religions in the Protestant academies. All the remaining Dharmas were artificially lumped together under “Hinduism.”

Most European and American Protestants in the 1700s-1900s viewed Hindus as heathen. However, a few European and American-educated Hindu spiritual, social and political leaders sought to gain independence from the British by leveraging the most powerful category in Christian empires: religion. Indians such as Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833), Swami Dayananda (1824-1883), Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902), Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Swami Yogananda (1893-1952), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), and many more have contributed to this process from across the spectrum of different viewpoints. They articulated a version of Indic cultures and civilizations that

exonerated it from the numerous missionary allegations of heathenry and oppression, which ultimately lent validity to “Hinduism, the world religion.” So, as long as Protestant presumptions continue to underwrite the modern world, Hinduism will remain a necessary part of modern history and reality. Nevertheless, the ancient Hindu Dharmas continue to exist. And the only way to understand not only the past but the present realities of Hindus is in full awareness of the internal independence and interdependence of the Hindu Dharma traditions, rather than presuming an overarching, monolithic “religion” with all of these traditions being characterized as ‘sects’ or ‘cults’ like the missionaries did.

Post-Colonial India

Key figures in the Indian Independence Movement took the term Hinduism and redefined it as “Sanātana Dharma”. According to them, Sanātana Dharma is the eternal spiritual tradition, unchanging with time in its essentials. It actually developed using one of the Hindu Dharma traditions, namely the Smārta Dharma tradition as its basis. They articulated particular interpretations of the core concepts of Brahman, Īśvara, Ātman, Dharma, Mokṣa, Karma, Bhakti and Jñāna. Because their work forms a significant part of the formation story of the state of modern India, Hinduism as Sanātana Dharma is the most commonly known inside India and across the world and is taught in World Religions classes. Hinduism, in its reclaimed form as “Sanātana Dharma” (Eternal Dharma) is, therefore, rightfully one of the Hindu Dharma traditions – but it should not be seen as the only one.

In countries that observe religious freedom, legislation and policies to protect practitioners of any religion also apply to Hinduism, given that it is recognized as a world religion, alongside Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. This protects the civil and human rights of practitioners of the Dharma traditions and so even though the monolithic monoculture that is taught in classes as

Hinduism does not represent all the Hindu Dharmas, it is the only one that is widely known. To most textbook authors, Hinduism is the singular Hinduism of the colonizers and the politicians, with the various Hindu Dharma traditions erroneously referred to as “sects” or “cults.” Accordingly, until systematic decolonization and thorough educational improvements are undertaken, Hindus will continue to face all of the challenges they have had for the past few centuries. Their right to self-define and ability to understand their histories and cultures will be limited both by foreign paradigms and loss of many indigenous institutions and sources of knowledge – a loss which is accelerated due to imperialistic education and worldviews, which, though being reassessed and improved in other disciplines, is not permitted to be applied to the Dharma traditions and ancient Indian history. This challenge is compounded by the fact that Indians of any Dharma tradition educated in the anglophone and national curricula of India are only able to articulate their traditions through the colonial lens they were given.

A rational approach to equal treatment, and historical, legislative and academic integrity would recognize the individual regional/tribal Dharma traditions labeled “Folk Hinduism” or “Indian Indigenous Religion” by colonial missionaries and administrators; it would be cognizant of Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsaka, etc.; it would understand the pan-regional theist Hindu Dharma traditions such as Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Kaumāram, Smārta, etc.; and all the other historical traditions, as well as modern Hindu Dharma traditions that developed during and subsequent to colonial times, like those of Sai Baba, Swaminarayan, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Art of Living, Isha Foundation, etc. In doing so, the project of trivializing the lives, histories, cultures, and practices of the nearly 2 billion people that practice some form of Dharma tradition – that was the mainstay of imperialism – will be interrupted, and their peoples be invited into conversations with global implications to which entry has been denied for at least 200 years. It will also empower the former colonized peoples to actively assess whether the culture inculcated

and perpetuated within them for the past two centuries (even post-independence) through a combination of economic and educational agendas actually align with their heritages, and invite them to interrogate their places in the modern world with the eyes their ancestors gave them, not the lenses of those who sought to divide and conquer.

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