

CHANGES IN INDIC SUBCONTINENTAL RELIGIOUS DOGMA, PRACTICE,  
AND WORSHIP:  
TRACING CATALYSTS OF THE MAURYAN AND GUPTA ERAS

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**ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

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The history of early India saw drastic social, political, and economic changes through its many ages and eras. Every time period had its unique interweaving of opposing and coalescing forces that set the dynamics for the culture of the time. These dynamics had far-reaching consequences, one of which was a profound influence of the ideology, practice, and development of religious sects and movements. Two time periods in particular saw exceptional changes in religion: the pre-, intra-, and post-Mauryan, spanning the sixth to second centuries B.C.E., and the pre- and intra-Gupta, spanning the second to fifth centuries C.E. The former time period saw the propagation of heterodox sects, the widespread acceptance of public debates in religion, and the inception of a missionary aspect into religious practice. Heterodox sects, not conforming to the norms of society at the time, introduced alternative beliefs and new ideas of social construction into the cultural milieu. The latter time period saw the process of reclamation of past traditions with a new interpretation; the sects were founded on the orthodox *brāhmaṇa*<sup>1</sup> Vedas, *dharma*,<sup>2</sup> cosmology, and *varnas*,<sup>3</sup> but incorporated them into belief and practice in novel ways.

The times preceding those of the *Mauryas* were characterized by the second urbanization in the history of the subcontinent. Two dominant systems of rule had concurrently arisen: monarchies and *gana-sanghas*, a form of republic or oligarchy. The former endorsed a more orthodox, *brāhmaṇa* religious ideology, while the latter endorsed heterodox sects like Buddhism, *Jaina*, and *Ājīvika*. Monarchies were accepting of social stratification based upon castes; however, *gana-sanghas* viewed them as a detriment not only to their governing body, but also their cultural heritage. Both forms of governance were predicated upon the power and authority of the *rāja*; the difference lay in the degrees and manifestations of power wielded by the *rāja* under each system. In the monarchy the singular *raja* wielded autonomous power; however, the numerous *rajas* functioned more as privileged citizens rather than kings.

The monarchical kingdoms generated the trading efficiency necessary for sustained growth and expansion through social organization and specialization of craft. As different localities had come to specialize in specific goods, social organization led to stratification based on occupational guilds. Guilds allowed for increased efficiency and quality of products, which were increasingly important for the trade necessitated by chalcolithic cultures. To ensure that the guilds continued to retain specific skills sets, there was a need to ensure continued membership and passing down of skills to future generations. This was accomplished primarily by limiting marriage to within specific guilds and limiting occupational specialization through hereditary transmission, allowing sustained production of goods through generations. As the guilds retained their identity and incorporated social, religious, and proprietary practices, they evolved into *jātis*<sup>4</sup> or sub-castes. By the sixth century B.C.E, trade had become widespread enough amongst *jātis* that there were significant interactions between different societies, leading to the development of new norms and mores. Trading centers, initially founded on the surpluses generated from agrarian and other practices, became more centralized as the exchange of goods expanded. Evolution of trading centers and towns was socially, politically, and economically important, and called forth new means of social order and regulation.

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It was in this context that the *rājas* of former tribes and chiefdoms were able further to assert their power and dominion over subjects in specific geographical locales. Under the authority of a *rāja*, a trading center could mature into an urban settlement, generating new cultural mores that were soon to become pivotal in the history of the subcontinent. The administrative system of the *rāja* allowed for the collection and redistribution of wealth, association of tribes or groups of tribes with specific territory, and increased trading efficiency. The power and authority of the *rāja*, however, was dependent on the ritual authority conferred upon him by a *brāhmaṇa*. Because a *rāja* was primarily a military leader and not directly chosen by the *vish*, or clan, to lead, he had no ritual authority over the people. Rather, the *brāhmaṇa* legitimized the power of the governing authority and allowed the *rāja* to ascend to power, done so through the performance of specific and elaborate *yajñas* or rituals, intended to confer on the *rāja* divine authority over his subjects. The performance of *yajñas*, however, necessitated the accumulation of large amounts of wealth, done through stringent demands on the members of the *vish* in the form of various taxes. Eventually, the accumulation of large sums of wealth enabled the kingship to draw upon political authority and circumvent the need to attain ritual authority. Without *yajñas* as a prerequisite to kingship, their performance precipitously decreased, followed by a drastic reduction in the dominion of the *brāhmaṇa*. The consolidation of power within the realm of the *rāja* and his governing body soon became hereditary.

A symbiotic relationship was established between the *brāhmaṇa* religion and monarchical kingdoms; *brāhmanism* was the endorsed religion of the state and monarchies were the form of governance endorsed by the religion. Mutual existence had been stabilized by establishing the prerogative of the *rāja* in line with the authority of the *brāhmaṇa*. Furthermore, the intrinsically hierarchical nature of the administration necessitated hierarchical social stratification, already endorsed by the *brāhmaṇa* code in the form of *varnas* and *jātis*. The *Dharmasūtras*,<sup>5</sup> codified around the time of empire formation, laid out the rigid confines of *dharma* for every *varna* in a monarchy supported by the *brāhmaṇa* ideal. In this environment, there wasn't much *brāhmaṇa* interest in abstract thoughts and practices; preference was for religion that was more accessible and tangible, in the form of *yajñas*. The authority of the *rāja* didn't lend itself to the promotion of public debates or individual thinking; priorities remained with maintaining stability, order, and efficiency.

Moreover, systems in which a confederacy of former tribes and chiefdoms united in a way reminiscent of clan traditions led to the development of *gana-sanghas*. Situated peripherally to Gangetic urbanization, *gana-sanghas* may have arisen from distinct origins or as a countermovement to the brahmanical monarchies by those unhappy with the Vedic system. Under this system of governance, authority was centralized within an assembly of heads of households and individuals who owned property. Each member of the *sangha* was a *rāja*, the total going into the hundreds. Much emphasis was placed on public debates and forums and this tradition had arisen from the earlier *kutūhala-sahas*, public debates in urban towns and settlements to address issues not only of governance, but also of social and religious concern.<sup>6</sup> Rule by assembly also promoted independent opinions and individual thinking, adding to an environment that soon gave rise to heterodox sects. Dissident ruling *kshatriyas* (from the second highest group in the *varna* system) rejected *brāhmaṇa* theories and unhappiness with Vedic practices gave rise to heterodox *Jaina* and Buddhist sects. The materialistic *Lokāyata* and *Cārvāka* sects and the atheistic and fatalistic *Ājīvika* sect also flourished. *Gana-sanghas* remained more tolerant of large cities and urbanizations than their monarchical counterparts, eventually leading to their rise in importance through the urban practices of widespread trading and exchange of goods.

The influence of the *rāja*, or several *rājas* in the case of *gana-sanghas*, in issues of social and religious importance depended upon an associated increase in the prerogatives of the *kshatriya* or dominant ruling caste, derived from their crucial role in maintaining stability within the growing trade centers. Though sustained by differing governing philosophies, both the monarchies and the *gana-sanghas* promoted the shift in the balance of power from the *brāhmaṇas*, influencing the dynamics of the religious atmosphere. In the case of the monarchies, the shift was towards the *kshatriya*, who used the power of kingship to influence the practice and doctrine of *brāhmaṇa* practice. *Yajñas*, the crux of the *brāhmaṇa* tradition, saw virtual extinction in the *gana-sangha* systems. This was almost certainly a function

of the strong distaste for the orthodoxy of ideology and *varna* system of the *brāhmaṇa* by those who ruled over the *gana-sanghas*.

By the 320s B.C.E, the time of the rise of the Mauryan Empire, significant attention was drawn to unification of peoples and cultures across the vast boundaries of the empire. Political, cultural, and religious unity would prove to be a critical strength in maintaining stability and centralization of authority. The *Mauriyas* were adept at utilizing their political power directly or indirectly to influence the conformity of all institutions to the standard prescribed by the laws of the *rāja*. Where institutions or peoples couldn't be brought under direct control, monetary, legal, and missionary persuasions were used to gain as much influence as possible. Certain practices, particularly those of the forest tribes, that didn't conform to the norms represented by the law of the *rāja*, were tolerated and allowed to coexist when they didn't pose overt threats to the dominant culture.

This era, and the one following it, saw a tremendous increase in the patronage of heterodox sects. As merchants acquired greater wealth, from the vastly expanding mercantile industry, large sums of wealth and patronage were given to particular religious institutions. Generally being of the lower castes, merchants were often patrons of the heterodox sects, in which there was a far less emphasis on *varna* rigidity. With increased wealth and patronage, merchants were soon able to transform the religious environment of the subcontinent, particularly by endorsing new forms of artistic expression in religious contexts. Buddhism, and also the *Jaina, sangha*, or gathering of followers, attracted large numbers of people, while other heterodox sects like the *Ājīvika, Lokāyata*, and *Cārvaka* grew to lesser extents. Local *rājas* soon saw the benefit in patronizing these popular sects as well as the impact supporting *śramaṇas* had in diminishing the power of *brāhmaṇas*. Soon Buddhism was widely patronized throughout the subcontinent and became very popular, though the *brāhmaṇa* tradition always remained. Gangetic religious traditions continued to expand along with the growth of the mercantile industry and increase in travel of Buddhist merchants. The change in the religious composition of the cultures of the subcontinent necessarily involved a redefinition of social norms and practices.

A flow of ideas and people, reaching a peak during the Mauryan imperial era, allowed new levels of cross-cultural interactions between previously separate cultures. Urban cultures, able to tolerate and integrate eclectic traditions, drew a considerable advantage in the evolving social and religious atmosphere. They soon used the power associated with flourishing cities and trading centers to assert cultural and political dominance over neighboring territories. The expansion of the territory of a single *rāja* to include various cultural traditions, came with a central concern: maintaining stability and control amongst people of differing beliefs and practices.

The *Mauriyas* were tolerant of pluralist societies; the third *Maurya* ruler, *Aśoka*, best exemplified this view, which may have been inherited from the tolerance of the *gana-sangha* tradition or developed as a consequence of the religious diversity within the royal family – *Chandragupta Maurya* was a *Jaina*, *Bindusāra* an *Ājīvika*, *Chāṇakya* (the chief political advisor) a *brāhmaṇa*, and *Aśoka* a Buddhist. Though each emperor had his unique way of incorporating the pluralist value into matters of political and social importance, *Aśoka's* practices were the most comprehensive and refined. The Edicts of *Aśoka*, inscribed on large pillars and rocks throughout the Mauryan territory through the authority of the emperor himself, provide the context of the political, social, and economic concerns of the time.

*Aśoka* drew attention to the importance in *dhamma*<sup>7</sup> in both the political and cultural spheres of imperial life. *Aśoka* alternatively defined *dhamma* as “having few faults and many good deeds, mercy, charity, truthfulness, and purity”<sup>8</sup> or “abstention from killing and non-injury to living beings, deference to relatives, *brāhmaṇas* and *śramaṇas*, obedience to mother and father, and obedience to elders.”<sup>9</sup> According to the emperor, adherence to *dhamma* was an ancient tradition that had declined in past centuries,<sup>10</sup> but it was now within the duty of the empire “to protect through *dhamma*, to administer affairs according to *dhamma*, to please the people with *dhamma*, to guard the empire with *dhamma*.”<sup>11</sup> Through the use of familiar religious terminology, albeit with secular connotations, the domain of the governing body was allowed rapidly to envelop most aspects of daily life. Incorporation of *dhamma*, as the central determinate of acceptable personal and societal practice, irreversibly shaped the beliefs and practices of all sects.

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It was the promotion of religious doctrine that allowed *Aśoka* to transform his reign into one so great that it was unsurpassed on the subcontinent for a thousand years. Establishing *dhamma*, consistent with a renewed sense of social progress, also increased *Aśoka's* fame and glory<sup>12</sup> so as to garner the necessary support for his preachments and pronouncements. Driving on public acceptance and fervor, *Aśoka* established a branch of his government dedicated to preaching the *dhamma* to all quarters of the empire, starting the still extant missionary tradition on the subcontinent. The precedent set was for *Aśoka* to lead his people by example and for appointed royal ministers to go on tour throughout the territory and inform the citizens not only of *Aśoka's* deeds, but also of the *dhamma* of the empire. It was *Aśoka's* belief that the advancement of his *dhamma* was better achieved through persuasion than through legislation.

By drawing on soundly founded authority and borrowing from the *kutūhala-saha* tradition of the *gana-sanghas*, *Aśoka* took the cultural exchanges created by the vast geographic empire as opportunities to redefine how different religious sects dealt with one another. At the foundation was an imperial impartiality towards all sects,<sup>13</sup> extending to all communications between different sects. Open discourse between those of differing sects soon took a formative role in the homogenization of some beliefs, the syncretic amalgamation of other beliefs, and even the new development of yet other beliefs. Concord was to be exemplified by all sects, be they *brāhmaṇa*, *śramaṇa*, or any other. Imperial impartiality, a unique perspective on the subcontinent, enabled a multitude of traditions to flourish, some of which still survive. A noteworthy exception was the view towards the various forest tribes now enveloped within the realm of the larger civilization; they remained outsiders. They were permitted to maintain their identity and religious persuasions when they didn't clash with the vision of *Aśoka's dhamma*<sup>14</sup> or threaten imperial rule over territory; however, they were warned of imperial wrath at any deviance.

This interpretation of impartiality significantly influenced three salient aspects of popular religious practice; governance actively reformed religious dogma and interpretation. First came the encroaching role of *Aśoka's* prominence in matters concerning the Buddhist *sangha*. Initially established as a refuge to the ardent follower of the *Buddha*, it had come to wield considerable authority, and naturally the concern of the emperor. As a body, the *sangha* garnered much respect from *Aśoka*,<sup>15</sup> but the dismissive and supercilious tone of some edicts<sup>16</sup> show the extent to which *Aśoka* had gained authority in religious matters, such as in the case of preventing and punishing schism within the *sangha*. Another manifestation of encroachment came with the acceptance of royal patronage in the function of the religious orders; patronage was differential and directly correlated with imperial favor and conformity to imperial values. Not surprisingly, the Buddhist *sangha* was the most highly patronized; however, this came at the cost of a growing tendency toward *Aśokan dhamma* rather than traditional doctrine.

In issues concerning the *brāhmaṇa* tradition, *Aśoka* remained wary of the practice of *yajñas* and unforgiving of eating meat. On *yajñas*, the emperor was clear that he regarded the sacrifice of animals as contemptible.<sup>17</sup> While not officially banned, the practice was only tolerated as far as *dhamma* forbid clear encroachment on the beliefs of others. The issue of vegetarianism was addressed in a different manner; *Aśoka* had taken a much more personal approach. The practice of killing animals had slowly been ended in the royal kitchens, with the banning of a growing list of game animals.<sup>18</sup> This pressed people to convert to vegetarianism, an ideal outlined in many of the *Aśokan* edicts themselves. A combination of legislation and royal persuasion was soon successful in converting large majorities of those of the *brāhmaṇa* tradition to vegetarianism. This paralleled a major shift away from the practice of *yajñas* amongst the *brāhmaṇas* because of royal condemnation and disappearing popular appeal. These changes reformed the religion so greatly that major reversions would never occur again, despite small backslidings after the fall of the empire.

Moreover, significant secular changes had occurred, which soon became important in shaping future religious beliefs and practices. When the economy surged during the reign of the *Mauryas*, the distribution of coins for general circulation became important. Coins had become necessary for even the daily activities of laypeople, so the distribution of coins that were respected inside and outside the empire became a defining aspect of an efficacious *raja*.<sup>19</sup> Second, the extensive use of a script for the transmission of ideas, inscription of edicts, and governmental function, led to significant rises in literacy and adoption of a script instead of oral transmission. The writing and meticulous preservation of important religious

texts was soon practiced, giving rise to the earliest study of primary text literature. Finally, the vast geographical expanse of territory brought under Mauryan dominion allowed new, pervasive interactions with other cultures. Most significant were the influence of the Greek and various nomadic powers such as the *Kuṣāṇas*, though communication had also been opened with the Chinese and Egyptians.

The fall of the empire led to a collapse in political authority, a vacuum that was filled in different ways throughout the subcontinent. Because political leaders and establishments could no longer provide civil services the *Mauryas* once did, other institutions were called upon to do so. What was soon seen was a blurring of the concept of the state, and an associated shift in loyalty towards the social order. The rise in the power of religious and ritual authority followed, with a building interdependence between caste and politics. Whereas in the Mauryan era religious institutions were subordinate to rising political forces, in the post-Mauryan era these institutions regained their social roles. The chief duty of the *rāja* and government became codified as the *varna-āśrama-dharma*, a preservation of the caste and age-defined *dharma* of every citizen.

As different provinces of the former Mauryan Empire began to break political ties with each other, rival regional *rājas* rose to power. Each patronized different religious sects based upon familial tradition and personal preference, partitioning the subcontinent into somewhat isolated religious identities: *Kaliṅga*, in modern day Odisha, became a refuge for the *Jaina dharma*, *Tośali*, in modern day Odisha, for the *Buddha dharma*, and *Śhūṅga*, in modern day Bengal, for the *brāhmaṇa dharma*. As Central Asian and Greek powers arose in the northwest, they patronized various forms of the *Buddha dharma*. Regional variations in religious expression and dogma formed during this era, in some instances as a direct result of a desire to differentiate one regional power from another. These variations are obvious in the art, from the red sandstone of *Mathura* to the Greco-influenced sculptures of the *Gandhāra*. Cross-cultural interactions were maintained, even strengthened, by *rājas* through trade. Reliance upon agriculture as the primary means of income was declining and the importance of dependable trading outlets and contacts grew. As far as agriculture was concerned, land ownership became largely private, with the government simply collecting a variety of taxes. Strategically located and important trading centers grew to become hubs of further urbanization, adding to the power of *rājas* and the patrons of trade. The efficiency of extensive trade networks increased with the formation of *śreṇis*, or guilds.

Patrons of trade, primarily followers of the *Buddha* and *Jaina dharma*, saw substantial increases in expendable wealth. Not unexpectedly, a significant portion of this was dedicated to the building of monumental edifices and sculptures along trading routes, furthering the power and authority of such institutions. Before long, elaborate and grandiose monuments at *Sāñci*, *Bhārhut*, and *Bhājā* were patronized almost exclusively by non-elite merchants.<sup>20</sup> This reflected not only the power and independence Buddhist *sangha* regained following the decline of the *Maurya* empire, but also the growing influence merchants would have in an evolving subcontinental culture.

Mercantile trade, the primary profession of adherents of the *Jaina dharma*, increased thanks to shifting global demands and resulted in the propagation of beliefs alongside traded goods. Buddhism benefited from this phenomenon, with large portions of Central Asian populations eventually converting. As newly converted Buddhists rose to regional power because of benefits derived from trade, they began introducing things that had once been unfamiliar to the subcontinent into popular culture. Not the least important of these were Indo-Greek coins, which drew on the coin tradition of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Rulers of the *Gandhāra*, namely *Kaṇiṣka I* of the *Kuṣāṇa* dynasty, were leaders in choosing images for deities<sup>21</sup> to be used on coins.

As images of deities were accepted, monumental and exquisitely intricate monasteries along trade routes that connected metropolises became feasible. Traders, who frequented monasteries built around grandiose sculptures or paintings of deities, sometimes gave them sizable donations. By the second century C.E, Buddhist monasteries with extensive imagery became widespread, and the *Jaina* monasteries soon followed. Increasing endowments encouraged monasteries to begin claiming rights over property, giving them backing for pressuring political authorities to grant some leniency in exercising different regulations for jurisdiction for private land. Under revised regulations, monasteries had significantly increased freedom in establishing their own laws and codes of acceptable conduct.

In this incipient Gupta context beginning around 320 C.E, divergence in practice and belief was leading to large shifts in the dynamics of religious sects; some experienced schisms along geographical or philosophical lines, others faded out from the importance of the general populace, and yet others were just beginning to attract larger groups of followers. The Ājīvika, Lokāyata and Cārvāka sects lost considerable public appeal and disappeared from the public eye. Where these traditions survived, they had little impact on the hegemonic culture and were replaced by other systems of thought. The Buddhist *sangha*, forbidden to undergo schism during the reign of the *Mauryas*, split along largely geographic lines. The development of disparate philosophies and religious practices forced further divisions of the *Mahāyāna*, *Hīnayāna*, and *Vajrayāna* schools into even smaller subdivisions. The *Mahāyāna* and *Hīnayāna* differed in fundamental issues of dogma; the former held the Buddha as a god, and worshiped celestial *bodhisattvas*, who had attained enlightenment and presided over the universe. *Vajrayāna* was founded on the same philosophy as *Mahāyāna*, but incorporated principles of *tantra* in daily observances. The *Jaina sangha* also experienced a devastating schism, this one a result of the increased power and prosperity of some groups over others. The desire to differentiate amongst these groups may have been the leading factor in the cultivation of new philosophies and practices. Divisions were seen between *Digāmbara*, the various sects of *Śvetāmbara*, and *Karnāṭaka Jainas*. Finally, a revival of some *brāhmaṇa* traditions in new contexts led to the formation of *Śaiva* and *Vaiṣṇava* sects, founded on the authority of *Purāṇas*. While drawing on core *brāhmaṇa* beliefs, such as the authority of the *Vedas* and Vedic gods, these sects reflected the more liberal and refined contexts from which they arose. The concepts of *puja* and *darśana*, personal expressions of devotion, largely took the place of the more ritualistic *brāhmaṇa yajñas* in everyday life.

During this period, the religious artistry of Puranic sects exemplified their historical roots and novel interpretations. While *brāhmaṇa* practices in the Vedic era did not feature any monuments because *yajñas* were performed in open spaces, the more social and devotional expressionism of Puranic beliefs led to the construction of temples as abodes for a pantheon of deities. These temples faithfully retained many features of the primitive monuments that preceded them and were constructed out of readily preserved stone, reflecting the traditionalism and conservatism of the time<sup>22</sup> also seen in newly-produced religious texts such as the *Dharmaśāstras*. Drawing on past traditions, new Puranic temples reflected many Buddhist influences; nearly all temples drew upon the symbolic power of lions in the Buddhist *sangha* popularized by *Aśoka*; the *Nakula Sahadeva rātha* in Mamallapuram even employed the familiar semicircular terminations of Buddhist *caitya* halls.<sup>23</sup> Puranic temples featured Vedic deities such as *Viṣṇu* and *Śiva*, as seen in the monuments at Ajanta, Ellora, and Elephanta, but omitted certain important Vedic deities such as *Agni*, *Soma*, and *Indra*.

The resurgence of *brāhmaṇa* ideals, culminating in the development and spread of Puranic sects, was probably aided most by the shift in trade interests to maritime expeditions, which provided the basis for sustained economic growth.<sup>24</sup> As maritime trading grew in importance, so did the interest in astronomy, astrology, and time. Their importance to travel on the sea must have led traders of all religious persuasions to reestablish contacts with *brāhmaṇas* and their sacred texts because of their knowledge of astronomy. Hellenistic concepts of astrology and the zodiac also entered the popular public domain, perhaps a consequence of loose links with astronomy, with the translation of Greek texts from Alexandria into Sanskrit. New niches in the trading economy were filled by new specialists, whose refined cyclical time models were incorporated into virtually every religious sect. The strongest evidence of the resurgence of *brāhmaṇa* traditions can be seen in the drastically increased patronage of *brāhmaṇa* astrological deities. As a support system to aid in mid-ocean navigation and a consequence of the revived study of *brāhmaṇa* texts, these deities reentered the hegemonic culture through the trading community. Rise in *brāhmaṇa* and Puranic interests by traders undoubtedly led to their geographic spread and the associated conversion of new peoples.

By the mid-second century, *Purāṇa* traditions became viable enough to rival the *Buddha sangha* and *Jaina sangha* for royal and mercantile patronage. Mercantile patronage was pivotal as trade routes expanded and were endorsed by various populations of merchants who traded along them. With the rise of the *Śaiva* and *Vaiṣṇava* sects came the resurgence of Sanskrit, as the sects' patrons attempted to associate themselves with the prestige of the *Purāṇas*, *Vedas*, and *Upaniṣads*. Indeed, many followed this trend, extensively using Sanskrit to bolster their legitimacy and authority.

By the time of the rise of the Gupta Empire in the fourth century C.E, it had become customary for political establishments to use Sanskrit as the primary language of administration. Inscriptions from a variety of regional kingdoms include prolific Sanskrit alongside copious references to *brāhmaṇa* deities. Trading guilds were refined and streamlined to provide better technical education and near-perfect craftwork. As stone-cutting and architectural guilds began collaborating with monastery and temple officials, a new age of religious edifices was born. Intricate and glamorous religious structures came to be regarded as the center of activity in most urban settlements. Political authorities, which had risen in wealth and power because of lucky trading ventures, drew upon religious delegations for support and stability. The Gupta empire, rising from a *brāhmaṇa* background, could no change local customs after the fashion of the imperial *Mauryas*.

Legitimizing Gupta rule meant forsaking full central authority in favor of a system of hierarchical decentralized authority. As regional kingdoms came under the Gupta sovereignty, each was allowed some local authority. Inscriptions from the rule of *Buddhagupta* show a governmental organization in which local rulers were appointed independent of central authority<sup>25</sup> and some village headmen were subordinate to local *brāhmaṇa* authority. Hierarchical rule from the *mahārājādhirāja*<sup>26</sup> descended to the *mahārāja* of a region, to the *uparika* of a province, then to the *aṣṭakula* board headed by the *mahattara* and *viśvāsa*, to the local *brāhmaṇa*, and finally to the village headmen and husbandmen.<sup>27</sup> Because of political pressures from local authorities, each with different religious loyalties, Gupta *mahārājādhirājas* were forced to concede support to many religious sects and patronize *Buddha* and *Jaina* monasteries alongside *brāhmaṇa* temples, exemplified by the adjacent monumental edifices of the three faiths in Ellora. Political maneuvering by religious institutions prompted imperial land grants to mitigate tensions with localities. When exercised, influence by religious sects could lead to new divisions of land and a shift in material wealth and power.

Land grants in favor of *brāhmaṇas*<sup>28</sup> helped spur a shift in the religious dynamic of the subcontinent. As the *brāhmaṇas* acquired more landed wealth, it became easier for them to get even more. Central, however, were the strategic granting policies devised by the Gupta administration; typically, wasteland on the outskirts of major settlements was given to the *brāhmaṇas*. This served to minimize imperial loss, promote territorial expansion, and encourage contact with still unincorporated forest tribes. As cross-cultural interactions deepened, burgeoning *Purāṇa* sects were equipped to cope with the differing ideologies and practices of forest tribes; the *Buddha* and *Jaina* found it difficult<sup>29</sup> to accept these new practices. Blending of mythologies, alongside infusion into many *Purāṇas*, advanced conversion to the *Śaiva* and *Vaiṣṇava* Puranic sects and incorporation of forest-dwellers into the larger society through *varna* and *jāti* designations.

Incorporation of forest traditions resulted in an influx of practices associated with female deities and fertility worship. Prevalent throughout much earlier Harappan cultures,<sup>30</sup> these had survived and evolved in the substrata of subcontinental society. Fusion with *Purāṇa* traditions led to formulations of *śakti*, a representation of female energy and force. Female goddesses were added to the Puranic pantheon in the forms of *Devī*, *Lakṣmī*, *Pārvatī*, and *Durgā* and into the Buddhist tradition as female counterparts to many important *bodhisattvas*. Rituals and other practices associated with tribal fertility worship evolved into *tantra* practices incorporated into some articulations of Puranic sects and the *Vajrayāna* school of Buddhism in the Himalayan cultures of the northeast.

Among Puranic sects, and between sects of other religious traditions, candid debate arose as a result of trade and Gupta attempts at imperial unification. *Nyāya* proponents proposed a school of logic for argument and belief. *Vaiśeṣika* proponents posited the theory of a universe consisting of a finite number of atoms, distinct from the soul. *Sāṃkhya* proponents posited a dualist universe divided into consciousness and matter without the existence of a deity. *Yoga* proponents asserted that knowledge and experience of reality demanded control over the body, senses, and desires. *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* proponents posited that reality and *dharma* could only be understood through study of the *Vedas*. Finally, *Vedānta* or *Uttarā Mīmāṃsā* proponents posited that self-realization and understanding of ultimate reality could be achieved only through the *Upaniṣads*. Further extensions and elaboration of these philosophies were indebted to Gupta influence and added to the diversity and accessibility of Puranic sects.

Propagation of Puranic beliefs was furthered by alignment of Gupta rulers with Vedic deities, extolling the reign of the former and embellishing the portrayal of the latter. Alignment with particular deities and performance of associated *yajñas*<sup>31</sup> increased ritual authority and political legitimacy while augmenting dynastic claims. Furthermore, the splendor of royalty adorned all aspects of the religious sects, not the least of which was their architecture. The crystallized articulation of royally elite literature and art made its way into religion, resulting in historically unparalleled stylized forms. Inscriptions from *Skandagupta*, the most prolific and active *mahārājādhirāja* of the dynasty, demonstrate elaborate use of poetic language<sup>32</sup> and clear desire to erect monumental religious structures celebrating victory over conquered lands and demonstrating imperial might.<sup>33</sup>

From the *Kuṣāṇa* practices of incorporating popular imagery on issued coins, the Guptas had established the basis of their own artistic forms. The gold coins of *Kaṇiṣka II* and *Vāsudeva II* were adaptations of *Skandagupta* into contemporary styles with imperial deities.<sup>34</sup> The massive stone sculptures were a blend of movements from *Mathurā* and *Gandhāra*, though the Gupta amalgam showed considerable further development and refinement. Likewise, reform in conceptions of ethics and personal virtue was brought to value self-control, quiescence, religious vows, and purity.<sup>35</sup> Because of outgrowth from urban centers to frontier territories, mediated by Gupta administration and infrastructure, such reforms quickly spread and influenced many subcontinental cultures. Trade promoted by the Guptas to China and Southeast Asia encouraged the movement of these iconographies along with religious doctrines and ideologies.<sup>36</sup>

Cursory inspection shows marked differences in the adherence to dogma and religious practices from the sixth century B.C.E. to the fifth century C.E. Coalescence of changing cultural, economic, and political ideals and powers redefined religious milieus and gave rise to distinct movements, observable through historical texts. Taken in context of these factors, changes in religious dogma, practice, and worship can be seen not to be independent of the former. The history of Indian subcontinental traditions highlights the interdependence of the religious tradition and the political and economic environment, the amalgamation of which has determined the backdrop of each era. These then acted on current mores to foster those that conformed to popular views and eliminate those that did not. This interplay facilitated preferential promotion of certain customs from a variegated palette, coloring future subcontinental religious history.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Orthodox religious tradition drawing authority from the four *Veda* scriptures.

<sup>2</sup> Multivalent Sanskrit term connoting religious duty or obligation.

<sup>3</sup> Caste divisions of the hegemonic society into *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*.

<sup>4</sup> Communities or subcommunities associated with occupations and tribes.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Olivelle, *The Dharmasūtras: The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 164.

<sup>7</sup> Prakrit form of the Sanskrit *dharma*, carrying the same meanings and connotations.

<sup>8</sup> Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1961), 266. *7<sup>th</sup> pillar edict*.

<sup>9</sup> Thapar, 251. *Fourth major rock edict*.

<sup>10</sup> Thapar, 260. *Minor rock edict*.

<sup>11</sup> Thapar, 262. *First pillar edict*.

<sup>12</sup> Thapar, 254. *Tenth major rock edict*.

<sup>13</sup> Thapar, 255. *Twelfth major rock edict*.

<sup>14</sup> Thapar, 256. *Thirteenth major rock edict*.



- <sup>15</sup> Thapar, 261. *Bhabra inscription*.
- <sup>16</sup> Thapar, 262. *Schism edict*.
- <sup>17</sup> Thapar, 254. *Ninth major rock edict*.
- <sup>18</sup> Thapar, 264. *Fifth pillar edict*.
- <sup>19</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 216.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 34.
- <sup>21</sup> Joe Cribb, *The Early Kushan Kings: New Evidence for Chronology – Evidence from the Rabatak Inscription of Kanishka I* (Vienna: Osterreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1999), 180. *Rabatak Inscription*.
- <sup>22</sup> Henri Stierlin, *Hindu India: From Khujuraho to the Temple City of Madurai* (New York: Taschen Publishing, 2002), 19.
- <sup>23</sup> Stierlin, 32.
- <sup>24</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 257.
- <sup>25</sup> Devadatta Bhandarkar, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum: Inscriptions of the Early Guptas* (Mumbai: Archeological Survey of India, 1981), 377. *Plate 37: Dāmodarpur Copper-plate Inscription of Buddhagupta: The Year 163*.
- <sup>26</sup> Highest ruler, or emperor, in the *Gupta* empire.
- <sup>27</sup> Bhandarkar, 380. *Plate 37: Dāmodarpur Copper-plate Inscription of Buddhagupta: The Year 163*.
- <sup>28</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 294.
- <sup>29</sup> Xinru Lui, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.
- <sup>30</sup> Shreen Ratnagar, *Trading Encounters: From the Euphrates to the Indus in the Bronze Age* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154.
- <sup>31</sup> Bhandarkar, 318. *Plate 24: Dāmodarpur Copper-plate Inscription of Kumāragupta: The Year 128*.
- <sup>32</sup> Bhandarkar, 336. *Plate 28: Junāgaḍh Copper-plate Inscription of Skandagupta: The Years 136, 137, and 138*.
- <sup>33</sup> Bhandarkar, 343. *Plate 29: Kahāum Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta: The Year 141*.
- <sup>34</sup> Cribb, 187.
- <sup>35</sup> Bhandarkar, 368. *Plate 35: Mandasor Inscription of Kumāragupta: The Kṛita Year 493*.
- <sup>36</sup> Lui, 26.