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Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity

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My choice of subject for this lecture arose from what I think might have been a matter of some interest to Kingsley Martin; as also from my own concern that the interplay between the past and contemporary times requires a continuing dialogue between historians working on these periods. Such a dialogue is perhaps more pertinent to post-colonial societies where the colonial experience changed the framework of the comprehension of the past from what had existed earlier: a disjuncture which is of more than mere historiographical interest. And where political ideologies appropriate this comprehension and seek justification from the pre-colonial past, there, the historian's comment on this process is called for.

Among the more visible strands in the political ideology of contemporary India is the growth and acceptance of what are called communal ideologies. 'Communal', as many in this audience are aware, in the Indian context has a specific meaning and primarily perceives Indian society as constituted of a number of religious communities. Communalism in the Indian sense therefore is a consciousness which draws on a supposed religious identity and uses this as the basis for an ideology. It then demands political allegiance to a religious community and supports a programme of political action designed to further the interests of that religious community. Such an ideology is of recent origin but uses history to justify the notion that the community (as defined in recent history) and therefore the communal identity have existed since the early past. Because the identity is linked to religion, it

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I would like to thank K. N. Panikkar, N. Bhattacharya and B. K. Matilal for their helpful criticism of an earlier draft of this lecture.

can lead to the redefinition of the particular religion, more so in the case of one as amorphous as Hinduism.

Such identity tends to iron out diversity and insists on conformity, for it is only through a uniform acceptance of the religion that it can best be used for political ends. The attempt is always to draw in as many people as possible since numbers enhance the power of the communal group and are crucial in a mechanical view of democracy. This political effort requires a domination over other groups and where the numbers are substantially larger, there is a deliberate emphasis both on superiority and the notion of majority, a notion which presupposes the existence of various 'minority communities'. In the construction of what have been called 'imagined communities',¹ in this case identified by religion, there is an implied rejection of the applicability of other types of divisions in society, such as status or class.

In the multiplicity of communalisms prevalent in India today, the major one obviously is Hindu communalism since it involves the largest numbers and asserts itself as the dominant group. I shall therefore discuss only the notion of the Hindu community and not those of other religions. Nevertheless my comments on communal ideology and its use of history would apply to other groups claiming a similar ideology. I would like to look at those constituents of Hindu communal ideology which claim legitimacy from the past, namely, that there has always been a well-defined and historically evolved religion which we now call Hinduism and an equally clearly defined Hindu community. Implicit in this are the historical implications of Hindu communalism and I shall argue that it is in part a modern search for an imagined Hindu identity from the past, a search which has drawn on the historiography of the last two centuries. The historical justification is far from being the sole reason for the growth of communalism, but recourse to this justification fosters the communal ideology.

The modern description of Hinduism has been largely that of a *brāhmaṇa*-dominated religion which gathered to itself in a somewhat paternalistic pattern a variety of sects drawing on a range of Buddhists, Jainas, Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas and Śāktas. The texts and the tradition were viewed as inspirational, initially orally preserved, with multiple manifestations of deities, priests but no church, a plurality of doctrines with a seeming absence of controversies and all this somehow integrated into a single religious fabric. Differences with the Semitic religions were recognized and were seen as the absence of a prophet, of

¹ B. Andersen, *Imagined Communities* (Vaso, 1983).

a revealed book regarded as sacred, of a monotheistic God, of ecclesiastical organization, of theological debates on orthodoxy and heresy and, even more important, the absence of conversion. But somehow the logic of these differences was not built into the construction of the history of the religion. Hinduism was projected largely in terms of its philosophical ideas, iconology and rituals. It is ironic in some ways that these multiple religious sects were seldom viewed in their social and historical context even though this was crucial to their understanding. Histories of the 'Hindu' religion have been largely limited to placing texts and ideas in a chronological perspective with few attempts at relating these to the social history of the time. Scholarship also tended to ignore the significance of the popular manifestation of religion in contrast to the textual, a neglect which was remedied by some anthropological research, although frequently the textual imprint is more visible even in such studies.

The picture which emerges of the indigenous view of religion from historical sources of the early period is rather different. The prevalent religious groups referred to are two, Brahmanism and Śramanism with a clear distinction between them. They are organizationally separate, had different sets of beliefs and rituals and often disagreed on social norms. That this distinction was recognized is evident from the edicts of the Mauryan king Aśoka² as well as by those who visited India and left accounts of what they had observed, as, for example, Megasthenes,³ the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Fa Hsien and Hsüan Tsang,⁴ and Alberuni.⁵ The Buddhist visitors write mainly of matters pertaining to Buddhism and refer to the *brāhmaṇas* as heretics. Patañjali the grammarian refers to the hostility between Brahmanism and Śramanism as innate as is that between the snake and the mongoose.⁶ Sometimes the *brāhmaṇas* and the *śramaṇas* are addressed jointly as in Buddhist texts and the Aśokan edicts. Here they are being projected as a category distinct from the common people. Such a bunching together relates to a similarity of concerns suggestive of a common framework of discourse but does not detract from the fundamental differences between the two systems. It might in fact be a worth-while exercise to reconstruct

² J. Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka* (Paris, 1950), pp. 97, 99, 112.

³ J. W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian* (London, 1877). Arrian, *Indica*, XI.1 to XII.9; Strabo XV 1.39-41, 46-9.

⁴ J. Legge, *Fa-hien's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (Oxford, 1886); S. Beal, *Si-yu-ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London, 1884).

⁵ E. C. Sachau (trans. and ed.), *Alberuni's India* (Delhi, 1964 reprint), p. 21.

⁶ S. D. Joshi (ed.), *Patañjali Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣya* (Poona, 1968), II.4.9; I.4.76.

Brahmanism from the references to it in Śramanic and other non-Brahmanical sources.

A historical view of early Indian religion would endorse this dichotomy and its continuity even in changed forms. Early Brahmanism demarcates the twice-born upper castes from the rest. The twice-born has to observe the precepts of *śruti*—the *Vedas* and of *smṛti*—the auxiliary texts to the *Vedas* and particularly the *Dharmaśāstras*. *Dharma* lay in conforming to the separate social observances and ritual functions of each caste. The actual nature of belief in deity was left ambiguous and theism was not a requirement. The focus of worship was the sacrificial ritual. Brahmanism came closest to having a subcontinental identity largely through its ritual functions and the use of a common language, Sanskrit, even though it was prevalent among only a smaller section of people.

Śramanism, a term covering a variety of Buddhist, Jaina, Ājīvika and other sects, denied the fundamentals of Brahmanism such as Vedic *śruti* and *smṛti*. It was also opposed to the sacrificial ritual both on account of the beliefs incorporated in the ritual as well as the violence involved in the killing of animals. It was characterized by a doctrine open to all castes and although social hierarchy was accepted it did not emphasize separate social observances but, rather, cut across caste. The idea of conversion was therefore notionally present. The attitude to social hierarchy in most Śramanic sects was not one of radical opposition. In Buddhism, for example, recruitment to the *saṅgha* and support from lay followers was initially in large numbers from the upper castes and the appeal was frequently also made to such groups.⁷ Nevertheless there were no restrictions on a lower caste recruitment and in later periods support from such groups was substantial. The founders of the Śramanic sects were not incarnations of deity. Buddhism and Jainism had an ecclesiastical organization, the *saṅgha*, and in most cases there was an overall concern with historicity.

In terms of numbers there appears to have developed even greater support for the Śākta sects which were in many ways antithetical to early Brahmanism. The essentials of Śāktism are sometimes traced back to Harappan times and some of these elements probably went into the making of popular religion from the earliest historical period. Recognized sects gradually crystalized from the first millennium A.D. when they come to be referred to in the literature of the period. The centrality of worshipping the goddess was initially new to upper caste

⁷ N. Wagle, *Society at the Time of the Buddha* (Bombay, 1966), p. 74.

religion. Some of these sects deliberately broke the essential taboos of Brahmanism relating to separate caste functions, commensality, rules of food and drink and sexual taboos.⁸ That some of the beliefs of the Śākta sects were later accepted by some *Brāhmaṇa* sects is an indication of a break with Vedic religion by these *Brāhmaṇa* sects although the legitimacy of the Vedic religion was sometimes sought to be bestowed on the new sects by them. Such religious compromises were not unconnected with the brahmanical need to retain social ascendancy. However, some brahmanical sects remained orthodox.

As legitimizers of political authority, the *brāhmaṇas* in the first millennium A.D. were given grants of land which enabled them to become major landowners. The institutions which emerged out of these grants such as the *agrahāras* became centres of control over rural resources as well as of Brahmanical learning and practice. It was probably this high social and economic status of the *brāhmaṇa* castes which encouraged the modern idea that Brahmanism and Hinduism were synonymous. But that Brahmanism had also to compromise with local cults is evident from the religious articulation of text and temple and from the frequency with which attempts were introduced into Brahmanism to purify the religion in terms of going back to *śruti* and *smṛti*. In the process of acculturation between brahmanic 'high culture' and the 'low culture' of local cults, the perspective is generally limited to that of the Sanskritization of the latter. It might be historically more accurate on occasion to view it as the reverse, as, for example, in the cult of Viṭṭhala at Pandharpur or that of Jagannātha at Puri.⁹ In such cases the deities of tribals and low caste groups become, for reasons other than the purely religious, centrally significant and Brahmanism has to adapt itself to the concept of such deities. The domain of such deities evolves out of a span spreading horizontally, moving from a village to its networks of exchange and finally encompassing a region. The focal centre of such a cult takes on a political dimension as well in the nature of the control which it exercises, quite apart from ritual and

⁸ Curiously, the eating of meat and the drinking of intoxicants was part of the rejection of Brahmanism for these were now abhorrent to Brahmanism, a rather different situation from that described in the Vedic texts where *brāhmaṇas* consumed beef and took *soma*.

⁹ G. D. Sontheimer, 'Some Memorial Monuments of Western India', in *German Scholars in India*, II (New Delhi, 1976); S. G. Tulpule, 'The Origin of Viṭṭhala: A new Interpretation', *ABORI*, 1977-78, vols 58-59, pp. 1009-15; A. Dandekar, 'Pastoralism and the Cult of Viṭṭhala', M. Phil. Dissertation, JNU; H. Kulke, *Jagannātha kult und Gajapati-Königtum* (Wiesbaden, 1979), p. 227; H. Kulke and D. Rothermund, *A History of India* (London, 1986), pp. 145ff.

belief. Pilgrimage then becomes a link across various circumferences.

The increasing success of Brahmanism by the end of the first millennium A.D. resulted in the gradual displacement of Śramanism—but not entirely. Local cults associated with new social groups led to the emergence of the more popular Puranic religion. Vedic deities were subordinated or ousted. Viṣṇu and Śiva came to be worshipped as the pre-eminent deities. The thrust of Puranic religion was in its assimilative and accommodating processes. A multitude of new cults, sects and castes were worked into the social and religious hierarchy. Religious observance often coincided with caste identities.

By the early second millennium A.D. a variety of devotional cults—referred to by the generic label *bhakti*—had come to form a major new religious expression. They drew on the Puranic tradition of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism but were also in varying degrees the inheritors of the Śramanic religions. Their emphasis on complete loyalty to the deity has been seen as a parallel to feudal loyalties. But what was more significant was that *bhakti* cults and the sects which grew around them sought to underline dependence on and salvation through the deity. To this extent they indicate a departure from earlier indigenous religion. These cults were god-centred rather than man-centred. The ritual of sacrifice had been substituted by the worship of an icon. Some sects accepted, up to a point, brahmanical *śruti* and *smṛti* whereas others vehemently denied it, a debate which continues to this day. Those sects in opposition to Brahmanism which sought to transcend caste and differentiated social observances, insisting that every worshipper was equal in the eyes of the deity, often ended up as castes, thus once again coinciding sect with caste. With the arrival of Islam in India some drew from the ideas of Islam. Most of these sects were geographically limited and bound by the barriers of language. Possibly the beginnings of larger religious communities within what is now called the Hindu tradition, date to the middle of the second millennium, such as perhaps some Vaiṣṇava sects, where, for example, the worship of Kṛṣṇa at Mathura drew audiences from a larger geographical region than before. This also heralds a change in the nature of Puranic religion, for Mathura attracts Vaiṣṇavas from eastern and southern India and becomes like Ayodhyā (for the worship of Rāma)¹⁰ the focus of a search for sacred topography. It might perhaps be seen as an attempt to go beyond local caste and sect and build a broader community. The historical reasons for its happening at this juncture need to be explored.

¹⁰ A. Bakker, *Ayodhya* (Groningen, 1984).

Initial opposition from those of high caste status also encouraged *bhakti* sects to inculcate a sense of community within themselves, particularly if they were economically successful, such as the Viraśaivas. Even when such religious sects attempted to constitute a larger community, the limitations of location, caste and language, acted as a deterrent to a single, homogeneous Hindu community. In the continuing processes of either appropriation or rejection of belief and practice, the kaleidoscopic change in the constitution of religious sects was one which precluded the emergence of a uniform, monolithic religion.

The multiplicity of cults and sects also reflects a multiplicity of beliefs. Even in Brahmanism we are told that if two *śruti* traditions are in conflict then both are to be held as law.¹¹ This is a fundamentally different approach from that of religions which would like to insist on a single interpretation arising out of a given theological framework. This flexibility together with the emphasis on social observance rather than theology allowed of a greater privatization of religion than was possible in most other religions. Renunciatory tendencies were common, were respected and often gave sanction to private forms of worship. The renouncer opted out of society, yet was highly respected.¹² The private domain of belief was always a permissible area of early Indian religion: a religion which is perhaps better seen as primarily the religious belief of social segments, sometimes having to agglomerate and sometimes remaining sharply differentiated. The coexistence of religious sects should not be mistaken for the absorption of all sects into an ultimately unified entity. But the demarcation was often more significant since it related both to differences in religious belief and practice as well as social status and political needs. The status of a sect could change as it was hinged to that of its patrons. Political legitimation through the use of religious groups was recognized, but the appeal was to a particular sect or cult or a range of these and not to a monolithic religion. Royal patronage within the same ruling family, extended to a multiplicity of sects, was probably conditioned as much by the exigencies of political and social requirements as by a religious catholicity. This social dimension as well as the degree to which a religious sect had its identity in caste or alternatively was inclusive of caste, has been largely ignored in the modern interpretation of early Hinduism. With the erosion of social observances and caste identity, there is now a search for a new identity and here the creation of a new Hinduism becomes relevant.

¹¹ Manu II. 14–15.

¹² Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: The making of a Counter-Culture?', in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (Delhi, 1978), pp. 63–104.

The evolution of Hinduism is not a linear progression from a founder through an organizational system, with sects branching off. It is rather the mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas and the adjusting, juxtaposing or distancing of these to existing ones, the placement drawing not only on belief and ideas but also on the socio-economic reality. New deities could be created linked genealogically to the established ones, as in the recent case of Santoshi Ma; new rituals worked out and the new sect could become the legitimizer of a new caste. Religious practice and belief are often self-sufficient within the boundaries of a caste and are frequently determined by the needs of a caste. The worship of icons was unthought of in the Vedic religion, but the idol becomes a significant feature of Puranic religion and therefore also in the eyes of contemporary Muslim observers. The consciousness of a similarity in ritual and belief in different geographical regions was not always evident. Thus *bhakti* cults were confined to particular regions and were frequently unaware of their precursors or contemporaries elsewhere. Recourse to historicity of founder and practice was confined within the sect and was not required of a conglomeration of sects which later came to be called Hinduism. This is in part reflected in the use of the term *sampradāya* for a sect where the emphasis is on transmission of traditional belief and usage through a line of teachers. The insistence on proving the historicity of human incarnations of deity, such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, is a more recent phenomenon and it may be suggested that there is a subconscious parallel with the prophet and the messiah. The identification of the *janma-bhūmis*, the location of the exact place where Kṛṣṇa and Rāma were born, becomes important only by the mid-second millennium A.D.

Religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity, see themselves as part of the historical process of the unfolding and interpreting of the single religion and sects are based on variant interpretations of the original teaching. They build their strength on a structure of ecclesiastical organization. In contrast to this, Hindu sects often had a distinct and independent origin. Assimilation was possible and was sometimes expressed in the appropriation of existing civilizational symbols. What needs to be investigated is the degree to which such civilizational symbols were originally religious in connotation.

Civilizational symbols are manifested in many ways: from the symbol of the *svāstika* to the symbol of the renouncer as the noblest and most respected expression of human aspirations. The history of the *svāstika* goes back to the fourth millennium B.C. where it occurs on seals and impressions from northwest India and central Asia. In the Indian

subcontinent it is not a specifically Hindu symbol for it is used by a variety of religious groups in various ways, but in every case it embodies the auspicious. The Bon-po of the Himalayan borderlands reverse the symbol to distance themselves from the Buddhists. The two epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, frequently treated as primarily the religious literature of the Vaiṣṇavas, are in origin as epics, civilizational symbols. They were, at one level, the carriers of ethical traditions and were used again by a variety of religious sects to propagate their own particular ethic, a situation which is evident from the diverse treatment of the theme of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Vālmīki, in the Buddhist *Vessantara* and *Dasaratha Jātakas* and in the Jaina version—the *Paumacaryam* of Vimalasūri.¹³ The epic versions were also used for purposes of political legitimation. The primarily Vaiṣṇava religious function of the epics develops gradually and comes to fruition in the second millennium A.D. with clearly defined sects worshipping Rāma or Kṛṣṇa coinciding with the development of what has been called the Puranic religion. Subsequent to this were various tribal adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and these were less concerned with the Vaiṣṇava message and more with articulating their own social fears and aspirations.

Even on the question of beliefs about the after-life, although the concept of *karma* and rebirth was commonly referred to, there were distinct and important groups who believed in a different concept. The life after death of the hero in the heaven of Indra or Śiva, waited upon by *apsaras*, goes back to the Vedic belief in the *pitṛloka* or House of the Fathers. This belief is a major motivation in the widespread hero cults from the mid-first millennium A.D. onwards.¹⁴ Here even the concept of after-life was conditioned by social birth and function. A different idea influences the way in which the ritual of *sati* changes its meaning over time. Initially a ritual which ensured that the faithful wife accompanied her hero-husband to heaven, and therefore associated largely with *kṣatriya* castes and those dying heroic deaths, its practice by other castes in the second millennium A.D. involved a change in eschatology. Ultimately the *sati* was defied, which meant that she neither went to heaven nor was subjected to the rules of *karma*.¹⁵

¹³ Romila Thapar, 'The Rāmāyaṇa: Theme and Variations', in S. N. Mukherjee (ed.), *India: History and Thought* (Calcutta, 1982), pp. 221–53.

¹⁴ Romila Thapar, 'Death and the Hero', in S. C. Humphreys and H. King, *Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death* (London, 1981), pp. 293–316.

¹⁵ Romila Thapar, 'Sati in History', *Seminar*, no. 342 (February 1988).

It has been suggested that there was a structural similarity in various rituals practised by people in different regions and therefore shared myths and shared ritual patterns can account for some unity in the varieties of the religious beliefs that we find in India over a long time.¹⁶ This is certainly true. But nevertheless it is different from a shared creed, catechism, theology and ecclesiastical organization.

The definition of Hinduism as it has emerged in recent times appears not to have emphasized the variant premises of Indian religion and therefore the difference in essence from the model of Semitic religions. This definition was the result of various factors: of Christian missionaries who saw this as the lacunae of religions in India and which they regarded as primitive; of some Orientalist scholarship anxious to fit the 'Hindu' process into a comprehensible whole based on a known model; the efforts also of Indian reform movements attempting to cleanse Indian religion of what they regarded as negative encrustations and trying to find parallels with the Semitic model. Even in the translation of texts from Sanskrit into English, where religious concepts were frequently used the translation often reflected a Christian undertone. The selection of texts to be studied had its own purpose. The East India Company's interest in locating and codifying Hindu law gave a legal form to what was essentially social observance and customary law. The concept of law required that it be defined as a cohesive ideological code. The Manu *Dharmaśāstra*, for example, which was basically part of Brahmanical *smṛti* was taken as the laws of the Hindus and presumed to apply universally. In the process of upward social mobility during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, traders and artisanal groups emerged as patrons of temple building activities and the trend to conform to the brahmanical model was reinforced by this comprehension of Hinduism.¹⁷ The growth of the political concepts of majority and minority communities further galvanized the process.

The degree to which castes and sects functioned independently even in situations which would elsewhere have been regarded as fundamentally of theological importance, can perhaps be seen in attitudes to religious persecution and the manifestation of intolerance. Among the normative values which were highlighted in the discussion of Hinduism in recent times, has been the concept of *ahimsā* or non-violence. It has been argued that non-violence and tolerance were special features of Hinduism which particularly demarcated its ethics from those of Islam and to a lesser extent Christianity. Yet *ahimsā* as an absolute value is

¹⁶ Personal Communication from a friend.

¹⁷ H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1981).

characteristic of certain Śramanic sects and less so of Brahmanism. The notion appears in the *Upaniṣads*, but it was the Buddhists and the Jains who first made it foundational to their teaching, and their message was very different from that of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* on this matter. That Brahmanism and Śramanism were recognized as distinct after the period of the *Upaniṣads* further underlines the significance of *ahimsā* to Śramanic thinking. This is also borne out by the evidence of religious persecution.

In spite of what historians, ancient and modern, have written, there is a persistent, popular belief that the 'Hindus' never indulged in religious persecution. However, the Śaivite persecution of Śramanic sects is attested to and on occasion, retaliation by the latter. Hsüan Tsang writing in the seventh century refers to this when he describes his visit to Kashmir.¹⁸ That this was not the prejudiced view of the Buddhist pilgrim is made clear by the historian Kalhaṇa in the *Rājatarāṅginī*, who even in the twelfth century refers to the earlier destruction of Buddhist monasteries and the killing of Buddhist monks by the Hūna king Mihīrakula and other ardent Śaivites.¹⁹ That Mihīrakula was a Hūna is used by modern historians to excuse these actions, but it should be remembered that he gave large grants of land, *agrahāras*, to the *brāhmaṇas* of Gandhāra, which Kalhaṇa in disgust informs us they gratefully received. Clearly there was competition for royal patronage and the Saiva *brāhmaṇas* triumphed over the Buddhists. The Buddhist association with the commerce between India and central Asia was one of the reasons for the material prosperity of the Buddhist *saṅgha*.²⁰ The Hūna disruption of the Indian trade with central Asia may well have resulted in an antagonism between the northern Buddhists and the Hūnas.

Elsewhere there is a variation on this story. In Tamil Nadu, for example, from the seventh century onwards, Śaiva sects attacked Jaina establishments and eventually succeeded in driving out the Śramanas.²¹ In neighbouring Karnataka, at a somewhat later date, the Vīraśaiva or Līṅgāyatas acquiring wealth and status in commerce, persecuted Jaina monks and destroyed Jaina images.²² In some inscriptions the Vīraśaivas claim that the Jains began the trouble. In this

¹⁸ S. Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, I. xcix.

¹⁹ I. 307.

²⁰ Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China* (Delhi, 1988).

²¹ Romila Thapar, *Cultural Transaction and Early India* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 17ff.

²² P. B. Desai, *Jainism in South India* (Sholapur, 1957), pp. 23, 63, 82-3, 124, 397-402; *Epigraphia Indica* V., pp. 142ff, 255; *Ep. Ind.* XXIX, pp. 139-44; *Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy*, 1923, pp. 4ff.

case the hostility can be traced not to competition for royal patronage but rather to control of the commercial economy over which the Jainas had a substantial hold. A further reason may also have been linked to the fact that the Jainas, maintaining high standards of literacy, may have been seen by the Vīraśaivas as rivals in the role of advisers and administrators at the royal court.

What is significant about this persecution is that it involved not all the Śaivas but particular segments of sects among them. The persecution was not a *jehād* or a holy war or a crusade in which all Hindu sects saw it as their duty to support the attack or to wage war against the Buddhists or the Jainas. Nor was there room for an inquisition in the Indian situation, for there dissidents could found a new sect and take on a splinter caste status. The notion of heresy evolved gradually. The term *paśamda* in the Aśokan edicts refers merely to any religious sect or philosophical school. By the time of the Puranic literature, *pāṣaṇḍa* quite clearly referred to sects in opposition to Brahmanism and carried with it the clear connotation of contempt.²³ Untouchability was also a form of religious persecution, for this exclusion was common to Brahmanism as well as to some Śramanic sects, the *caṇḍāla* being a category apart. Vaiṣṇavism, although it had its episodes of enmity with Śaivism and others, seems to have been less prone to persecuting competitors. Instead it resorted to assimilating other cults and used the notion of the *avatāra* or incarnation of Viṣṇu to great effect in doing so. But even Vaiṣṇavism was less given to assimilating the Śramanic sects, preferring to absorb tribal and folk cults and epic heroes. Thus in spite of the reference to Buddha as among the ten incarnations, this, interestingly, does not become the focus of a large body of myths or Puranic texts as do the other incarnations. If acts of intolerance and violence against other religious sects reflecting the consciousness of belonging to a religious community did not form part of a Hindu stand against such sects, then it also raises the question of how viable is the notion of a Hindu community for this early period.

The notion of a Hindu community does not have as long an ancestry as is often presumed. Even in the normative texts of Brahmanism, the *Dharmaśāstras*, it is conceded that there were a variety of communities, determined by location, occupation and caste, none of which were necessarily bound together by a common religious identity. The term for village, *grāma*, referred to the collective inhabitants of a place and included cultivators and craftsmen. The control of this community lay

²³ Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation'.

in the hands of the *grāma-saṅgha*²⁴ and the *mahājana* and, in some cases, the *pañcakula*. Customary law of the village is referred to as *grāma-dharma*.²⁵ The sense of the village as the community was further impressed by the grants of land to *brāhmaṇas* and officers in the late first millennium A.D. when they began to be given administrative and judicial rights over the villages granted to them. Community therefore had one of its roots in location and the law of the *janapada*/territory is listed among those which a king should observe.

In urban centres, craftsmen of the same profession or of related professions formed organizations and guilds, such as the *pūga*, *goṣṭhi* and *śrenī*. They were responsible for production and sale and gradually took on a community character. Thus donations were made at Buddhist *stūpas*, as the one at Sanchi, by *goṣṭhis* and *śrenīs* which identified themselves as such.²⁶ These communities were part of the larger Buddhist community and the same *stūpa* was embellished from donations by a number of other such communities and by individuals. One can therefore speak of a Buddhist community which cuts across the boundaries of caste and locality. In contrast is the silk-weavers guild at Mandasor which built a temple to Sūrya, the Sun-god, and renovated it in the late fifth century A.D.²⁷ Even though the members of this guild had taken to a variety of alternative professions they retained their identity as a guild for the purpose of building a temple. This religious edifice was built through the effort of a single group, identified as a guild and worshipping Sūrya, for no other Sun-worshippers were involved nor any other religious group which today would be called Hindu. It is unlikely that such a group saw itself as part of a larger Hindu community as its identity seems to have been deliberately limited. The Hūnas established themselves in the region soon after and were known to be Sun-worshippers. A temple to the Sun was built at Gwalior in the early sixth century A.D. by a high-ranking individual.²⁸ Curiously there is neither contribution from nor reference to other Sun-

²⁴ Manu VIII. 41.

²⁵ *Aśvalāyana Gṛhasūtra* I.7.1.; *Aśvalāyana Śrauta-sūtra* XII.8; Pāṇiṇi 6.2.62; *Amarakośa* 2.3.19; Buddhist texts speak more specifically of village boundaries (*Vinaya Piṭaka* I. 109. 10; III.46.200). This was necessary in a system where the limits of areas for collecting alms had to be defined for each monastery.

²⁶ See inscriptions from Sanchi as given in J. Marshall and A. Foucher, *Monuments of Sanchi* (Calcutta, 1940); also H. Lüders, *Ep. Ind.* X. nos. 162–907; See also the Bhattiprolu inscription, Lüders no. 1332.

²⁷ J. F. Fleet (ed.), *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, III (Varanasi, 1970 reprint), pp. 79ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 162ff.

worshipping communities in the area in the later inscription, barring the reference to the Hūna kings.

In urban life the guild was a commanding institution acting as the nucleus of the urban community. The coins and seals of such guilds point to economic power and social status.²⁹ The *Nārada-smṛti*³⁰ clearly states that a guild could frame its own laws and these laws related both to administration and social usage. The customary law of the guild, the *śrenī-dharma*, is particularly mentioned in the *Dharmaśāstras* and to which kings are required to conform. The importance of the guild also lies in the fact that some evolved into *jātis* or castes, becoming units of endogamous marriage uniting kinship and profession. Those not following a Śramanic religion maintained their own separate religious identity. We are also told that the king must respect *jāti-dharma*. The emphasis on the *dharma* of the *janapada* (locality or territory) *śrenī* (guild) and *jāti* (caste) and the absence of reference to the *dharma* of various religious sects or of a conglomeration of religious sects are a pointer perhaps to what actually constituted the sense of community in the early past.

Identities were, in contrast to the modern nation state, segmented identities. The notion of community was not absent but there were multiple communities identified by locality, language, caste, occupation and sect. What appears to have been absent was the notion of a uniform, religious community readily identified as Hindu. The first occurrence of the term 'Hindu' is as a geographical nomenclature and this has its own significance. This is not a quibble since it involves the question of the historical concept of 'Hindu'. Inscriptions of the Achaemenid empire refer to the frontier region of the Indus or Sindhu as Hi(n)dush.³¹ Its more common occurrence many centuries later is in Arabic texts where the term is initially used neither for a religion nor for a culture. It refers to the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, the land across the Sindhu or Indus river. Al-Hind was therefore a geographical identity and the Hindus were all the people who lived on this land. Hindu thus essentially came to mean 'the other' in the eyes of the new arrivals. It was only gradually and over time that it was used not only for those who were inhabitants of India but also for those who professed a religion other than Islam or Christianity. In this sense

²⁹ *Bṛhaspati* I. 28–30; *Kātyayaṇa* 2.82; 17.18; I. 126; Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1903–04; 1911–12.

³⁰ *Nārada-smṛti*, X. 1–2; *Ep. Ind.* XXX, p. 169.

³¹ The Persepolis and Naqsh-e-Rustam inscriptions of Darius, in D. C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, vol. I (Calcutta, 1965), p. 7.

Hindu included both the *brāhmaṇas* and the lower castes, an inclusion which was contrary to the precepts of Brahmanism. This all-inclusive term was doubtless a new and bewildering feature for the multiple sects and castes who generally saw themselves as separate entities.

The people of India curiously do not seem to have perceived the new arrivals as a unified body of Muslims. The name 'Muslim' does not occur in the records of early contacts. The term used was either ethnic, *Turuṣka*, referring to the Turks,³² or geographical, *Yavana*,³³ or cultural, *mleccha*. *Yavana*, a back formation from *yona* had been used since the first millennium B.C. for Greeks and others coming from west Asia. *Mleccha* meaning impure, goes back to the Vedic texts and referred to non-Sanskrit speaking peoples often outside the caste hierarchy or regarded as foreign and was extended to include low castes and tribals. Foreigners, even of high ranks, were regarded as *mleccha*.³⁴ A late fifteenth-century inscription from Mewar refers to the Sultan of Malwa and his armies as *śakas*, a term used many centuries before for the Scythians, and therefore reflecting a curious undertow of historical memory.³⁵ These varying terms, each seeped in historical meaning, do not suggest a monolithic view, but rather a diversity of perceptions which need to be enquired into more fully.

For the early Muslim migrants Indian society was also a puzzle, for it was the first where large numbers did not convert to Islam. There was, further, the unique situation that they were faced with a society which had no place for the concept of conversion, for one's birth into a caste defines one's religious identity and conversion is outside the explanation of belief.

Historians have posited two monolithic religions, Hinduism and Islam, coming face to face in the second millennium A.D. This projection requires re-examination since it appears to be based on a somewhat simplistic reading of the court chronicles of the Sultans. These spoke of Hindus sometimes in the sense of the indigenous

³² Similarly Muslim women were often referred to as *turuṣki*, as, for example, in Hemādri, *Caturvarga-cintāmaṇi*, Prāyaścitta-kāṇḍa.

³³ e.g. Chateśvara temple inscriptions, where in the thirteenth century a reference is made to a campaign against the *yavanas*. *Ep. Ind.* 1952, XXIX, pp. 121-2.

³⁴ Romila Thapar, 'The Image of the Barbarian in Early India', in *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 152-92. A fourteenth-century inscription from Delhi refers to Shahab-ud-din, as a *mleccha*, who was the first *Turuṣka* to rule Dhillika/Delhi. D. R. Bhandarkar (ed.), Appendix to *Epi. Ind.* XIX-XXIII, no. 683.

³⁵ Udaipur inscription of the time of Rajamalla in *Bhavnagar Inscriptions*, pp. 117ff. And see Bhandarkar (ed.), Appendix to *Ep. Ind.* XIX-XXIII, no. 862. It is ironic that it was earlier thought that these Rajput ruling families may in some cases have had their origin in the Sakas!

population, sometimes as a geographical entity and sometimes as followers of a non-Islamic religion. Such references should be read in their specific meaning and not as referring uniformly to the religion of India. Possibly the germ of the idea of a Hindu community begins when people start referring to themselves as Hindus, perhaps initially as a concession to being regarded as 'the other'. Such usage in non-Islamic sources is known from the fifteenth century. The literature of the *bhakti* sects registers a variation on this. Much that was composed in an indigenous tradition such as the *Rāmacaritamānas* of Tulsidās seems not to use the term Hindu. That which was clearly influenced by Islamic ideas such as the verses of Kabīr refers to Hindus and counterposes Hindus and Turuṣkas in a religious sense. Curiously both Tulsidās and Kabīr belonged to the Rāmanandin sect, yet expressed themselves in very different idioms.

Rānā Kumbha of Mewar ruling in the fifteenth century, on defeating the sultans of Dhilli and Gurjarātra, takes the title of *himdu suratrāna*,³⁶ *suratrāna*, being the Sanskrit for sultan. In the context of the inscription in which it occurs, it is less a declaration of religious identity and more a claim to being a sultan of *al-hind*, superior to the other sultans. In another inscription the sultan of Gujarat is referred to as the *gurjareśvara* and the *gurjarādhiśvara*, but the virtually hereditary enemy, the sultan of Malwa, merely as *suratrāna*,³⁷ a subtle but significant distinction.

It would also be worth while to investigate when the term Muslim came to be used in what would now be called Hindu sources. One's suspicion is that Turuṣka and its variants and certainly *mleccha* were more commonly used as they are to this day. *Mleccha* does not have a primary religious connotation. It is a signal of social and cultural difference. Indian Muslims of course did not discontinue caste affiliations, particularly as the basis of marriage relations and often even occupations. Thus the gulf between the high caste Muslims claiming foreign descent, such as the *ashrafs*, and the rest was not altogether dissimilar to the social difference between *brāhmaṇas* and non-*brāhmaṇas*. But the rank and file were often converted from lower castes, where an entire *jāti* would convert. These Muslims retained their local language in preference to Persian, were recognized by minor differences of dress and manner and often incorporated their earlier

³⁶ Sadadi Jaina inscription of the time of Kumbhakarna of Medapata in *Bhavnagar Inscriptions*, pp. 114ff and D. R. Bhandarkar, *op. cit.*, no. 784; D. Sharma, *Lectures on Rajput History and Culture* (Delhi, 1970), p. 55.

³⁷ Kīrtistambha-praśasti, *ASIR*, XXIII, pp. 111ff.

rituals and mythology into Islamic tradition. Some of the *mangal-kābyas* in Bengali, for instance, are an example of such interlinks in the creation of what might be seen as a new mythology where Puranic deities intermingled with the personalities of the Quran.³⁸ This becomes even more evident in the folk literature of regions with a large Muslim population. Elsewhere in Tamil-Nadu, for instance, the guardian figures in the cult of Draupadi are Muslim.³⁹ This is not an anomaly if it is seen in terms of local caste relations.

This is not to suggest that the relationship was one of peaceful coexistence or total cultural integration but rather that the perception which groups subscribing to Hindu and Islamic symbols had of each other was not in terms of a monolithic religion, but more in terms of distinct and disparate castes and sects along a social continuum. Even the recognition of a religious identity does not automatically establish a religious community. Tensions, confrontations and even persecutions at the level of political authority were not necessarily repeated all the way down the social scale nor were all caste and sectarian conflicts reflected at the upper levels. Clashes which on the face of it would now be interpreted as between Hindus and Muslims, would require a deeper investigation to ascertain how far they were clashes between specific castes and sects and to what degree did they involve support and sympathy from other castes and sects identifying with the same religion or seeking such identity.

The nineteenth-century definition of the Hindu community sought its justification in early history using Mill's periodization which assumes the existence of Hindu and Muslim communities and takes the history of the former back to the centuries B.C. Its roots were provided by yet another nineteenth-century obsession, that of the theory of Aryan race.⁴⁰ It was argued that the Indo-Europeans who conquered India created the Hindu religion and civilization. In the theory of Aryan race the nineteenth-century concern with European origins was transferred to India. The theory as applied to India emphasized the arrival of a superior, conquering race of Aryans who used the mechanism of caste to segregate groups racially.⁴¹ It underlined upper caste superiority by arguing that they were the descendants of the Aryans and it therefore became an acceptable explanation of the origin of

³⁸ Ashim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983).

³⁹ A. Heltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi* (Chicago, 1988).

⁴⁰ Romila Thapar, 'Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History', in K. S. Krishnaswamy *et. al.* (eds), *Society and Change* (Bombay, 1977), pp. 1-19.

⁴¹ H. Risley, *The People of India* (London, 1908).

upper castes, who could now also claim relationship to the European Aryans.⁴² The lower castes were seen as the non-Aryan, indigenous people and were said to be of Dravidian and Austric origin. Aryanism was seen then to define the true and pure Hindu community. Other groups recruited into the caste structure at lower levels were regarded as polluting the pristine Hindu community.

Because of its centrality to both the notion of community and religion, the theory of Aryan race requires to be looked at critically by historians working on nineteenth-century ideas as well as historians of ancient India. The earlier evidence quoted in support of the theory as applied to India begins to fade with information from archaeology and linguistics. The notion of an Aryan race has now been generally discarded in scholarship and what we are left with is essentially a linguistic category: the Indo-Aryan speaking people. The archaeological picture takes the foundation of Indian civilization back to proto-history and the Harappa culture. The characteristic features of the latter do not mesh with those of the Vedic texts associated with the culture of the Indo-Aryan speakers.⁴³ The culture depicted in the Vedic texts seems increasingly to have drawn on local practices and beliefs, some going back to the Harappa culture or earlier, others drawing perhaps from the then contemporary society in India. There is virtually no evidence of the invasion and conquest of northwestern India by a dominant culture coming from across the border. Most sites register a gradual change of archaeological cultures. Where there is evidence of destruction and burning it could as easily have been a local activity and is not indicative of a large-scale invasion. The border lands of the northwest were in communication with Iran and central Asia even before the Harappa culture with evidence of the passage of goods and ideas across the region.⁴⁴ This situation continued into later times and if seen in this light then the intermittent arrival of groups of Indo-European speakers in the northwest, perhaps as pastoralists or farmers or itinerant traders, would pose little problem. It is equally plausible that in some cases local languages became Indo-Europeanized through contact. Such situations would require a different kind of investigation.

⁴² As, for example, in the writings of Keshab Chunder Sen, 'Philosophy and Madness in Religion', in *Keshab Chunder Sen's Lectures in India* (London, 1901).

⁴³ Romila Thapar, 'The Study of Society in India', in *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 211-39; also, 'The Archaeological Background to the Agnicayana Ritual', in F. Staal, *Agni*, vol. II (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 3-40.

⁴⁴ J. Jarrige, 'Excavations at Mehrgarh: their Significance for Understanding the Background of the Harappan Civilisation', in G. Possehl (ed.), *Harappan Civilisation* (New Delhi, 1982), pp. 79ff.

If cultural elements from elsewhere are being assessed, then during the Harappan period excavated evidence for contact with west Asia via the Gulf was more significant than that with eastern Iran and central Asia and this raises another set of possibilities.

The more basic question for the historian is to explain the slow and gradual spread of the Indo-Aryan language across a large part of the Indian subcontinent. Here again the evidence from linguistics provides an interesting pointer. The claim that the earliest of the Vedic texts, the *R̥g Veda* dating back to the second millennium B.C. is linguistically purely Indo-Aryan is now under question for it is being argued that the text already registers the presence of non-Aryan speakers. The later Vedic texts show an even greater admixture of non-Aryan and specifically when dealing with certain areas of activity, such as agriculture.⁴⁵ The emergent picture might suggest that the speakers of Indo-Aryan may have been in a symbiotic relationship with speakers of non-Aryan languages, with a mutual adopting of not only vocabulary and linguistic structures in a bi-lingual situation but also technologies and religious practices and beliefs.⁴⁶ The exclusivity of *brāhmaṇa* ritual does not have to be explained on the basis of a racial segregation, but can be viewed as derived from the will to retain a certain kind of priestly power, which, claiming bestowal by the deities would ensure a separate and special status. Possibly the political hold of priestly power has its roots in the Harappa culture. In charting the spread of Indo-Aryan it is worth remembering that Sanskrit not only underwent change in relation to other languages with which it had to co-exist and in relation to social change but that its use was initially restricted to *brāhmaṇa* ritual and elite groups.

The focus therefore is shifting to an investigation of the many ways in which a language gains acceptability. This would involve detailed studies of the juxtaposition of new technologies particularly in relation to ecological contexts, of demography, of kinship systems and the ways in which social groups interact where stratification relates to lineage rather than to race. So deep has been the modern obsession with race that Pargiter as late as in the 1920s suggested the identification of even the traditional descent groups from the genealogies of the Puranic texts as Aryan, Dravidian and Austric.⁴⁷ Thus the spread of the Indo-Aryan languages and the changes they manifest are a far more complicated

⁴⁵ T. Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language* (London, 1965), p. 379; M. M. Deshpande and P. E. Hook (eds), *Aryan and non-Aryan in India* (Michigan, 1979).

⁴⁶ Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State* (New Delhi, 1984), pp. 21ff.

⁴⁷ F. E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* (London, 1922).

study than that implied in the theory of spread by conquest. There is also a need to see the evolving of early Indian society as suggested by archaeological evidence independent of the attempt to impose Aryan identities on archaeological cultures. Only then can we hope to understand the social processes which went into the creation of early Indian society. In the texts the term *ārya* generally refers to status indicating one who is to be respected. Whereas the connotation of *dāsa* may be said to contain racial elements, as, for example, in the emphasis on physical characteristics, such elements are not in the forefront of references to *ārya*. Thus in the Vedic texts there are *āryas* of *dāsa* descent, the *dāsi-putrāḥ brāhmaṇas*,⁴⁸ or, politically powerful *dāsa* chiefs making gifts to the *brāhmaṇas*.⁴⁹ (It is interesting that one of the most respected lineages, that of the Purus is associated with sub-standard Sanskrit.⁵⁰ It is also said that Puru was an ancient king who was an Asura Rākṣasa and was overthrown by Bharata,⁵¹ which can hardly be said to place the Purus in the category of the pure Aryans! In the *Dharmaśāstras* it is the observance of the complex *varnāśrama-dharma* which defines the *ārya*. To trace the emergence of caste would also involve a study of access to resources, kinship and clan networks and notions of pollution.

Early history suggests the existence of multiple communities based on various identities. The need to create the idea of a single, Hindu community appears to have been a concern of more recent times which was sought to be justified by recourse to a particular construction of history. The new Hinduism which is now sought to be projected as the religion of this community is in many ways a departure from the earlier religious sects. It seeks historicity for the incarnations of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrally sacred book, claims monotheism as significant to the worship of deity, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing over all and has supported large-scale missionary work and conversion. These changes allow it to transcend caste identities and reach out to larger numbers. Religions indigenous to India which questioned brahmanical belief and practice such as Buddhism and Jainism have been inducted into Hinduism and their separateness is either denied or ignored. Pre-Islamic India is therefore presented as a civilization characterized by

⁴⁸ *Bṛhaddevatā* 4.11-15; 21-5; describes the birth of Dīrghatamas and his son Kakṣivant as the son of a *dāsi*. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 2.19 and the *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* 12.3 describe the Ṛg Vedic seer Kavasa Ailusa as a *dāsi-putrah*.

⁴⁹ Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ *Ṛg Veda*. VII. 18.13.

⁵¹ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* VI. 8.1.14.

an inclusive Hinduism, whereas it would seem that the reality perhaps lay in looking at it as a cluster of distinctive sects and cults, observing common civilizational symbols but with belief and ritual ranging from atheism to animism and a variety of religious organizations identifying themselves by location, language and caste. Even the sense of religious identity seems to have related more closely to sect than to a dominant Hindu community.

The modern construction of Hinduism is often acclaimed as in the following defence of Orientalism: 'The work of integrating a vast collection of myths, beliefs, rituals and laws into a coherent religion and of shaping an amorphous heritage into a rational faith known now as "Hinduism" were endeavours initiated by Orientalists.'⁵² Given that religious traditions are constantly reformulated, the particular construction of Hinduism in the last two centuries has an obvious historical causation. Deriving largely from the Orientalist construction of Hinduism, emergent national consciousness appropriated this definition of Hinduism as well as what it regarded as the heritage of Hindu culture. Hindu identity was defined by those who were part of this national consciousness and drew on their own idealized image of themselves resulting in an upper-caste, *brāhmaṇa*-dominated identity. Even the counterposing of Hindu to other religious identities as an essential fact of social and historical reality grew out of this construction. But this construction not only deviates from the history of the religious groups involved but fails to encapsulate the essential differences within what is called the Hindu tradition whose presuppositions were distinct from other religions and closely entwined with social articulation. The search for coherence and rational faith was in terms of a perspective familiar to those who came from a Christian religious tradition and hardly reflected any attempt to understand the coherence of a different, indigenous religious tradition. The shape thus given to the latter has changed what originally existed and has made it difficult to recognize the actual earlier form.

The need for postulating a Hindu community became a requirement for political mobilization in the nineteenth century when representation by religious community became a key to power and where such representation gave access to economic resources. The competition for middle class employment brought with it the argument that in all fairness the size of the community should be taken into consideration. Communal representation of the religious kind firmed up the image.

⁵² D. Knopf, 'Hermeneutics versus History', *Journal of Asian Studies* 39.3 (1980), pp. 495-505.

Once this argument was conceded it became necessary to recruit as many people as possible into the community. Here the vagueness of what constitutes a Hindu was to the advantage of those propagating a Hindu community. It encouraged an almost new perception of the social and political uses of religion. Conversion to Hinduism was invented largely to bring in the untouchables and the tribals. The notion of purification, *śuddhi*, permitted those who had been converted to Islam and Christianity to be reintroduced to the Hindu fold. A Hindu community with a common identity would be politically powerful. Since it was easy to recognize other communities on the basis of religion, such as Muslims and Christians, an effort was made to consolidate a parallel Hindu community. This involved a change from the earlier segmented identities to one which encompassed caste and region and identified itself by religion which had to be refashioned so as to provide the ideology which would bind the group. In Gramsci's terms, the class which wishes to become hegemonic has to nationalize itself and the new 'nationalist' Hinduism comes from the middle class.

The change implicit in the various levels of what is called modernization inevitably results in the refashioning of communities. Given that the notion of expansive communities may well be imagined, nevertheless the premises on which such communities are constructed are open to analysis and where they claim an historical basis, there the historian has perforce to be involved. This involvement becomes even more necessary when the concept of communities is brought into play in assigning positions to them in history either close to or distant from what are regarded as national aspirations. Thus the majority community tends to define national aspirations. The minority communities in varying degrees are viewed as disrupting society by their refusal to conform. The projection of such communities historically is that of their always having been alien to the dominant culture and therefore refusing to assimilate with the majority.

Minority communities pick up their cue in a similar reconstruction of history seeking to project a unified community stance in all historical situations. The fear of being overwhelmed by the majority community is expressed even in opposition to the making of homogeneous civil laws. These are treated as threats to a specific culture and practice, and there is a tendency to preserve even that which is archaic in an effort to assert a separate identity.

If the history of religions in India is seen as the articulation not only of ideas and rituals but also the perceptions and motivations of social groups, the perspectives which would follow might be different from

those with which we are familiar. The discourse and the play between and among religious sects of various kinds, has been a central fact of Indian religion and would reflect a more realistic portrayal of the role of religion in society. A historically analytical enquiry into the definition and role of religion and the concept of religious communities in pre-modern India could be juxtaposed with the way in which these have been perceived by interpreters of the past in the last couple of centuries. Incidentally such an assessment would be valuable not only to contemporary society in India but also to those societies which now host the vast Indian diaspora. Communal ideologies may be rooted in the homeland but also find sustenance in the diaspora.

It is possible now to look more analytically at the perspectives on early Indian society as available in the sources, keeping in mind the insights which we have, arising from research which, in a sense, is being gradually liberated from the polemics of the colonial age. Where institutions and ideologies of modern times seek legitimacy from the early past, at least there, the dialogue between historians working on these time periods becomes imperative.