



Ten Misconceptions About India and Indic Traditions

By Arvind Sharma

Different disciplines or fields of study outgrow their earlier conclusions or assumptions as new evidence accumulates, or at least they should. But any academic field of study also tends to exhibit a certain measure of inertia in abandoning earlier formulations which have been rendered questionable or obsolete with the accumulation of new data, and the application of new methods to the available data in the field. Abandoning or modifying old positions for new entails discomfort. Moreover, once a position has become widely accepted, it takes time to alter it and the attempt requires effort.

The fields of Indian Studies and the Study of Indic Religions now constitute a two-hundred-year-old tradition. They also continue to entertain certain misconceptions, which no longer bear scrutiny. Ten such misconceptions, which still prevail in these fields despite evidence to the contrary, are identified below.

1 India is merely a geographical description.

It was once fashionable, in the 1930s, to argue that there was no such thing as India apart from a geographical description until it was artificially created as an administrative entity by the British. It is becoming fashionable again to do so, but this time for post-modern rather than imperial reasons. There is ample evidence, however, that a conception of India as a political entity can be documented as early as the third century B.C.E.¹ and as a cultural entity certainly by the fourth century C.E.²

The element of truth that the statement “there is no such thing as India” contains is that (1) there is no such thing as a ‘uniform’ India on account of the plural nature of Indian culture, or that (2) the periods when the entire subcontinent was under the control of a single political authority have been rare. But the concept of a culturally and politically united India is part and parcel of Indian culture, even if not always realized.

2 India had no concept of a state.

It is often argued that even if India may have had a concept of itself, and of itself as a political entity, it had no concept of a state other than being an estate of the ruler. While it may be arguable if premodern India possessed a concept of a nation-state in the modern sense prior to the Independence movement, the state had certainly been conceptualized as an entity in itself, as suggested by the allegories used in this connection. The comparison of polity with a body (king: head; ministers: eyes; allies: ears; treasury: mouth; army: mind; fortress: hands; land: feet)³ suggests an organic concept of the state,⁴ just as the tree suggests an essentialist concept (the sap being the essence).⁵

The element of truth this statement contains is that India was rarely under the control of a single authority, or that India, for the most part, did not operate with the concept of a centralized state such as China might have. But this is a far cry from claiming that India lacked the notion of a state itself.

3 The prevailing form of government in India was always ‘oriental despotism.’

The political history of India proper commences from the sixth century B.C.E., and at this time republicanism was as prominent a form of government as monarchy.⁶ It is true that the Magadha empire rose at the expense of such republics, but when Alexander invaded India in the fourth century B.C.E., he had to fight against as many republics as kingdoms on his way to the Punjab.⁷ *Brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*⁸ republics are attested to by Panini, the famous grammarian assigned to the fourth century B.C. if not earlier, and Alexander had to defeat both a *brahmana* and a *shudra* republic in the course of his conquest.⁹

The element of truth the statement contains is that gradually monarchy became the dominant form of government in India. But if oriental despotism implies that there were no doctrinal and practical checks on the unrestrained exercise of power by the king, then this is again misleading. Not only did republicanism in the form of the operation of guild-laws, common law, regional practices, etc. survive throughout countenanced by the kings, the *Rajatarangini*, a historical narrative of Kashmir, informs us of cases in which the king’s decisions were blocked and even reversed by the king’s council. Rudradaman (c.150 C.E.) had to spend money from his privy purse to carry out repairs at Lake Sudarshana in Saurashtra because his council would not let him use public funds for the purpose.¹⁰

4 India was always a poverty-stricken country.

The impoverishment of India during British rule has led observers to ascribe such a condition to the India that preceded the period of British occupation. If this were so, it would be difficult to account for Herodotus's statement that the "twentieth satrapy of the Persian empire"—the Indian part of the empire—"paid more tribute than any other part in the empire";¹¹ or the complaint of Pliny that the annual drain to the Roman treasury for Indian goods amounted to 100 million sesterces, "so dearly do we pay for our luxury and our women."¹² The prosperity of India under the Guptas is attested to by Fa-hsien¹³ and under Harsa by Hieun-Tsang,¹⁴ while "royal treasures, the existence of which was reported by early Muslim travellers, were important factors in encouraging invasions which ultimately destroyed Hindu India."¹⁵

Once peace was established on the Indian subcontinent under the aegis of the Moghul empire (1526–1858), it was once again the wealth of India ("the golden sparrow") which attracted the attention of a nascent Europe. Or, to make the point in terms of cold and comparative statistics: "In 1750 China accounted for almost one-third, India for almost one quarter, and the West less than a fifth of the world's manufacturing output."¹⁶

Absence of such knowledge has unfortunately tempted scholars into attempting misleading correlations between elements of Indic civilization and India's poverty, despite the fact that prosperity has always been an important axiological element in Hindu ethics.¹⁷

5 Misconceptions regarding Sanskrit.

Two beliefs regarding Sanskrit seem widely prevalent: that it was exclusively the language of the Brahmins, and that women were not allowed to study it in ancient India. Both are false. A basic text memorized by aspiring students to this day is the *Amarakosha*, whose author was a Buddhist. The works of leading Buddhist thinkers like Nagarjuna are also in Sanskrit. The one Jaina text held in equal regard by both the Digambara and the Shvetambara sects, the *Tattvartha Sutra of Umasvati*, is in Sanskrit.¹⁸ Nor were women debarred from studying Sanskrit: they are the authors of several poems and even epics, and one poetess, Vijjika (eighth century), in a verse, compares herself favorably even to the goddess Sarasvati. A medical treatise written by a woman was translated into Arabic in the eighth century by the order of Caliph Harun. Her Arabized name is given as Rusa.¹⁹

The core of substance in these misconceptions is the following. When Hindu civilization came under siege, as in the past thousand years, the preservation of the language fell to the lot of Brahmins, who made ritual use of it. This may have led to a misleading identification. Similarly, for about two thousand years (c. 400 B.C.E.–1800) women were debarred, at least in theory,²⁰ from studying the Vedas, which are in pre-classical Sanskrit. This may have contributed to the misleading view that women could not study Sanskrit.

6 Misconceptions regarding widow-marriage.

Most of the literature on the subject creates the impression of a general ban on widow-remarriage in Hinduism. According to the 1901 census, however, only 10 percent of the Hindu communities observed it.²¹

Such misconceptions arise as a result of using religious texts uncritically and by conflating a "desired" reality with what it actually was. Such an error is possible at both ends of the spectrum. One should not imagine—just because certain crimes are described and their punishment prescribed—that these actually took place, just because of these statements. Nor should one imagine—just because priestly law books make certain recommendations—that reality conformed to them.

7 Misconceptions regarding equality before law.

It is often claimed that equality before law was unknown in ancient India, especially in the sphere of criminal law. The Pali texts, however, clearly allude to it,²² and the *Nibandhas*—legal digests of the twelfth century onwards—specifically eliminate unequal punishments.²³

The core of substance in this misconception consists of the fact that the legal texts called *dharma sutras* and *smṛti* literature (and the secular *Arthashastra* as well) provide for differential punishments according to caste, and this may have corresponded to historical reality from c. 400 B.C.E. to the twelfth century C.E. for the most part. But the concept of legal egalitarianism was cognizably present both before and after this period. Even during this period Asoka may have tried to enforce it.²⁴ The Nepala-Mahatmya (13.46) of the *Skanhapurana* also seems to recommend such egalitarianism.²⁵

8 The Caste System meant people could not change their profession.

People have failed to stick to their caste-ascribed occupations from the earliest times. This is clear from the fact that Megasthenes lists "seven" castes and not "four,"²⁶ and from the provision in the law books themselves that in times of crisis (*apaddharma*) one could adopt the mode of livelihood of the lower varna.²⁷ This phenomenon is dramatized by the fact that the kings and dynasties of ancient India hail from all the four varnas: the Shungas and Kanvas were Brahmins; the Guptas were Vaishyas and the Nandas were Sudras. Narada (V.16.21) dispenses with caste-qualifications for apprenticing as an artisan. The misperception here arises from a lack of appreciation of the caste system as a historical phenomenon as distinguished from a theoretical construct. The theoretical construct emphasizes both endogamy and craft-exclusiveness. But while endogamy persisted as a major (though not unchallenged) element in the system, craft-exclusiveness was the first to go.²⁸

9 Hinduism does not possess a universal ethic.

The fact that Hinduism possesses a universal ethic is the clear implication of the term *samanya* or *sadharana dharma*, or duties and obligations common to all human beings. Nor is this concept an afterthought even in a book allegedly so concerned with a particularistic ethic as that of Manu, wherein these *sadharana dharmas* are enumerated *both* after a discussion of duties specific to one's caste (X.63) and after a discussion of duties specific to a stage of life (VI.92). It is worth adding that this list of virtues virtually coincides with the *yamas* and *niyamas* which constitute the first limb of yoga (*Yogasutra* II. 30–31), thereby supporting the view that the practice of a universalistic ethic was preparatory to a spiritual life. It thus constitutes a bridge from mundane to spiritual life.

Many treatments of *dharma* by scholars simply ignore or marginalize this category, thereby generating the misconception that Hinduism does not possess a universalistic ethic.²⁹

10 Misconceptions about relations among the Indic religious traditions.

The Indic religious traditions are often spoken of as three: Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina. It is often presumed that their self-consciousness as separate traditions goes all the way back. Such a view, however, may be anachronistic. All the earliest transmitters (called *ganadhara*) of the message of Lord Mahavira, the twenty-fourth Jaina *tirthankara*, were *brahmins*,³⁰ and out of the 101 monks and 180 lay supporters of the Buddha whose caste affiliations can be determined, 39 and 76 were respectively *brahmins*.³¹ All this suggests that the ancient Indians operated with a definition of religion different from the modern West, which implies exclusive identification with a single religious tradition. The ancient Indian concept of religion, or of *dharma*, apparently allowed for multiple religious participation, or even for multiple religious identification. The Buddha famously on two occasions asked his former Jaina followers to continue patronizing their earlier religion even after they became his followers.³² ■

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NOTES

1. The whole subcontinent is described as the field of conquest by the universal monarch (*chakravartikhetra*) in the *Arthashastra* (IX.1).
2. By then, the prayerful invocation of rivers while bathing enumerated them from all parts of the subcontinent (*Brahmapurana*: 70, 30–35), and the centers of pilgrimage embraced the whole of India. See Haridas Bhattacharyya, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1956), Introduction to Volume I.
3. Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), p. 3. This is particularly significant as it parallels the account of the emergence of the society as famously described in the *Purushasukta* of the *Rig Veda* (X.90).
4. P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra* (Poona: Bhadarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1973) Vol. 111, p. 20.
5. Hartmut Scharfe, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
6. Hemachandra Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 85 ff.
7. R. C. Majumdar, *The Classical Accounts of India* (Calcutta: Firma K.L.M. Private Ltd., 1981), pp. 5–92.
8. V. S. Agrawala, *India as Known to Panini* (Varanasi: Prithvi Prakashan, 1963), p. 52, 437.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
10. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1967), p. 99.
11. Percival Spear, *India: A Modern History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 52.
12. A. L. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
13. Percival Spear, ed., *The Oxford History of India of the Late Vincent A. Smith, C.I.E.* (fourth edition) (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 170.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
15. A. L. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 111. Also see Hartmut Scharfe, *op. cit.*, p. 154, note 171.
16. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996), p. 86.
17. See Arvind Sharma, "The Purusarthas: An Axiological Exploration of Hinduism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27: 2:223–56 (Summer 1999) *passim*.
18. Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 82.
19. A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959), p. 19.
20. What amounts to exceptions in practice have now been documented (see Vasudha Narayanan, "The Hindu Tradition," in Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 114.
21. Madhu Kishwar, "From Manusmriti to Madhusmriti: Flagellating a Mythical Enemy," *Hinduism Today* 23: 1:59 (January/February 2001).
22. *Majjhima Nikaya* (ii.68).
23. P. V. Kane, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 338, note 184 and p. 512, note 924, Vol. I, Part II, pp. 737–741, 806–807.
24. Although A. L. Basham remains sceptical, see *op. cit.*, p. 128.
25. See Jayaraj Acharya, *The Nepala-Mahatmya in the Skanda-Purana* (New Delhi: Nirala Publications, 1992), p. 151.
26. See Rameschandra Jain, ed., *McCrimble's Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian* (New Delhi: Today and Tomorrow's Printers and Publishers, 1972). Fragment 33, pp. 83–6.
27. A. L. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
28. See P. V. Kane, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, Part I, Chapter II, *passim*.
29. A. L. Basham, *op. cit.*, does not use the term at all, while alluding to the concept once in passing (*ibid.*, p. 137), and Wilhelm Halbfass mentions the term only once without hinting at its implications (see *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 333).
30. Padmanabh S. Jaini, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
31. A. L. Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, ed. K. Zysk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 130.
32. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1974), p. 4; etc.