

Buddhist India

Oriental Institute, Oxford

20.11.17



What was Indian Buddhism?

The standard view of pre-modern Indian history is that Buddhism emerged in a Brahmanic/Hindu culture.

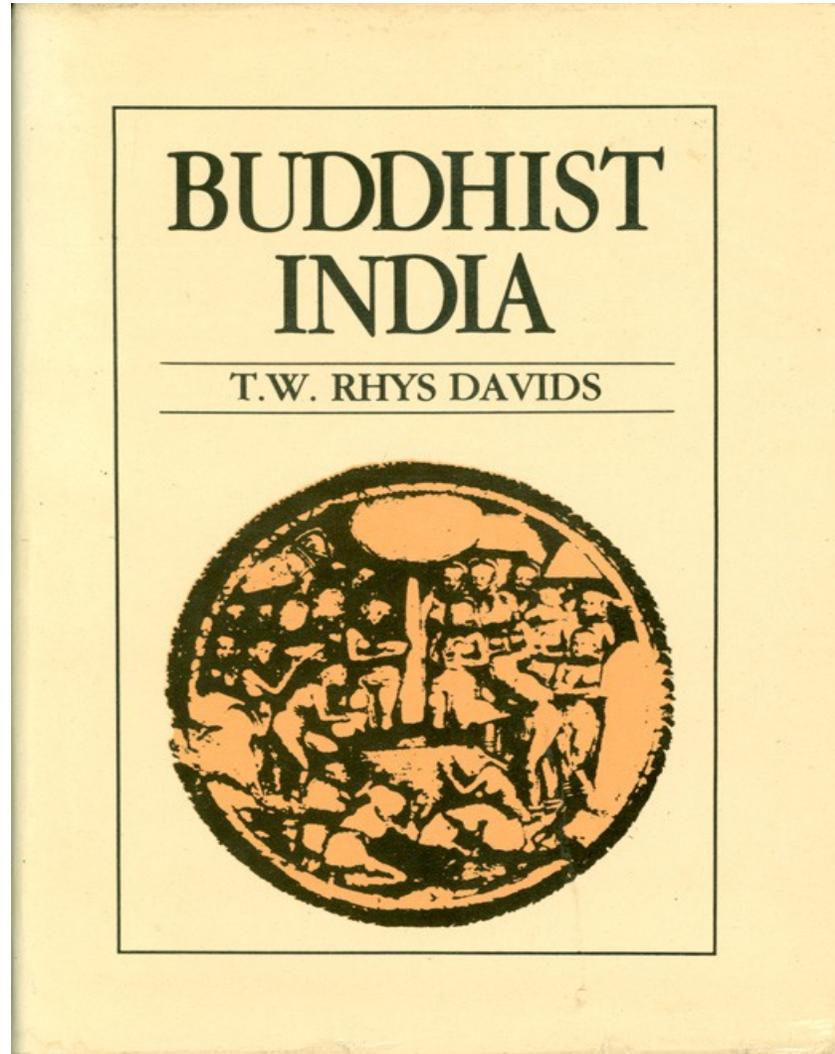
Starting with the Buddha, Buddhist teachings and institutions had to adapt to the cultural and intellectual hegemony of Brahmanism.

Thus, Buddhism successfully adapted to Hindu India for about 1500 years, before it went out of fashion and disappeared.

This view has been recently challenged and should now be regarded as untenable.

Buddhist India

T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, London (1903): an attempt to describe a civilization from the non-Brahminic perspective, from the Buddha to Kaniṣka.



Rhys Davids' aim

'In the following work a first attempt has been made to describe ancient India, during the period of Buddhist ascendancy, from the point of view, not so much of the brahmin, as of the rajput. Priest and noble in India have always worked very well together so long as the question at issue did not touch their own rival claims as against one another. When it did and it did so especially during the period referred to, **the harmony**, as will be evident from the following pages, **was not so great.**'

(p.iii)

The opposition to Rhys Davids's project

‘Even to make this attempt at all may be regarded by some as a kind of *lèse majesté*. The brahmin view, in possession of the field when Europeans entered India, has been regarded so long with reverence among us that it seems almost an impertinence now, to put forward the other.’

(p.iii)

Giovanni Verardi, *Issues in the History of Indian Buddhism*, p.18

‘in India ... research is hindered by the preconception according to which the Brahmans would have created a social system where the conflict rate was low (though at the price of reinforcing the caste system and creating the barrier of untouchability). **This view is a legacy of nineteenth-century historiography**, which created an exotic India compensating Europe and its violent history.’

The task at hand

How should we respond to Rhys Davids' assessment of Indian historiography?

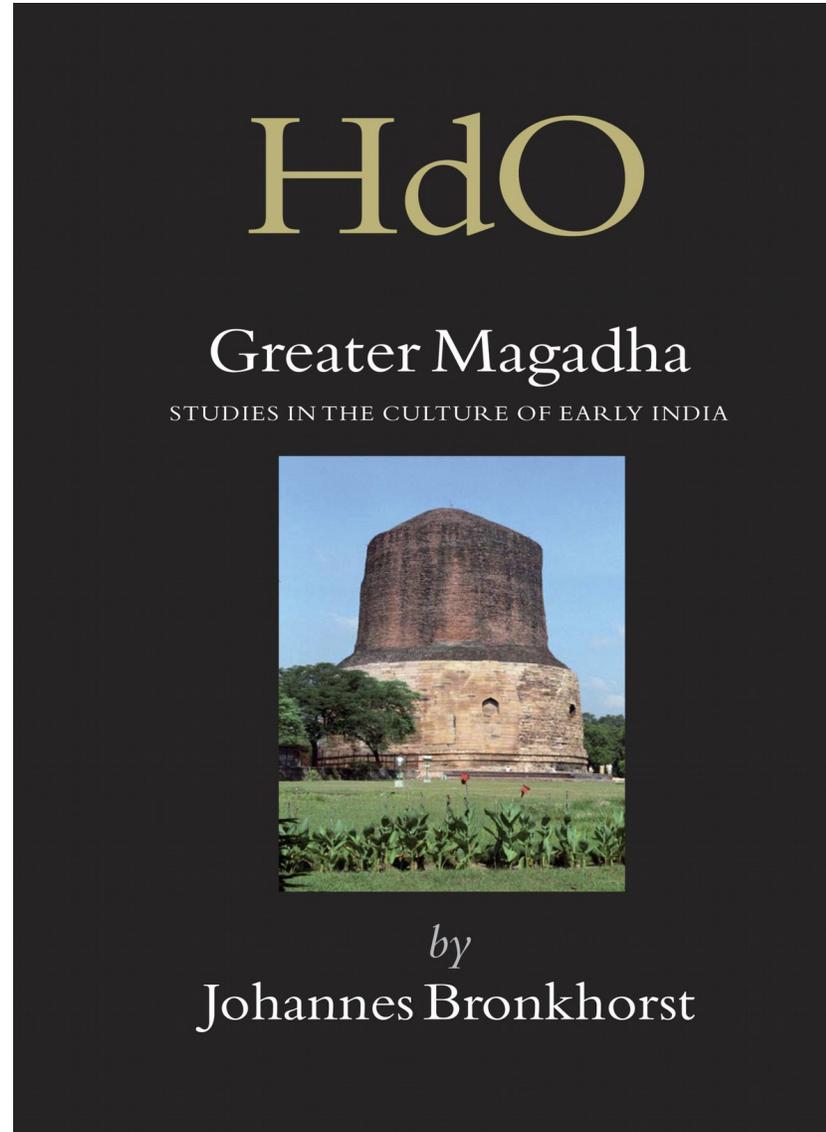
Rhys Davids stated his response in forthright terms:

'...there is, perhaps, after all, but one course open, and that is to declare war, always with the deepest respect for those who hold them, against such views. The views are wrong. They are not compatible with historical methods, **and the next generation will see them,** and the writings that are, unconsciously, perhaps, animated by them, forgotten.

(p.iv-v)

Recent Research: Johannes Bronkhorst

Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India*. (2007).



What was 'Greater Magadha'?

Bronkhorst proposes that Buddhism originated in the non-Vedic culture of "Greater Magadha," an area he defines as:

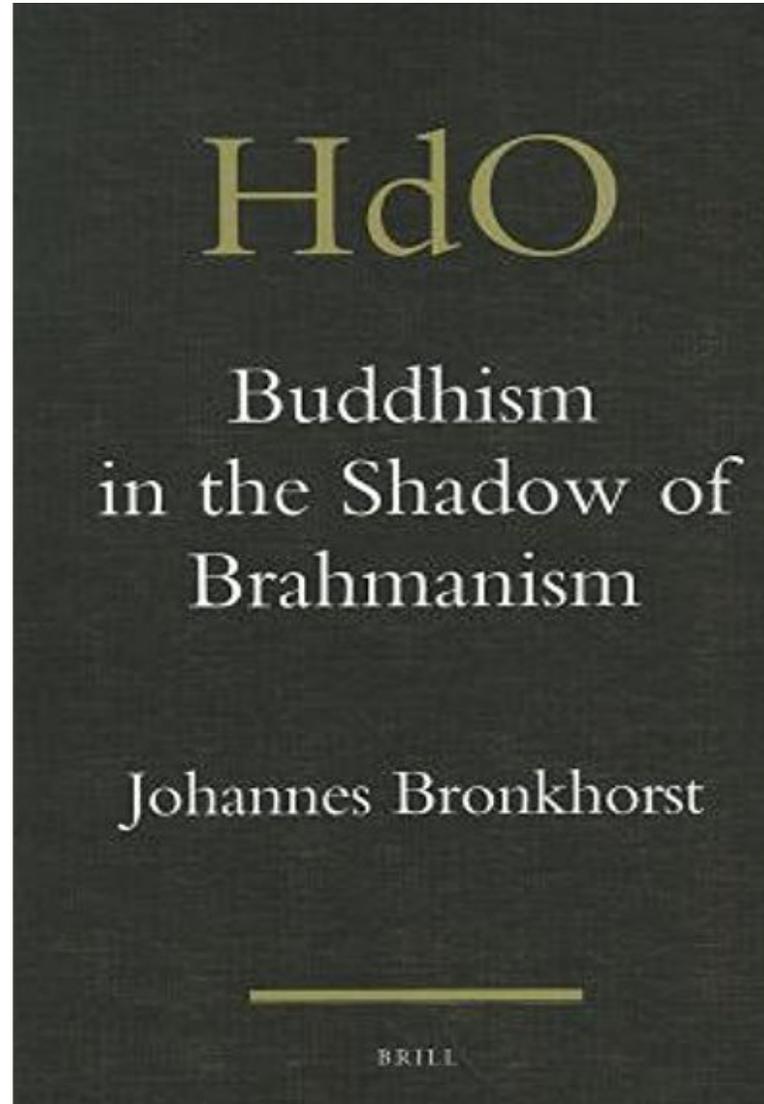
"roughly the geographical area in which the Buddha and Mahāvīra lived and taught. With regard to the Buddha, this area stretched by and large from Śrāvastī, the capital of Kosala, in the north-west to Rājagṛha, the capital of Magadha, in the south-east".

Bronkhorst claims that from this starting point, a non-Brahminic society spread all over India.

It took a sustained effort to turn a largely non-Buddhist society – one in which Brahmins were less important than Buddhists– into a Hindu civilization.

Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahminism

Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahminism* (2011).



The Origins of 'Greater Magadha'

Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (ca. 150 BCE) and the *Baudhāyana* and *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtras*: 'the domain of the Aryans' (*āryāvarta*) included the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā rivers.

But in the *Śatapatha* and *Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇas*, Vedic Brahmins considered their neighbors to the East barbarous and inferior.

Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa: the "demonic" (*āsurya*) people of the East constructed round "sepulchral mounds," a funerary practice adopted by Buddhists.

Brahminic culture was originally confined to a small part of India; the civilization which emerged in and around the Ganges plains was non-Brahminic.

Problems with Bronkhorst: Kosala and Magadha

The two most important Indian *janapadas*, Kosala and Magadha, had fundamentally different cultural traditions.

The discourses (Suttanta) of the Pali canon record many more Brahminic settlements in Kosala than Magadha.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad III-IV set in the kingdom of Videha (disappeared by the Buddha's lifetime).

BĀU III-IV is also set in the pre-Buddhist period. It does not know the towns and cities of the urban period in which the Buddha lived.

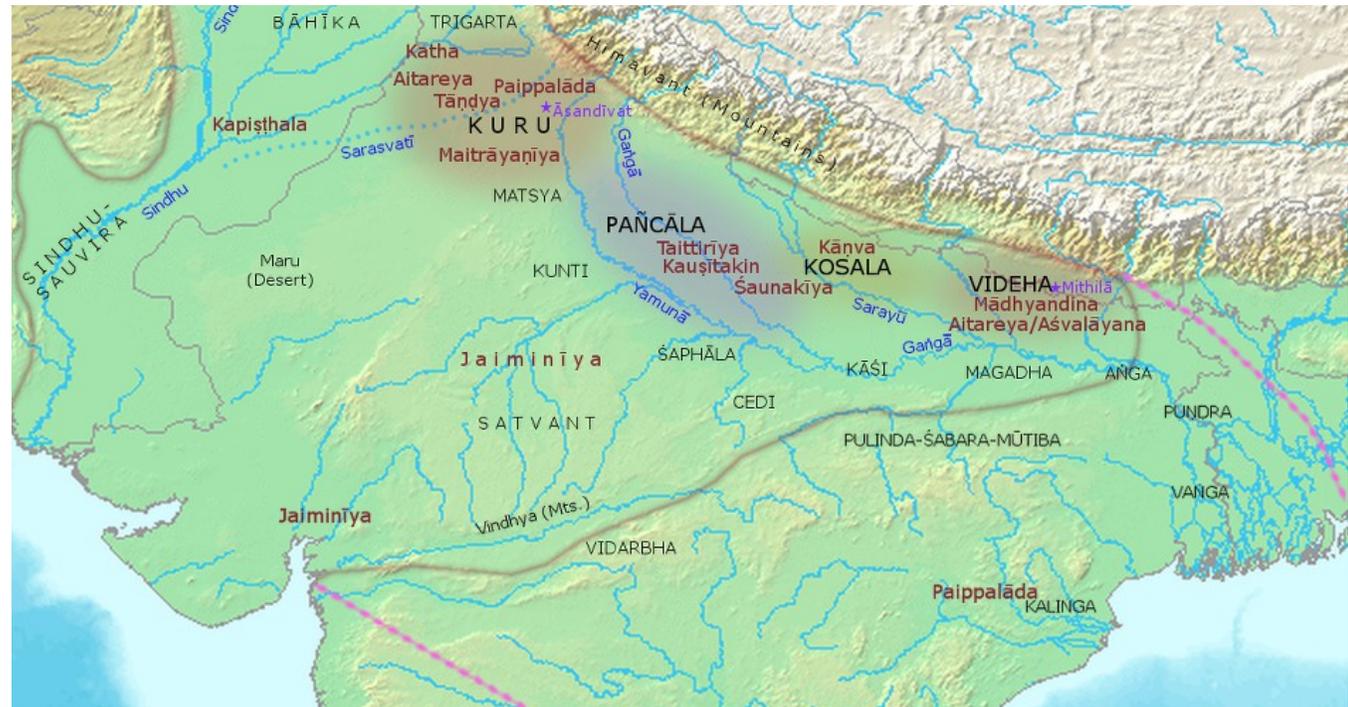
BĀU III-IV contains the only reliable textual information on the ideas which led to the phenomenon of world renunciation: karma and rebirth, asceticism, meditation, *mokṣa*, the *ātman* etc.

Problems with Bronkhorst: Kosala and Magadha

According to BĀU III-IV, r enunciation and key ideas resulted from the attempted 'Sanskritization' of Kosala/Videha.

Brahminism was intellectually but not culturally hegemonic in Kosala before the Buddha; 'renunciate religion' emerged from Brahminic ideas.

A non-Brahminic hegemony was established later on with the expansion of Magadha.



Some Pali evidence: Ambaṭṭha

In the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta*, the young Brahmin Ambaṭṭha visits the Buddha to see if he has the marks of a great man (*mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇa*).

But he is rude to the Buddha and abusive about the Sakyas. Ambaṭṭha says that the Sakyas once insulted him when he visited Kapilavatthu:

‘One time, ven. Gotama, I went to Kapilavatthu on some business. At that time many Sakyas were assembled in the council hall, sat down on high chairs, poking each other with their fingers, playing around, surely they were mocking me, I think. Nobody offered a seat to me.’

A new model of ancient Indian civilization

The *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* suggests that Brahmins were an oddity in the early Buddhist period.

Bronkhorst developed the idea proposed by Rhys Davids. A non-Brahminic culture flourished between the Buddha's life and the Guptas: the great period of Indian Buddhism.

The Buddha faced two types of Brahminic influence:

- **An orthodox type:** found e.g. in the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta*, with its interests in ritualism (karma) and class (*varṇa*).
- **An unorthodox type:** interested in renunciation, knowledge and liberation, represented by the figure of Yājñavalkya in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

The Jetavana of Sāvattihī

Beyond the domain of the Aryans' (*āryāvarta*, i.e. the doab), and during the Buddha's life and the period following him, was Brahminic law implemented?

No reason to suppose law, kingship, economics and culture was organised according to Brahminic principles.

Non-Brahminic legal norms can be seen in the foundation of the Jetavana.



Indian punched coins, 4th century BC



The circumstances surrounding the donation of the Jetavana

The Vinaya story outlines a dispute between Anāthapiṇḍika and prince Jeta:

‘Anāthapiṇḍika the householder ... thought, ‘It is not too far from the village, and not too close; it is easy to approach and leave, accessible for those who wish to visit, but not too busy by day and not crowded; with few sounds at night, not noisy, it has an atmosphere of loneliness, a secret resting place for people, suitable for seclusion. He approached prince Jeta and said ‘Give me, noble son, your pleasure grove (for me) to turn into a park.’

‘The park is not to be given, householder, but for spreading out a crore’

‘The park is purchased, noble son’.

‘No it isn’t, householder’.

Vinaya Cullavagga,

Senāsana-kkhandha

The legal resolution

‘They asked the **legal ministers** whether it had been purchased or not. They said this:
‘Since you offered a price, the park has been purchased.’

Then Anāthapiṇḍika had carts of gold brought out to the Jetavana and spread out a crore. But the gold which had been delivered was unable to cover a small area around the gateway. So Anāthapiṇḍika ordered his men: ‘Go, I say, and bring more gold, we will cover this (entire) area.’

Then prince Jeta thought, ‘It can be no trifling matter that this householder drops so much gold.’ So he said to Anāthapiṇḍika, ‘Enough, householder, do not scatter this area (with more gold). Let me have a chance: this gift will be mine.’

Then Anāthapiṇḍika thought, ‘This prince Jeta is well-known, a man of repute. It is most profitable when such men of repute have faith in the Dhamma-vinaya’. He gave the opportunity to prince Jeta, who built a gateway in that place.’

Indian Devotionalism

‘Then the Mallas of Kusināra ordered their attendants to gather perfumes and garlands, and musicians of the town. They then took the perfumes, garlands and musicians, as well as 500 hundred cotton shawls, and went to the Upavattana Sāl grove, where the Blessed One’s body was lying.

‘They spent the rest of that day venerating, revering, honouring and offering *pūjā* to the body of the Blessed One with dancing, singing, music, garlands and perfumes; and in making canopies out of their clothes and circular garlands.’

Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya II.159)

The funerary procession

‘At that very moment Kusināra became strewn up to the knee with Mandāra flowers. And then the Mallas of Kusināra were joined by deities in venerating, revering, honouring and offering *pūjā* to the body of the Blessed One with both heavenly and human dancing, singing, music, garlands and perfumes.

‘They carried the body to the North of the city, entered through the northern gate and then departed through the eastern gate, placing the body of the Blessed One at the Makuṭa-bandhana shrine of the Mallas.’

Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya D II.159)

The funeral of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

Rose petals rained down from a helicopter on tens of thousands of mourners at the lavish funeral today of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the 91-year-old Indian guru who inspired the Beatles and introduced transcendental meditation to the West.

The elderly mystic's embalmed body was laid on an enormous pyre of sandalwood on a hilltop in the grounds of his ashram, overlooking the ... confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers with the mythical river Saraswati.

... volunteers plastered sticky cow dung – sacred to Hindus – on the funeral platform, and decorated it with marigold flowers and hundreds of yellow and saffron flags.

Maharishi's body, which had lain in state, was daubed with ghee, or clarified butter, and saffron vermilion.

... mourners from the global religious order he founded clashed cymbals, pounded drums and chanted Vedic hymns. A police guard added to the cacophony with a gun salute.

The 35 newly anointed leaders, or "rajas", of the order wiped away tears as they watched, dressed in gold crowns and flowing cream robes. Many mourners meditated as the flames engulfed the body, and the chanting crescendoed to a peak.

A marbled tomb is to be built on Maharishi's ashes after the ceremony.

The Times (Feb 11th 2008)





What happened to Buddhist India?

The travel account of the **Faxian** (c.5th century AD), shows that a number of old Buddhist sites – e.g. Kapilavatthu, Sāvattihī and Bodhgaya – had been abandoned.

When **Xuanzhang** visited India in the late 7th century, he observed a greatly depleted and demoralized Sangha.

Many more old sites of Buddhist support, dating to the Mauryan period and before, such as Kusinārā, Vesālī and Pāṭaliputta, were in ruins.

A gap in statecraft followed the decline of the Mauryas. This was an opportunity for the Brahmins, who were educated and trained in law, ritual and kingship.

Agrarianism and Theism

The spread of Brahminism changed cultural conditions to such an extent that it affected the foundation of Buddhist support in two important ways:

- Brahmins found popular support through theistic religion
- Urban support for Buddhism dwindled

During the first half of the first millennium ad, popular theistic elements of Brahminism gained in prominence.

By the time of the Guptas a culture of what could loosely be called **temple Hinduism** had emerged: **theistic devotionalism** was utilised within Brahminism.

Urban support of Buddhism was gradually eroded by the establishment of an **agrarian, *varṇāśrama***, socio-political culture.

An Introduction



Buddhism



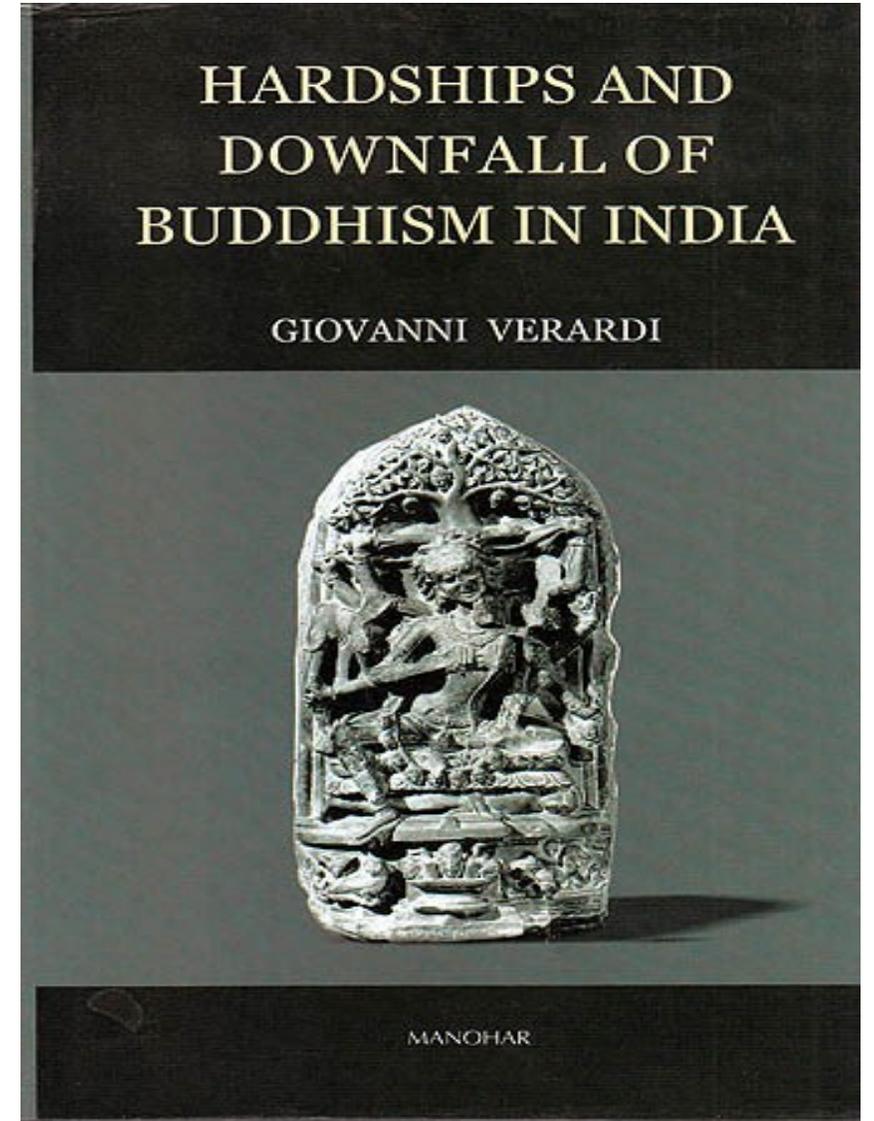
Alexander Wynne

I.B. TAURIS

Recent research: Giovanni Verardi

Giovanni Verardi, *Hardships & Downfall of Buddhism in India*. Manohar publication New Delhi, 2011.

- In 1992 Verardi was researching an archaeological site in the Kathmandu valley. A large Buddhist stūpa had been dismantled around 749 AD, and replaced by a Vaiṣṇava temple.
- He found that Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas had worked together with Vaidikas to suppress Buddhism. This prompted him to research the decline of Buddhism in India.



Verardi's argument, 1: two models of society

'In ancient India there was not a single model of society but, rather, two opposing models of social and economic relations that coexisted for a long time in conflict.

Inclusive paradigms should be rejected; in particular, the idea, created by western scholars and Indian historians who felt the need to provide their country with a national ideology, of a unified India where Brahmanism and Buddhism are almost interchangeable.'

(Verardi, *Issues in the History of Indian Buddhism*, p.1)

Verardi's argument, 2: violence in the name of *varṇa*, agrarianism

'The idea of state and society that the Buddhists had in mind was compatible with the varied peoples inhabiting the subcontinent, whereas the Brahmanical model implied their forced incorporation into the boundaries of an agrarian society organized according to the rules of *varṇāśramadharmā*. The latter was opposed not only by the trading classes, to which operational freedom was necessary, and by the natives who saw themselves downgraded to the lower peasantry ranks, but also by the Brahmins who had joined Buddhism.'

(Verardi, *IHIB*, p.2)

'The history of ancient India involved a high rate of violence, much of which caused by the imposition of the *varṇa* state.'

(Verardi, *IHIB*, p.1-2)

Verardi's argument, 3: Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas unite with Vedism

'The Guptas were *aśvamedhin* kings, but around AD 400 a crucial readjustment took place. At Udayagiri (Vidisa), the ritual capital of the dynasty, we observe the emergence of **Bhāgavatism** not only as the state religion but as a theistic system capable of uniting forces with the other major system, **Sivaism** (as we call it now), while keeping a strategic tie with the Veda.'

(Verardi, *IHIB*, p.3)

'We observe a rapid decline in Indian urbanization (Sharma 1987) and the replacement of manufacturing and trading towns with *tīrthas*. Rural India was largely **colonized** by the Pāśupatas, who acted as priests or *pujāris*, as shown by a very large set of archaeological finds from all over northern India.'

(Verardi, *IHIB*, p.4)

What is Verardi's evidence?

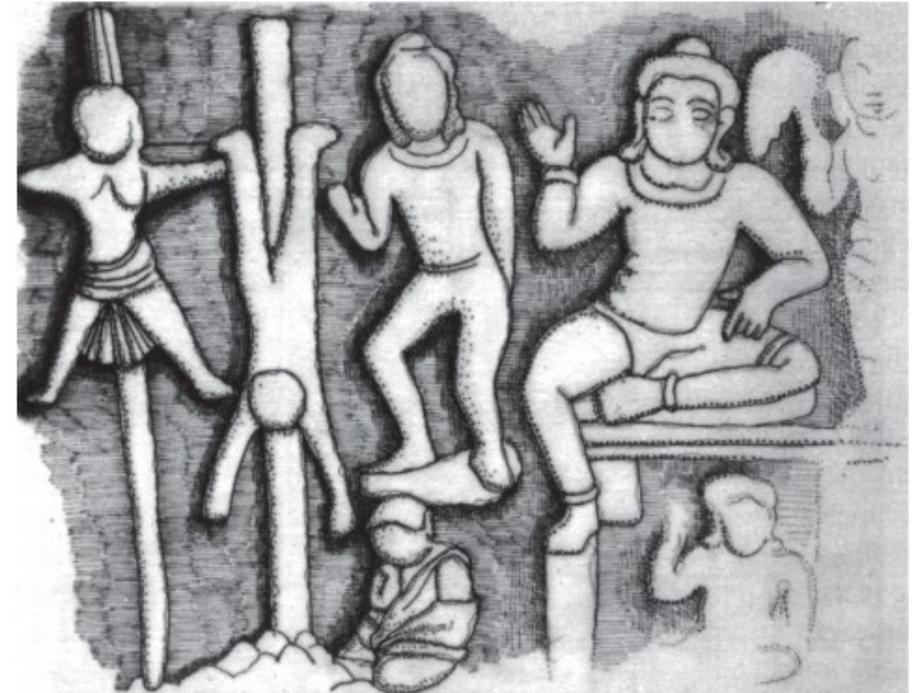
Verardi puts together three strands of evidence:

- Mythical material from the Puranas, in which Hindu gods do battle with asuras and daityas.
- Art historical evidence from Hindu temples, depicting violence against ascetics/Buddhists/tribals.

Inscriptional evidence recording an attitude of implicit Brahminic violence towards against Śramaṇas/Buddhists.

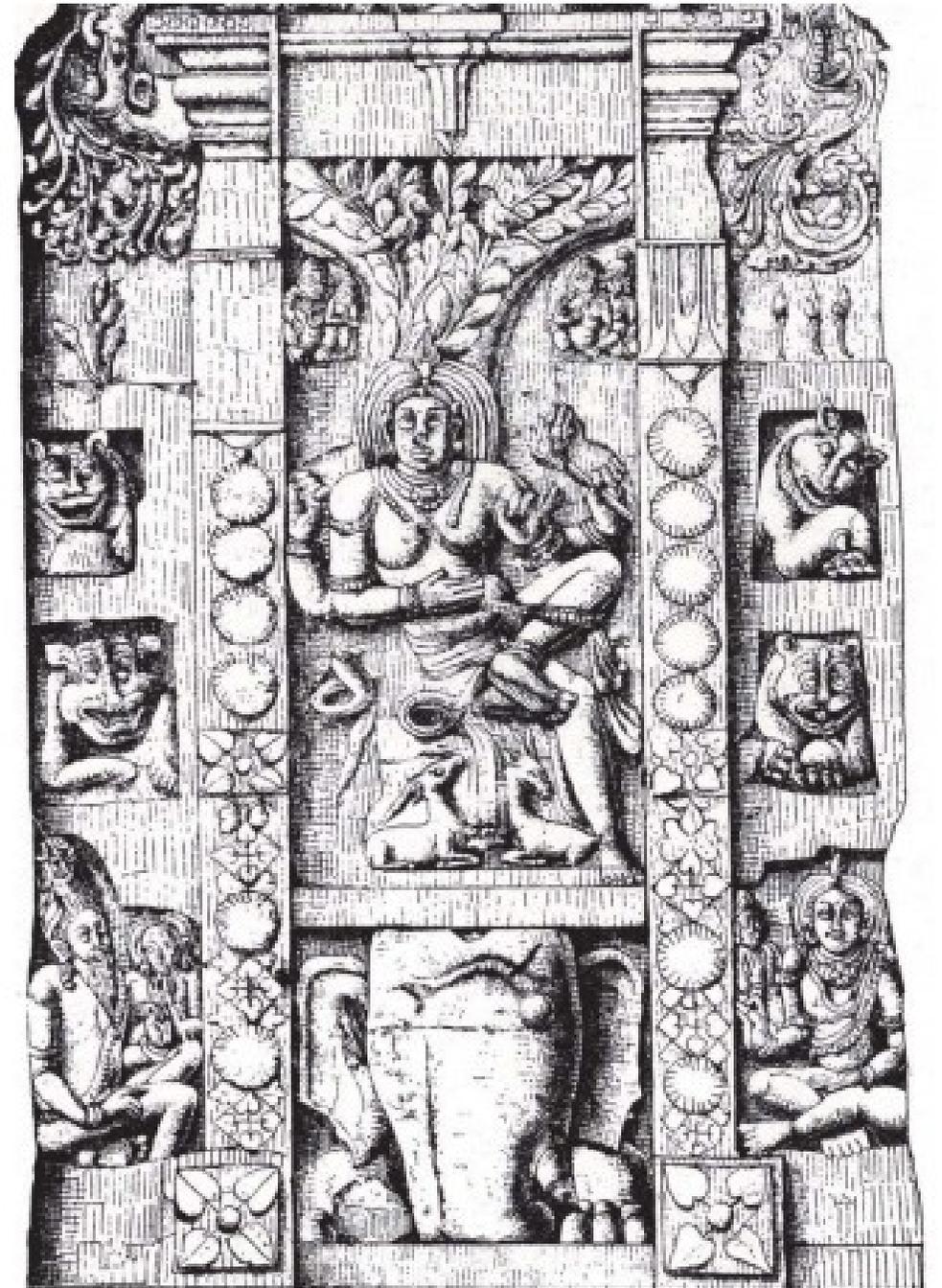
Kanchipuram, 8th century AD

- Pallava king Nandivarman II (c.730-95)
- Galleries of Vaikuṅṭha Perumāḷ temple depict Nandivarman's deeds
- One panel seems to depict the king presiding over doctrinal debate
- Śramaṇas seem to be impaled
- An Āḷvār poet is in an adjacent panel
- Toṅṭaraṭippoṭi advised that the heads of śramaṇas should be cut off



Kailāśanātha temple, Kanchipuram (8th century)

- Inscripton during period of king Rājasimha Pallava (700-30) states that Viṣṇu has been incarnated to rescue people from sin of the Kali age.
- The king is describes as a lion who has defeated the 'elephants' that are his enemies.
- The Kailāśanātha temple has many panels depicting Śiva fighting asuras.
- There is also a panel in which Śiva is depicted like that Buddha, sitting under a pipal tree, surrounded by deer, sitting atop a chopped elephant head.



Vaitāl Deul, Bhubaneswar

At Vaitāl Deul, the Kāpālikas are associated with other Saiva ascetics, such as Pāśupatas. One panel depicts them with khaṭvaṅgas (2nd half of 8th century).



Bhairava is also depicted with a knife above a beheaded asura/Bud (century). The presiding deity of the *garbha-gr̥ha* is the goddess/yoginī Cāmuṅḍā.

Outside the temple is a yūpa adapted from a Buddhist sculpture. Verardi claims that human sacrifices to the Goddess took place here.



Cāmuṇḍa images

Early medieval images of the wrathful goddess/yoginī Cāmuṇḍā are found throughout Orissa and Bihar.

She is often seated on a dead *asura*, often identifiable as a śramaṇa or Buddha.

Left: Bihar, 10th century, Cāmuṇḍā above an *asura*/Buddha.

Right: 9th century, Kalamisri, Orissa; a Kāpālīka hovers over the dead tribal/'Buddha'.



Conclusion

The disappearance of Buddhism did not happen naturally: a sustained campaign of was required to eliminate all traces of it. Did this involve violence?

In response to the success of **Buddhism**, aided especially by **Aśoka**, Brahmins reformulated their ideas. They went beyond the Vedas:

- Renunciation became one of the four *āśramas*; Mahābhārata XII, *Śāntiparvan*, is a major attempt to deal with the problem of renunciation.
- Forms of theism connected with **Śiva** and **Viṣṇu** were formulated/appropriated, as was devotionalism.
- Temple Hinduism** was created: there was no such thing before the Guptas.
- Agrarianism** – and possibly **violence** – was used to subjugate Buddhism.