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Introduction

ONCE IN A PREVIOUS EON, it is said, the gods and demons joined together to churn the primordial ocean of milk. This origin story is told in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* and in many other early Indian works.¹ According to the *Ramayana*, the gods and demons both wish to become immortal, free from all sickness and old age. They believe that the cosmic ocean holds an essence called *amrita* (non-dead) and that by churning the ocean, as one might churn milk to extract butter, they could obtain that elixir of immortality. In some versions of the story, it is the goddess of prosperity, Shri Lakshmi, that they seek. To attain such lofty goals, these two groups, normally implacable enemies, must cooperate. They employ suitably cosmic implements for the task: the world-mountain Mandara will be the churning pole, and world-spanning snake Vasuki serves as the rope. In many versions, the god Vishnu assumes the form of an enormous tortoise, dives to the bottom of the ocean, and offers his shell as pivot for the pole.

As the gods and demons exert themselves, pulling Vasuki back and forth to spin the immense mountain, extraordinary things begin to rise up from the roiling ocean waters. The divine physician Dhanvantari emerges, along with great troops of beautiful celestial dancers, the Apsarases. Many auspicious items come into existence from the churning. The goddess of wine Varuni, the eminent horse Uchhaishravas, the most precious gem Kaustubha, the cow of plenty Surabhi, the wish-granting tree Parijata, the supreme elephant Airavata, and the Moon all arise from the ocean. (The list of items varies slightly from version to version.) The goddess Shri Lakshmi rises forth, seated on a lotus. In most versions she gravitates to the god she perceives as most eminent, Vishnu.

But not all is auspicious. The potent poison Kalakuta also emerges from the churning, posing the dilemma of how to keep this deadly substance from annihilating the world. In some versions, the great god Shiva swallows the poison. This neutralizes its destructive potency, but it also turns Shiva's neck forever blue.

Finally the elixir of immortality emerges. Both gods and demons want to monopolize this treasure. Their cooperation breaks down and they begin to fight. In the conflict the demons make the first grab and get ahold of the amrita. In many versions, Vishnu assumes the form of a seductive female, Mohini, and beguiles the demons into handing over the elixir, which Mohini then gives to the gods. The story ends with the gods drinking the amrita, defeating the demons, and re-establishing their supremacy in the heavens.

Churning the Ocean of Religions

This book is a narrative history of religious cultures in early India, covering a broad span of two thousand years. It begins with the earliest available religious texts of ancient India, the hymns of the *Rig Veda*, which date back to around 1300–1000 BCE, and it ends at the beginning of the eighth century CE, during the imperial dynasties of the Chalukyas in the Deccan and the Pallavas in southern India. In these early centuries, India was a place of remarkable religious activity: elaborate sacrificial rituals, rigorous regimes of personal austerity, psychospiritual experimentation, vigorous theological debate, sophisticated poetic composition, ideals of righteous kingship, flourishing arts of sculpture and architecture, fervent devotional practices, utopian visions, and energetic missionizing. It was the birthplace of the three world religions we now know as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It was also the home of other religions, often unnamed, that are usually classified as “folk” or “popular” religions. These, too, played an important role in the development of religion in early India.

But what do we mean by “religion”? How should we define “religious cultures” in early India? Scholars in Religious Studies and in adjacent disciplines have long traced the semantic history of the term “religion” and have proposed definitions for this supposedly universal feature of human life. In his 1988 article “Religion, Religions, Religious,” Jonathan Z. Smith points to a 1912 study that listed fifty definitions of religion—and no doubt at least another fifty have been proposed in the century since that study.² In his 1902 treatise, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James responded to this same plethora of definitions:

Meanwhile the very fact that they [definitions of “religion”] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word “religion” cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name. . . . Let us not fall immediately into a one-sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one

essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion.³

I will adopt James's pluralistic attitude toward religious phenomena, though not his emphasis on "experience" as the foundation for the theologies, practices, institutions, and communities that he considers "secondary" developments. For this book, I propose not another new definition, but an old Indic story.

When the gods and the demons churn the ocean of milk they engage in a shared activity. From their quest for some life-enhancing ambrosia that may bring prosperity, longevity, or even immortality, their cooperative action gives rise to a host of remarkable phenomena. I do not want to push the analogy too far, but I propose that we think of religion along similar lines. Shared desires for human flourishing, what Indic works often call simply "the good" or "the highest" (*shreyas*), give rise to all sorts of activities and outcomes that we consider to be religious. These may be codes or guides for virtuous living, practices aimed at self-transformation, rituals and collective ceremonies to gain individual ends or sustain the order of the cosmos, ways of physically demonstrating honor or devotion, programs for creating a just society or a righteous kingdom, myths or stories of the gods (such as churning the milk-ocean), theologies that seek to conceptualize the nature of God or gods, and cosmological visions that try to encompass all that there is. The "highest" may denote prosperity and flourishing in this lifetime and this world, or it may involve some form of transcendence or salvation from all worldly suffering and bondage.

As the gods and demons remind us, these activities do not always arise without conflict. Humans both cooperate and compete, and this is true in the spheres of religion just as elsewhere. Religious practices, we know, can involve exclusions of others. They can lead to oppression and to conflict. They can offer seductive deceptions, too, as Vishnu-Mohini does to regain the elixir.

It is often said that early India had no single word that corresponds to what we understand by religion. India was fluent, as we will see, in discussing the specifics of religious phenomena, but did not choose to envision them as parts of a single bounded category. But this should not be surprising. As Smith concludes in his study,

"Religion" is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.⁴

The question is what one chooses as that horizon. For this narrative history of religious cultures in early India, I propose a deliberately broad one, and one with a fuzzy border. It encompasses not just the single shared desire for immortality, but the multiplicity of cultural phenomena that arise from the quest for the “highest.”

Voices and Visions, Lost and Found

This history of early Indic religious cultures will speak, as much as is feasible, with voices from early India. In many cases the voices are recorded in verbal works. Religious texts come in various genres: hymns, poems, songs, didactic stories, epic narratives, scientific treatises, ritual guidebooks, theological discourses. But in this history we will also attend to voices that speak from ancient material remains, including coins, sculptures, inscribed rocks and pillars, built structures, cityscapes. They, too, should be listened to as texts. All these we will consider as intentional works of human labor, articulating distinctive voices or visions, realized at a certain moment in the human past. With early Indian works, we will need to be flexible in what is meant by “a certain moment,” for these texts often wish to cover up their own human authorship and historicity in favor of divine authorship and eternity. Assigning dates to ancient Indian texts is often a matter of approximation.

In this approach, I follow the lead of historian Ronald Inden. “We want to think of texts,” he writes, “as works enmeshed in the circumstances in which people have made and used them, and we want to see them both as articulating the world in which they are situated and as articulated by it, that is, as integral to the makeup of one another.”⁵ This way of listening to texts foregrounds the agency or will of those who have created and promulgated them, and at the same time it recognizes the context in which they have been made. It also acknowledges the ways that texts act upon the world, creating new circumstances. It emphasizes what philosopher R. G. Collingwood, in his *The Idea of History*, calls the “inside” of an event—that which “can only be described in terms of thought.”⁶ But it will be clear throughout that these thoughts are active in the world—whether they take the form of individual programs of religious conduct or great community projects of sacrifice or worship.

To survey such a large period of time, from which an enormous corpus of verbal texts and material remains survive, it will be necessary to be very selective. And this poses a fundamental question: Whose voices do we hear? What visions have been recorded and passed down over time? We need to

acknowledge from the start that the main story of early Indian religions available to us is a narrative composed by and about religious elites. To some extent this is inevitable, but it is important to examine and question it.

The cliché “history is written by the victors” is often ascribed to Winston Churchill. He put his aphorism into personal practice by writing a triumphal six-volume victor’s history of the Second World War. Whether we accept the cliché or not, we do need to keep in mind that all historical reconstruction of the past depends fundamentally on what exists in the present. As Collingwood succinctly puts it, “The historian cannot answer questions unless he has evidence about it. His evidence, if he ‘has’ it, must be something existing here and now in his present world.”⁷ Collingwood’s point is perhaps obvious, but it is profound in its implications. Any story we can tell about religion in early India will be based necessarily on those texts and artefacts that have somehow or other continued to exist from then until now. Verbal compositions may have been passed down orally, written down on palm leaves, copied over in manuscripts, maintained in archives, eventually printed in books—and at every moment of transmission there have been decisions about what is worthy of preservation. Unforeseen circumstances—fires, floods, famine, and the like—can intervene to bring about breaks in continuity.

We need to imagine a sociology of textual transmission. Some groups will be in positions to pass on their visions over time, and others not so. To Churchill’s wartime analogy, I prefer a genetic one. This religious history primarily reflects the productions, not necessarily of the historical victors, but of those who have been most able to transmit their voices and visions over long periods of time, much as a species procreates its DNA through time. As we will see, in early India this often involves the protracted work of communities who organize themselves around the oral transmission of important religious texts.

What about voices that have been lost? To what extent is it possible to incorporate into the historical narrative the perspectives of those who have most often been marginalized in surveys of Indian religious history? This would include females, lower class communities, and those groups outside the hierarchical Indo-Aryan cultural order. To adapt Gayatri Spivak’s oft-quoted phrase, can the subaltern of early India speak? So often subaltern speech has been lost, but in a few cases, we will see, female voices have been preserved intact, such as in the remarkable songs of the early Buddhist nuns. So, too, the vernacular Bhakti literature that begins in early medieval Tamilnadu includes poems of female, low-caste, and outcaste devotees. In other cases, outsider perspectives may peek through, such as in the pastoral ethos of Krishna’s tribe of nomadic cowherders told in the *Harivamsha*.

Most often, though, early Indian subalterns cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. We have to attend to the ways marginalized figures and groups are represented within the works of upper-class male authors. Female protagonists like Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and Sita in the *Ramayana* give powerful voice to their own distinctive visions of wifely Dharma, within epics composed and transmitted by male bards. Other episodes in the Sanskrit epics involve the Nishada hunting-fishing community, living on the borders of Indo-Aryan culture. Nishada characters are given limited speaking roles, but these scenes provide an insight into the relations of ruling Kshatriya elites and marginal communities, as understood and debated by the elites. This is not a history of early Indian religion “from the bottom up,” as historians have sometimes advocated, however desirable that might be. My effort in this historical narrative is to integrate some of these often-excluded voices and visions from the lower ranks of a hierarchical social order, in order to tell an expanded and more complete story.

Archeology and art history open up a different corpus of evidence: material remnants of the past that have continued to exist in the present, above or below the ground. These may be the remains of elaborate stupas and stone temples, inscribed stone pillars of victory, coins buried in treasure troves, or fragments of humble terracotta figurines. All these are, as the archeologist Gordon Childe long ago defined it, the “fossilized results of human behavior,” and these remnants also need to be interpreted in terms of their purposes.⁸ “Fossilized results” also favor elites, of course. They are the ones best able to realize their religious purposes in permanent form: rulers who can have their visions of kingship and Dharma inscribed on stone pillars or plates of copper, well-supported religious communities that enjoy the resources to erect religious edifices, and the like. But we also find, among the material remains of classical India, stone images of “popular” earthly deities like Yakshas and Nagas, alongside those of the pan-Indian images of Buddhas, Jinas, and Hindu deities. Terracotta figurines of nameless little goddesses, suitable for domestic worship, predate the identifiable goddesses who populate the later religious edifices of the pan-Indian religious cultures. Objects underground are not mediated by later transmissional choices. They just lie there, buried, until sometimes they are disinterred accidentally by a farmer ploughing a field, by changes in the course of a river, or by an organized archeological excavation. As evidence of past religious purpose, the Yakshas, little goddesses, and other archeological remnants expand the scope of how we understand the religious cultures of early India. In this narrative, we will seek to listen to the stories these physical objects wish to tell.

The Main Story

This narrative history of religions in South Asia follows a chronological organization. The time frame ranges across two millennia, a very long time indeed, from the earliest preserved texts in India from around 1300 BCE up through the end of the seventh century CE. Since the religious cultures of early India are many and complex, it will be helpful to set out in advance the main story, the plot of this religious history.

After a grounding in the physical and human geography of South Asia (chapter 1), the story begins with the entry into the Indian subcontinent of nomadic groups who called themselves “*arya*,” and whom we will call Indo-Aryans (chapter 2). These groups migrated into northwestern India from around 1500 BCE and gradually spread eastward into the Indo-Gangetic plains. They spoke a language related to the Indo-European family of languages, which in the Indian setting developed into Sanskrit, the “perfected” language. Since the Indo-Aryans carefully preserved and transmitted their religious texts orally, the earliest of which they called the *Rig Veda*, we have an extraordinary collection of ancient hymns articulating their beliefs and practices from a very early time indeed. Scholars date the *Rig Veda* hymns to 1300–1000 BCE.

The Indo-Aryans did not arrive into uninhabited space, of course. As recent genetic studies have found, modern *Homo sapiens* began to migrate to the subcontinent at least sixty thousand years ago. South Asia was already fully inhabited in the second millennium BCE. Various groups of hunter-gatherer tribes lived throughout the subcontinent. Fishing communities and peasant agriculturalists occupied river valleys. Most notably, between 2700 BCE and 1700 BCE, an extensive urban civilization developed along the Indus River basin. Since the 1920s, archeologists have intensively excavated the vast remnants of this formerly lost civilization, but its writing system remains undeciphered. We call this the Indus Valley civilization, or the Harappan civilization, after one of its principal urban sites. Archeologists consider this one of the earliest urban civilizations in world history. Hunter-gatherers, peasant farmers, and the Indus Valley civilization have all helped shape the complex development of religious cultures in India.

As the Indo-Aryans extended their range across northern India, interacting with the indigenous populations they encountered, they developed a complex religious order centered around sacrifice (chapter 3). Over several centuries the Indo-Aryans were able to impose their social and cultural order as the dominant one in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Within Indo-Aryan society, one group organized itself as a priestly class, the Brahmins. They took upon themselves the enormous

tasks of transmitting the growing corpus of Vedic texts, officiating at sacrificial rituals, and interpreting the underlying significance of these rites. As Indo-Aryan tribes consolidated into kingdoms, ambitious new rulers sponsored larger public sacrificial ceremonies to reinforce their growing authority. In the period from 1000–600 BCE, sacrifice became a cosmogonic ritual of profound complexity and meaning.

By around 600 BCE, urban civilization began to emerge (or reemerge) in northern India. New cities grew up, especially along the Ganges and Yamuna rivers (chapter 4). In this urbanizing culture, fundamental religious innovations occurred. Within the Vedic tradition, teachers articulated new speculative philosophies about the nature of the cosmos, focusing on individual gnosis and spiritual quests. These were collected in the Upanishads, the final layer of the primary Vedic corpus. Some seekers decided to leave behind the urban culture and became wandering anchorites. These renouncers were called Shramanas. Successful and charismatic Shramana teachers established their own followings. The founding figures of Jainism and Buddhism, Mahavira the Jina and the Buddha Shakyamuni, both claimed to have gained complete liberation or enlightenment, and they organized groups of their most dedicated followers into monastic orders outside the Vedic religious culture.

By the end of the fourth century BCE, a single kingdom, the Mauryan dynasty, established itself as the dominant power over large portions of South Asia (chapter 5). Partly inspired by the earlier Achaemenid empire to the west and by Alexander's disruptive world-conquering incursions as far as the Indus River, the Mauryans styled themselves as imperial rulers. The Mauryan rulers were generally sympathetic to Shramana groups and patronized Jains, Ajivakas, and Buddhists. At the height of Mauryan power, Emperor Ashoka committed himself as a lay follower of Buddhist teachings. Through his extensive patronage, the Buddhist community expanded its reach enormously. This set in motion the dynamic process by which Buddhism became a pan-Asian religious order.

Ashoka's inscriptions speak of the various religious specialists of the time as "Brahmins and Shramanas." From the Mauryan period on, both Brahmins and Shramanas organized themselves as distinct, and competing, disciplinary communities (chapter 6). Smarta Brahmins loyal to the Vedas developed their own austere code of pure conduct and dedicated themselves to teaching and transmitting the Vedas orally and to maintaining a cycle of regular domestic sacrifices. The Buddhist Sangha organized itself as a self-governing mendicant community devoted to the teachings and practices set out by its founder. Notably, both Jains and Buddhists acknowledged (albeit somewhat reluctantly) the religious

aspirations of females, and women organized themselves into mendicant communities of nuns alongside the monks. The Buddhist nuns sung of their lives, tribulations, aspirations, and attainments in a remarkable collection called the *Therigatha*, the songs of the female elders.

The Mauryan empire was overthrown in 185 BCE, and in the following two centuries many ruling groups sought unsuccessfully to gain dominant power in the subcontinent. Ruling in Pataliputra (the earlier Mauryan capital) and in Vidisha, the Shunga dynasty was the most significant of these aspiring successors. We call the period from 185 BCE to the beginning of the Common Era the Shunga Era (chapter 7). Material remains from the Vidisha area and across northern India provide a rich image of the multiple religious cultures of this period. These include popular religious cultures centered on Yakshas, Nagas, and other local earthly deities, and domestic cults devoted to “little goddesses.” Myriad remains reflect the prominence of a well-supported Buddhist community of mendicants and lay followers in and around Vidisha. Buddhist stupas such as the one on Sanchi hilltop, about five miles from the city of Vidisha, grew up as centers of Buddhist religious activities. We see early signs of a new theistic community, the Bhagavatas, devoted to the god Vasudeva, which would become a major stream of the ensuing Vaishnava religion centered on the high god Vishnu.

In the aftermath of the Mauryan period, groups of bards retold and expanded stories of legendary Kshatriya heroes into two vast Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (chapter 8). These narratives coalesced over a long period of time, through a complex process of oral composition, but they took on a clear form, as far as scholars can determine, during the post-Mauryan Shunga Era. (The *Mahabharata*, however, remained an open composition susceptible to suitable additions for several centuries later.) Reflecting the dynamic religious culture of the Shunga Era, the epics bring together myriad ideas, practices, and deities within their capacious embrace. The *Mahabharata* explicitly claims to encompass all that there is. But at the center of both epics is an inclusive synthesizing vision. Loyal to the tradition of the Veda and reinforcing the status of Brahmins, the epics imagine an alliance of two elite classes, Kshatriya rulers and Brahmin advisers, pursuing a religious ethics of Dharma to bring about a righteous empire. In a pantheon of multiple old and new gods, the epics elevate the minor Vedic deity Vishnu into a new Supreme Deity. In the new synthesizing religious culture, we see the earliest formulation of what we can call—to apply a more modern term—“Hinduism.”

In the first century a new imperial dynasty arose in the northwestern part of the subcontinent and gradually expanded into the Gangetic plains. The

Kushanas became the most powerful ruling group in the first three centuries CE (chapter 9). This was a period of unprecedented international trade, reaching from China to the Mediterranean, and India occupied a key intermediate position in these overland and sea networks. Art of the Kushana Era reflected this cosmopolitan atmosphere. Literati began to adapt the Sanskrit language—formerly confined mainly to Vedic liturgical settings—to new political and literary ends. Buddhist monks took advantage of the trade routes, and the Buddhist order expanded its reach into new parts of Asia. Along with this geographical expansion came new and expansive doctrinal developments, which came to be called the “Great Vehicle,” Mahayana Buddhism.

Nowadays the worship of images in shrines and temples is a conspicuous feature in the religious landscape of India. The production of divine images and the development of ritual practices for their worship took shape decisively during the Kushana Era (chapter 10). These innovations probably began among congregations devoted to popular semidivine figures like Yakshas and Nagas, and they were adopted more or less simultaneously by Jains, Buddhists, and devotees of emerging Hindu gods like Vishnu Narayana. Votaries of the legendary pastoral hero and divine incarnation Krishna Vasudeva pioneered the religious sensibility of devotion, called Bhakti. And worshippers of Krishna and followers of the Buddha likewise sought glimpses of their supernal forms in visions. During the Kushana Era, Indian religious cultures broadly adopted a visual orientation.

In the beginning, according to an origin story in the *Mahabharata*, the creator god Brahman authored a massive treatise to instruct humans in the four fundamental aims of life. In this formulation, three of those aims are worldly in nature: Kama (desire, pleasure), Artha (power, wealth), and Dharma (morality, righteousness). Alongside those, another human purpose involved the effort to transcend worldly vicissitudes and gain salvation or liberation. This goal is usually termed Moksha. In the early centuries CE, experts in these matters set out systematic treatises to guide those who would pursue one or another of these aims (chapter 11). These foundational works provide valuable views of the ideals and activities of diverse religious and social groups in early India, such as affluent city dwellers, courtesans, ambitious kings and ministers, pious Brahmins, and renunciatory yogis.

In the early fourth century, the Gupta dynasty established itself in northern India as the dominant power in the subcontinent. The Gupta ruler Samudragupta proclaimed this hegemony by performing a *digvijaya*, a conquest in all directions (chapter 12). For roughly two centuries, the Guptas and their Deccan allies the Vakatakas held sway over a large part of India. During this time, the royal elites

and wealthy urban merchants created a new courtly culture, which included the support of Sanskrit poetry and drama. Gupta rulers allied themselves with earlier Vedic ritual traditions and made donations to sustain Brahmin disciplinary communities. They also proclaimed themselves Bhagavatas, followers of the new high god, Vishnu Narayana. Nevertheless, the Buddhist order also flourished throughout South Asia, and when the Chinese pilgrim Faxian traveled throughout India and Sri Lanka in the early fifth century, he encountered a religious landscape covered with Buddhist shrines and monasteries.

During the Gupta Era, a new genre of religious literature took shape. These were called the Puranas (“old traditions”) (chapter 13). These prolific new works covered myriad topics and incorporated extensive teachings on a great variety of fields of knowledge. Most important, they presented the narratives, theologies, and rituals centered on the principal gods of Hindu theism—Vishnu, Shiva, and the Great Goddess Mahadevi.

Starting in the Gupta Era, and increasingly in the two centuries after the decline in Gupta authority, religious communities eagerly constructed homes for gods to dwell on earth (chapter 12). These took various forms. The Buddha Shakyamuni in image form could be installed as the head of the monastic community, just as he had been in his human lifetime. So, too, Mahavira and other tirthankaras took on meditative poses in stone images within Jain shrines. Vishnu, Shiva, and other gods of Hindu theism were invited to reside in their human-fabricated homes. These temples gave material form to a new paradigm in Indian religious culture. Gods would be present, in the form of ritually enlivened sculpted images, and could receive acts of honor and homage from their human devotees. The sponsors of these institutions might be kings and queens, members of royal courts, ambitious local chieftains, or other wealthy patrons who wished to honor the gods and also to receive the moral and social benefits of their beneficence. This pattern of “temple Hinduism” would persist through the early medieval period. For the next several centuries, temples became ever grander and more complex in their artistic and architectural design.

The main story I tell here ends around 700 CE. In works of historical narration, choices of endings are always contingent. There is never a clear endpoint to history. Nevertheless, there are some good reasons to stop at this date. In surveying the two millennia from 1300 BCE to 700 CE, we can explore the great variety of early Indic religious cultures, from the poetic visions and sacrificial worldview of the Vedas, through the emergence and expansion of the Shramana communities of the Buddhists and Jains, up to the appearance of new Hindu gods and

their growing temples. We see the foundations of three world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

In larger global terms, too, 700 CE marks a point of transition. To the west of India, historians of the Mediterranean world often use 700 CE (give or take a half century) as the endpoint of what they call “Late Antiquity.” In the Middle East, the Iranian empire of the Sasanians falls in the mid-seventh century. And most significant, the rise of Islam as a world-transforming religious and political force starting in the seventh century has profound consequences throughout the Afro-Eurasian world. James Laine aptly speaks of the period from 700 to 1700 CE as the “Islamic millennium.” “The eighth century,” he observes, was “a time in which the foundations of an Islamic civilization was being laid, during which the Arabs ruled a vast, but still internally diverse empire.”⁹ From the eighth century on, Islamic political and religious groups would make a deep impact on the South Asian religious landscape. The main story of religious cultures in India over the subsequent centuries, from 700 CE up to the early modern era, centrally involves the myriad interactions of the many groups we have designated as Hindu with the complex and equally diverse Muslim community. But that is another story.

South Asian Religions, Yesterday and Today

“India has 2,000,000 million gods, and worships them all,” Mark Twain exclaimed in his account of an 1896 speaking tour in British India. “In religion other countries are paupers; India is the only millionaire.”¹⁰ Where did this fabulous wealth come from? This book traces the early formation of India’s religious fortune.

Nowadays nearly one-quarter of the world’s population adhere to religions that originated in India. According to the Pew Research Center’s 2012 demographic survey of the “Global Religions Landscape,” three of the five largest world religions have their beginnings in South Asia.¹¹ After the two most prevalent world religions, Christianity and Islam, the survey lists Hinduism as third in number of followers worldwide. Over a billion Hindus live in South Asia, with 974 million in the nation of India alone. Hindus make up nearly 80 percent of the Indian population. Buddhism is the fourth most populous world religion. The Pew survey counts 488 million Buddhists worldwide, 7 percent of the world’s total population. Adherents of Buddhism are found throughout Asia, with four majority Buddhist nations in Southeast Asia. The Sikh religion (categorized in the Pew survey as one of the “Other Religions”) is probably the fifth-largest named religion, with some twenty-five million adherents across the world—though the Pew demographers admit the uncertainty of their estimates when it comes to these

religious “others.” Smaller, but very ancient, the Jain religion based in India has about four million followers.

This book focuses on the religious landscape in early South Asia, within which Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism take shape. Alongside these world religions, early India was also the home of other religions, often unnamed, that the Pew survey would have classified as “folk religions.” However, the categories used by the Pew demographers, and which we readily use today, tend to hide the contingent historical construction and the internal complexity of these religions. This is particularly true of Hinduism. In one respect Hinduism is one of the oldest of the world’s religions, since many modern adherents claim a continuity going back to the ancient Vedas. In another respect, though, Hinduism is one of the youngest members to the parliament of world religions, for only in the nineteenth century did the term “Hindu” come into widespread use to designate a unitary religious faith. In the historical narrative of this book, we will trace some of the multiple strands that have been gradually woven together into what, in modern times, has come to be called Hinduism.

Hinduism did not come into being as a singular, self-developing religious formation. Likewise, neither Buddhism nor Jainism appear historically as separate, autonomous religious cultures. Rather, we will look at them all as interacting groups within a shared, changing social and political reality, in which they may compete with one another for resources and influence. This history of religions in early India will emphasize encounter, interaction, competition, debate, critique, and borrowing among religious communities. In the perspective adopted in this book, religious cultures define and redefine themselves in relation to one another.

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