

Walter Slaje

Brahmā's Curse

Facets of Political and Social Violence
in Premodern Kashmir



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Preface

The European divide of practical and theoretical philosophy has no counterpart in premodern India. Whereas ontology, epistemology and logic were developed in a most sophisticated manner as essential elements of theoretical philosophy, the keystones of practical philosophy, notably philosophical ethics and political philosophy, did not evolve on the subcontinent. Even though they occupy a prominent place among Indian philosophies, soteriological aims invoked as an equivalent will hardly meet the demands of practical philosophy in the above Western sense. While it is therefore little astounding to learn that Indian philosophers did not make the political and social settings of their times a subject matter of philosophical consideration and debate, it is astounding to observe that Indologists, too, paid very little attention to the societies these philosophers were part of, and to the everyday realities they had to endure in their days. This is certainly not the place to speculate about the reason why premodern Indian philosophy would have cast a veil of silence over the prevailing political and social conditions and why leading philosophers would have refrained from making reasoned proposals towards possible betterments of governance and society. One might however argue that, for one thing, the design of an ideal society had already been drawn up by the comprehensive and eternally valid law of *dharma*, which cannot be improved by man. As is well known, it was the major purpose of orthodox philosophers to protect and sustain the Vedic *dharma*. They considered themselves upholders of this time-honoured tradition (*āstika*). Ideological preconditions of such a kind may have played a decisive role in hindering the development of political philosophy in India. Seen from this background, it is difficult to escape the notion of escapism on the Indian philosophers' side if one considers the omnipresent basic patterns of making promises only of (transcendent) deliverance from suffering (in this world).

This, in an allegedly roundabout way, brings us to Kashmir and its social and political conditions of the past. For decades research on the Valley was focussed with enormous success on texts of chiefly the religious and philosophical genres. Social misery, disasters, violence and war were simply not there in these works. By the sheer quantity of lopsided source materials which take hardly any, if not no, notice of contemporary politics and society, but also through privileged analyses of the statements to be found in exactly such literatures of predominantly a soteriological orientation, the inherited, though unfounded romantic image of Kashmir was

only increased. This contributed to an ongoing construction of the myth of an idyllic world in a glorious Hindu past before the advent of Islam.

The two chapters making up this little booklet put the picture of premodern realities of life in Kashmir a bit into perspective by drawing on sources where historical facts are not omitted.

The first chapter going by the title of “A Glimpse into the Happy Valley’s Unhappy Past: Violence and Brahmin Warfare in Pre-Mughal Kashmir” is an enlarged and annotated version of a talk given at the Department of South Asian Studies at Harvard University on 26 March 2018. It focusses on the centuries-old stereotype of Kashmir as a “Happy Valley” which hardly conforms to the lyrical angle adopted by foreign visitors. A penetration into the rather gloomy aspects pre-modern contemporaries have left us of the constant perils the inhabitants of the valley were exposed to in their well-documented history – ranging from natural disasters, famines and epidemics to the man-made evils of incessant violence and war –, coerces one into relativizing the dominant enthusiasm of the outsider. Particular attention is paid to the prevailing stereotype of the Brahmin class as non-violent and pacifist. The involvement of Brahmins in warfare and their interaction with members of other social classes in armed conflicts teaches us otherwise.

The second chapter entitled “What does it mean to smash an idol? Iconoclasm in Medieval Kashmir as Reflected by Contemporaneous Sanskrit Sources” is again an enlarged and annotated version of another paper read at the University of Tokyo on 7 March 2019 on the occasion of the workshop “Buddhist Monasteries and Political Power Toward the Reconsideration of the Decline of Buddhism in India”, organized by Taiken Kyuma (Mie University). The paper deals with different notions of an “idol” (*mūrti*) from the Hindu, Buddhist and Abrahamic view-points and with contrasting perceptions of the destruction of an idol by the iconoclast and his victim. Historic cases of idol smashing in Kashmir in the pre-Islamic and the Islamic periods are analysed and presented together with the rationale of iconoclasm as maintained and debated by the Hindu and Muslim parties at the time. The chapter ends with an exposition of additional and more sophisticated methods of desecrating Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries in order to make them inoperative for all future. This necessitated a brief concluding discussion of the possible causes of the downfall of Buddhism in the area.

Why “*Brahmā's Curse*”? The title chosen refers to an old and widespread belief among Kashmiris that they had fallen under a curse by Brahmā, in which their sufferings are rooted.¹

Walter Slaje

1 Cp. pp. 7f.

The present book deals with Kashmir and some of its largely neglected social and political conditions of the past including the Islamization of the Valley in the early modern period. In the last decades research on Kashmir focussed essentially on textual sources of chiefly the religious and philosophical genres. Social misery, disasters, violence, famines, epidemics and wars, which perpetually ravaged the country during its long and well-documented history, were largely, if not entirely, ignored by academic studies of the above orientation. The resulting lopsided representation of Kashmir increased the romantic image inherited from the Mughals and contributed to the construction of the myth of an idyllic world in a glorious Hindu past before the advent of Islam.

The two chapters making up this booklet try to put the picture of the premodern realities of life in Kashmir somewhat into perspective.

The first chapter focusses on the centuries-old stereotype of Kashmir as a "Happy Valley". Particular attention is devoted to the prevailing cliché of the Brahmin class as non-violent and pacifist.

The second chapter deals with different notions of an "idol" (*mūrti*) from the Hindu, Buddhist and Abrahamic religions' view-points, as well as with the contrasting perceptions of the destruction of an idol by an iconoclast and his victim. Historic evidence of idol smashing in Kashmir in the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods will be analysed and presented together with the rationale of iconoclasm as maintained and debated by the Hindu and Muslim parties at the time. The chapter ends with an exposition of the sophisticated methods of desecrating Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries in order to make them inoperative for all future.

The title of this book refers to an old and widespread belief among Hindu Kashmiris that they had fallen under a curse by Brahmā, a curse, in which they see all their sufferings rooted.

