

## DHARMA AS A BINARY IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** The idea of Dharma has different connotation in History from that of religion as is popularly understood. While it is accepted as righteousness, it transcends the notion that Dharma represents piety, spirituality, belief and nobility. On the contrary, History is replete with instances of how religion, an institutionalized aspect of Dharma, was constantly articulated as representing Authority, Power, Status and Hierarchy. Due to these interpretations Dharma often was projected as a tool for realization of the above by various institutions, be they, political, social, cultural or economic, and Dharma provided legitimacy and justified their identities. The present paper juxtaposes this articulation in the context of Ancient and Medieval India, spanning a period approximately from 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. It argues that the different trajectories that flowed between Dharma and various other secular institutions constantly witnessed divergence as well as assimilation at various points of time.

**Keywords:** Binary, Dharma, History, Identity, Institutions, Justification, Legitimacy, Righteousness

### 1. Introduction

History of humankind has consistently witnessed a dependency on certain systemic identities by institutionalized structures be they political, social, intellectual or cultural, as a process to legitimize and justify their articulations. These articulations may be symptomatic representatives in the form of Power, Authority,

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Ideology, Community Autonomy and Regionalization. However, what strengthens their argument is the intertwining of their ideas with widely accepted notions of righteousness, ethics, and morality. Thus, History constantly demonstrates this symbiotic equation between its process and the concept of Dharma, which is thought of more as righteousness in Asian context rather than as Religion.

This paper attempts to explore the extraordinary interface between the world of History and the concept of Dharma in the context of Indian subcontinent, wherein Dharma occupied a binary position in relation to politico-cultural institutions in the ancient and early medieval past. The main argument of this paper is that while Dharma as righteousness was a virtue, it also became a significant political tool once it was institutionalized. Thus, the interface between the secular and sacred was not uniform or universal but contextualized to meet the requirement of the State, Society and Communities. Dharma in ancient and medieval history of India was considered as much an individual virtue as a trajectory to legitimize governance and administrative initiatives by Institutions of authority. This paper maps the process of an uninterrupted predicament for institutions of power which range from State to Guilds to Monasteries when Dharma had to be executed as an ennobling idea as well as a manipulative strategy.

Human communities inhabited the Indian subcontinent for around 500,000 years which is revealed by the Stone Age sites in the Beas and *Soan* river valleys as well as in the farther Deccan areas of southern parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Between 40,000 and 10,000 BCE there appeared the middle Stone Age societies and by 4000 BCE advanced communities of artisanal specialists and farmers had inhabited this vast tract of a land. The Mehargarh settlement of 3500 BCE indicates a complex but well evolved cultural system in place. All these are indicative of an evolution of a civilization by 2500 BCE known as Harppan culture which also marks the beginning of an extremely nuanced cultural identity that was textured by a grid of political, economic, cultural and religious systems. Spread over a vast area from Afghanistan to Assam and the Deccan plateau, that was characterized by

territorial and cultural diversity, societies and communities in the Indian subcontinent had to initiate the birth of region specific institutions that were also marked by complicated process and trajectories. Thus for instance social norms, religion, political systems have a very different connotation that cannot be understood in a linear style. Almost from the start societies had to invent means of enmeshing and merging all of these ideas in either positions of subservience or control according to their needs. Hence, Dharma ceases to be Piety alone instead it becomes a tool for expansion and consolidation of Power and Authority too. This non-linear identity stems from the tradition of non compartmentalization of beliefs and norms, where a social practice always was authorized by a text of Dharma or the Smṛti literature. Similarly, political responsibilities were termed as ‘*rajadharmā*’. Thus Dharma was not just systemic beliefs but also perceived as duty, function, and work. Thus, for instance, the centrality of ritual sacrifices by a ruler during the Vedic times arose not from a social text but from a religious composition such as ‘The Hymn of the Primeval Man’ from the *Purushasukta*. Similarly, the historic eastward movement of the Aryans into the gangetic valley is to be inferred through a ritual manual ‘*Satapatha Brahmana*’. Thus, while texts of Dharma become sources for constructing historical identities, they also exhibit binary positions when applied to the larger socio political milieu. Rig-Veda while according rights of scholasticism to women also ascribed a very gendered role to women as bearers of sons and were sexual temptresses who had to be subordinate to their husbands.

## 2. Historical Context

The Mahabharata composed around 400 BCE delineates the roles and responsibilities of political institutions there by underlining the fact that this was not just a tale of dilemmas of ethics and morality, not just of issues of Dharma but also a dexterous intervening voice about economic, social concerns. The *Shanti Parva* sets out a theory of Aryan kingship justifying elaborate royal sacrifices. The recurring cycles of public morality as demonstrated through the various yugas were framed under a

chef feature. Thus, *Kritayuga* by its inherent righteousness rendered all social and political institutions irrelevant, where as through progressive deterioration the *Kaliyuga* warranted introduction of political institutions to maintain *varnashramadharma*. Ruling required efficiency and if not found in the highest *rajanyas* of the Vedic Aryans, morality and correct values could be achieved by the non Aryans and non Kshatriyas through the ritual transformations of *rajasuya* and *ashwamedha*. Texts of Dharma thus often interpolated social necessities with articulations of Dharma, thereby providing it a utilitarian face.

Such utilitarian articulation of Dharma can be seen explicitly during the later Vedic period in ancient India, specifically in relation to the Heterodoxies. Buddhism and Jainism, the ascetic and ethical systems were juxtaposed against the ritualistic brahmanical order. Karma for them was a liberating order and the Buddhist moderation was framed against the hierarchical order of Brahmanism. This moderation won for them a following that spanned across caste, class considerations, involving the *dasas* and *shudras* who were without any legal standing. Thus, the new faith provided an escape pod for the classless and casteless, there by augmenting its own presence against an established brahmanical structure. The gods of the brahmanical orders were ignored by the heterodoxies. This vacuum was filled by positing the importance of a few men such as the leaders and founders of the faiths. This was an internal dynamism in the operational aspect of dharma, where rejecting gods necessitated elevation of leaders as cult figures. The tradition of considering the founders as realized souls provided a hagiographical extension to them thereby balancing the austerity of the heterodoxies. This trend was furthered by the artistic traditions of Gandhara and Mathura schools where Buddha was invested with the *Mahapurusha lakshanas* thus deifying Him. While this was what Buddha had explicitly forbidden, absence of tangible, relatable forms after his death, for his followers, particularly in the areas outside of 'Buddhist belt' necessitated this initiation. His followers added two more jewels, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* to facilitate propagation of the

doctrine and commemoration of the founder, thus institutionalizing it.

The new heterodoxies, Jainism, Buddhism, Ajivikas and Charvakas successfully confronted the brahmanical orthodoxy forcefully through logic and rationality. While this helped contain the influence of the brahmanical order, the rivalry among these newly arrived protest Faiths created frictions among themselves. Thus for example the Buddhists condemnation of the extreme asceticism of Jainas and *Ajivikas* created an unbridgeable chasm between them. This emphasis on extreme ascetic practice also brought in a peculiar problem of survival and sustenance for the Clergy and for the various members of the Jaina order. For instance, the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas by virtue of their profession as well as because of the elevated social status did not seek entry into Buddhism and Jainism as much as the Vaishyas and the Shudras. This resulted in the mercantile class being encouraged to invest and support both the orders in general. Frugality in commercial dealings was promoted as a form of Piety for the mercantile class to obliterate the notion of greed. Thus, for the Vaishyas who were caught in the *jati* order, in a position where they were inferior to the first two but superior to the *shudra*, the new faiths facilitated an elevation of their social standing. The Buddhist Sangha and the Jaina monastery drew their followers from this stratum of the society. They conscientiously maintained close links with traders and artisanal class, where in they encouraged the laity to practice periodic retreats into the monastery to live as monks which in turn ensured continuous financial and technical support to the faith.

While these were strategies of survival, the new orders were unable to liberate themselves from patronizing stereotyped imagery in relation to women. In fact, the ethical heterodoxies articulations about women converged with that of brahmanical orthodoxy, where by all of them considered women to be inferior, inherently sinful and source of contamination. For instance Buddha felt a woman's place was at home and even if they were to become nuns their position would always be inferior to monks. The *Vinayapitaka* contains the episode of his aunt seeking entry

into the order and being consistently refused. Gautami asked "Pray Reverend Sir, let women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Tathagatha."<sup>1</sup> She was admitted into the order later with eight more harsh regulations. Buddha confided in Ananda that the life of the Sangha would be halved because of the entry of women for they "are uncontrollable, envious, greedy, weak in wisdom ... A woman's heart is haunted by stinginess ... jealousy and sensuality."<sup>2</sup> This was the case in the South Indian Bhakti tradition too. "The hagiographies and songs of the Bhaktins indicate that ... that there was no contradiction between the life of a householder and devotion to god for male saints where as the female body directly impinged on the path of the bhaktin."<sup>3</sup> Buddhist traditions also record that after the death of Buddha, the monks forced Ananda to confess to a variety of sins one of which was allowing the women devotees to view the body of Buddha who soiled it with their tears.

The understanding of Dharma as both a virtue and righteousness gets contested with such stance and its image as a confirmatory sphere gets further strengthened by debates about female salvation that preoccupied the minds and intellect of the Jainas for about a millennium and half between second to eighteenth century CE. The major points of controversy revolved around the argument of how essential it is to abjure clothes to be known as a true believer and how by virtue of her physiology a woman cannot practice nudity, hence she cannot claim to be a true believer and so she is ineligible to attain salvation. Thus salvation regarded as an inalienable right of every individual based on the individual's karma, becomes an act of charity and privilege in case of women representing Patriarchy. This

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922, 441.

<sup>2</sup>Cornelia D. Church, "Tempress, Wife, Nun: Women's Role in Early Buddhism," *Anima: An Experiential Journal* 1, 2 (1975), 55.

<sup>3</sup>Uma Chakravarthi, "The World of the Bhaktin in South Indian Traditions: The Body and Beyond," in *Women in Early Indian Societies*, ed., Kumkum Roy, New Delhi: Manohar, 1999, 299.

argument of the *Digambaras* was similar to the *teravada* position where it was argued that being reborn as a male was a prerequisite to attain salvation. In fact in none of the Buddha's life as Bodhisattva or even in his animal births was there a female Buddha. In this process, the egalitarian characteristic feature of Dharma gets contested and politicized.

### 3. Kings, Politics, and Dharma

These predicaments about Dharma and its various facets acquires added dimension with the emergence of stronger political structures in ancient India. By 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE formations of State had stabilized and the mahajanapada system was giving way to larger territorial conglomerations. Listed as empires and States by traditional historians, these political units had to explore ways of sustaining their hegemony over a diverse area. This is where Dharma was extensively used as a source for creating the necessary environment to legitimize power and authority. An interesting point was that this approach traversed across politics and involved social, economic, religious, and cultural organizations too. Such trends become more pronounced from the period of the Mauryan dynasty and its kings.

In the *Pauranic* texts Ashoka occurs merely as an undistinguished name from among the other Mauryan rulers. For the brahmanical tradition he was a patron of heretic sects such as the Ajivikas and hence unworthy of elaboration where in for the heretic sects he was their great supporter and backer. Thus, historical narratives become dependent on perceptions about polity by religious sects and their writers. Implicit in such contested portrayal lies the question of the relation between temporal and the sacred power. Such questions correspondingly become sharper in the context of discussing kings like Ashoka of the Mauryan family. The rock edicts of Ashoka reveal a layered execution of Dharma by the state and the emperor, where dharma is structured as a controlling mechanism. This interdependence between Dharma and Ashokan state is a constant in 3<sup>rd</sup> century history of India. It was this interdependence between the State and Religion that resulted in formation of exalted claims such as the ones made by

the Ceylonese Buddhist texts *Mahavamsa* and *Deepavamsa*. These texts claimed that a very violent Ashoka who was known as Chandashoka became Dharmashoka after proclaiming his allegiance to Buddhism. The King's association with the Sangha reaches fruition with the convening of the Third Buddhist Council in Pataliputra. The Theravada form of Buddhism gets authorized as the correct doctrine in this council thereby exhibiting trajectories of Legitimacy and Justification mutually. "Temporal power is legitimized by a religious assembly and the latter is in turn legitimized by the authority of the King."<sup>4</sup> While these are representations of the political face of Dharma, this period also witnessed the ambivalence in the persona of the ruler, which forced him to continuously balance between the pull of the faith and the needs of the administration, between his role as the 'State' and in his personal capacity as follower of the Dhamma.

The *Rummindei* Pillar Inscription records a visit of Ashoka to Lumbinivana.<sup>5</sup> The inscription records that while *Devanampiya Piyadasi* on his visit to this land of the Buddha, exempted the village from *bali*, the land tax, and reduced the *bhaga* to one tenth, he could not exempt the village from all taxes as that would damage the revenue of the state. This internal power play between Politics and Dharma is also evident in the 13<sup>th</sup> rock edict issued by Ashoka immediately after the Kalinga campaign. In the *Shahbazgarhi* version of the epigraph, he repents causing such extensive destruction and violence, abandons war, chooses peace but also issues a stern warning to forest people that punishment would be swift and harsh if they contested the authority of the ruler.<sup>6</sup> Such contradictions had led scholars like Thapar to assert that there need not be any linkages between the personal beliefs of a statesman and his public proclamations. Dharma was an ideological tool used by Ashoka to weld, consolidate his far flung

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<sup>4</sup>Romila Thapar, "Asoka and Buddhism as Reflected in the Ashokan Edicts," in *Cultural Pasts*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 425.

<sup>5</sup>E. Hultzch E, *Inscriptions of Asoka*, vol. 1, Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969.

<sup>6</sup>Hultzch, *Inscriptions of Asoka*.



empire and his patronage of non-orthodox faiths provided for him the much required support systems needed for governance.<sup>7</sup>

An interesting facet is the extent to which texts of dharma become sources for the construction of History of Indian subcontinent in ancient period. For instance, the later *Dharmasutras* and *Smritis* such as *Manusmriti* and *Yajnyavalkya-smriti* represent not just the theological discourses of the time but also hold within them varied historical knowledge. Either specific historical facts can be inferred after a careful analysis of different texts or the entire text can be analyzed by contextualizing it historically. Patrick Olivelle’s study of Manu *Dharmashastra* suggests that this was the work of an author who sought to vigorously defend the brahmanical privileges and re-establish the old alliances and power equation between the Kings and Brahmanas.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the *Puranas* and various *Upanishads* are considered as primary source materials for the construction of historical identities of the region from circa 200 BCE. The Mauryan empire disintegrated due to the revolt of *Pushyamitra*, the commander of the Mauryan army. The *Puranas* ascribe Pushyamitra’s lineage to the *Shunga* family. The Vedic texts also carry references about the *Shunga* teachers. The *Bruhadarnyaka Upanishad* mentions a teacher named *Shaungiputra* of the *Shunga* family. Panini, the grammarian, links the *Shungas* with the brahmana *Bharadvaja gotra*. The history of the *Satavahana* period, including the study of the genealogy of the rulers, has scant references in epigraphs in comparison to texts of dharma and hence is heavily dependent on the Pauranic writings. The *Matsya* and *Brahmanda Puranas* lists thirty kings who ruled for four hundred and sixty years, whereas the *Vayu Purana* lists around seventeen kings ruling for a combined period of three hundred years.

The *Dharmashastras* have an interesting position. While these texts provided a framework for the formation of structured

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<sup>7</sup>Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, 136-181.

<sup>8</sup>Patrick Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmashastra*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, 5-40.

society at specific points of time, they also are revelatory in nature, specifically when one has to map out the process of socio-cultural changes. The four *varnas*, *ashramas*, and the inter- and intra-*jati* dynamism, positions and role of women in society form the crux of these writings. The *Manusmriti* contains details about each of the castes, roles of people in each of them and position of women. Women are specially both praised and devilled. Women were not expected to possess an independent existence, disapproved widow remarriage and argued for lifelong strictures for widows. It is interesting to note that the non-dharmic textual evidences such as inscriptions and numismatics provide a contradictory image of this period. For example, royal women of the *Satavahana* family provided grants, held offices, administered areas, in their own right. The *Satavahana* kings assumed their mother's *gotra*, as is evident in their names such as *Gautamiputra Satakarni* and *Vasishtaputra Pulamavi*. Across the expanse of Indian history writings on dharma also become historical sources. The *Vishnu Purana* forms a strong basis for reconstructing the lineage of the Gupta dynasty between 300 to 600 CE. The *Vishnu Purana* provides details of the Gupta territorial expanse, by elaborately tracing the process of expansion of the kingdom through wars and conquests.

The accompanying result of such territorial expansion from the early periods of imperial authority was the tradition of assuming royal titles and insignias that have very strong connotation to their use of religion and dharma. Ashoka constantly referred to himself as *Devanampriya*, one who was loved by the gods.<sup>9</sup> The *Kushana* kings continuously used the title *Devaputra*, son of god. This appears to be a marked way of exalting the position of the king by ascribing a divine status to him. Historians believe this was in line with similar practices in other ancient empires. The Tamil *Brahmi* inscriptions corroborate the appropriation of religious emblems by the *Vendar* or the king. Thus the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas had specific emblems of Power – the tiger, bow and the fish representing the *Shaiva* and

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<sup>9</sup>Hultzch, *Inscriptions of Asoka*.

*Vaishnava* identities. The Chalukyas of Badami had the boar as their emblem which was deeply symbiotic to the *Varaha* incarnation of Vishnu. The Gupta kings assumed imperial titles such as *Parama-Bhattaraka*, *Parama-Bhagavata*, *Parameshwara* and *Parama-Daivata*, all of which were epithets suggesting that they were foremost worshippers of *Vasudeva Krishna*. Chola inscriptions refer to their rulers as *Perumal* or *Peruman adigal* meaning the great one. However, it is the indirect comparisons that are noteworthy. Rajaraja is remembered as *Ulakalanda Perumal* meaning the great one who measured the earth. While the explicit meaning refers to his orders of land survey for taxation, the implicit imagery compares him to Vishnu. “The rulers rooted themselves in the epic-pauranic traditions of Surya and *Chandravamshi* and crafted several origin myths for themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

An analysis of these titles reveals, however, a different understanding. These titles seem to suggest an attempt to appropriate a divine status to their temporal being and this idea strengthens through certain historical evidence. The Allahabad *prashasti* or pillar inscription describes Samudragupta as a god dwelling on earth, as Purusha, the Supreme Being, and as equal of the gods *Dhanada/Kubera*, *Varuna*, *Indra* and *Antaka/Yama*. Such assertions are interpreted by historians as attempts at justifying the imperial authority through dharma rather than as assertions of king’s divinity. The period from around 6<sup>th</sup> century CE also features the tradition of donative inscriptions for the maintenance of *chattras* or charitable feeding houses associated with religious establishments. However, it was the prevalence of devotional forms of rituals that had very intense political overtones that become the most conspicuous signs of intertwining of Dharma and political establishments and the overlapping of Dharma as an altruistic tradition with that of Religion as an institutionalized establishment of the materialistic world.

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<sup>10</sup>Kesavan Veluthat, *The Political Structure of Early Medieval South India*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993, 30.

The devotional forms, religious practices parallel the performance of Vedic rituals by the Kshatriyas or Kings. The major royal sacrifices, *Rajasuya*, *Vajapeya*, and *Ashwamedha* in existence from fifth century BCE intensified by sixth century CE. These were sacrifices performed in conjunction with priests, temple, and monastic establishments of the royal family and as specified in religious texts such as the *Purushasukta*. Of these performing the *ashwamedha* or the horse sacrifice was considered as indicative of the military might of the king and the sexuality and fertility of his chief queen.<sup>11</sup> Samudragupta and Kumaragupta, Vijayadevavarman of Shalankayana dynasty, Dharasena of Trikuta dynasty and Krishnavarman of Kadamba dynasty claimed to have performed the *ashwamedha* sacrifice "The Vakataka king Pravarasena I is described in inscriptions as having performed four horse sacrifices, as well as the *agnishtoma*, *aptoryama*, *ukthya*, *shodasin*, *brihaspatisava* and *vajapeya*."<sup>12</sup> The Pallava inscriptions in Tamilnadu refer to the performance of various *shrauta* sacrifices and some of the evidences also inform setting up of a sacrificial post by the brother in law of a Gupta ruler. All of such acts had deep political and social intonations.

By the seventh century CE the organizing of several *shrauta* sacrificial ceremonies by the kings were also accompanied by their support to popular sectarian cults and patronage to temples. In fact, this period stands for varied invocations and religious imagery as enunciated through the royal *prashastis* and diverse beneficiaries of royal gifts. It is also indicative of the fact that royal patronage was not channelized towards any one direction. Considered as religious toleration, it was also a sound political sense, because an expanding empire would often be venturing into peripheral areas, composed of communities outside of the mainstream and hence would be in need of as all encompassing and an inclusive strategy as possible to sustain its imperial hold.

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<sup>11</sup>Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual and Hospitality in Ancient India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 20-28.

<sup>12</sup>Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India, From the Stone Age to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century*, Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008, 386.

#### 4. Patrons and Patronage

The inter-textual linkages between Dharma/religion and Establishments in ancient India was not confined to State and its corresponding authority alone. On the contrary, there were socio-economic institutions that subscribed to dharma as a way of exoneration and texts of Dharma provided a larger moral compass, by designing a grid of viable practices and alternatives. The *Dharmashastras* prescribed a format for taxes, profits and interests on loans for trade, traders and the administration. The *Yajnyavalkyasmṛiti* considers that a 5% to 10% taxes on indigenous and foreign commodities respectively as the most feasible. Such frame works did impact the working patterns, beliefs and roles of traders and trade guilds in ancient India. Merchants as support structures for religion become a normative feature of the history of the subcontinent from third century BCE. This coincided with greater institutionalization of religious institutions.

Patronizing seminaries, monasteries, and places of prayer and worship was accepted as an act of Piety and a quest for validation of social status too. For example, a symbiotic link developed between mercantile guilds and Buddhist monasteries. As monasteries expanded, attracting community loyalties expressed through greater financial backing, there also arose the compulsion for them to engage with local communities. “Passing traders provided donations to monasteries and monasteries in turn provided service for traders and there emerged a reciprocal relationship between the monks and traders.”<sup>13</sup> This process was refined with donation becoming a tradition. The only variant was in relation to the specific religious ethos. The Hindus gifted images and financed the building of the shrines and its associated structures like tanks, halls and wells. In the case of Buddhist establishments grants received were primarily meant for stupas, chaityas, viharas and carving of images. Grants for Jainas were more for excavating caves for their ascetics.

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<sup>13</sup>Liu Xinri, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, 122 -123.

For all of the above traditions what was common was land grants and monetary investments, the interest from which would finance the day today management of the establishment. Most specifically land grants were considered as an integral part of the Dana and Dakshina tradition in ancient India. Translated as gifts, the donor/*Daata* was invariably from political, social elite and the recipients were the brahmana, the bard who composed songs of praise and men who demonstrated exemplary valor. These acts of giving gifts and grants are referred to in early texts of Dharmashastras and sutras. Several smriti literatures elaborate on the process of providing these grants, as well as also stipulate what objects should constitute these gifts. Among the various grants the most extensively practiced was the land grants to the Brahmanas known as *Brahmadeyas* which had significant political overtones. The *brahmadeyas* were settlements created by royal order and the rights of the recipient over the settlement was confirmed through royal decree. While the process was considered as very righteous, it was not entirely free from accruing other materialistic benefits. Thapar observes that three specific purposes for extensive gift making in early societies. While it served as a symbolic communion with the supernatural, it also had other purposes, wherein the donor and the recipient conferred status on each other and gifting was also a means of redistributing economic wealth.<sup>14</sup> The land granted as *Brahmadeya* was exempted from taxes on the condition that the recipient developed it into an established settlement. Thus for both fledgling and established kingdoms, such patronage to Brahmanas who enjoyed a higher degree of socio-religious status, was a way of establishing power and legitimacy. The Brahmanas were legitimisers of political authority by constructing the royal genealogies, performing several royal sacrifices such as the *ashwamedha* and *rajasuya*. Hence patronage to them through land grants was not deemed as loss of revenue to the state exchequer.

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<sup>14</sup>Romila Thapar, "Dana and Dakshina as Forms of Exchange" in *Cultural Pasts*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, 525.

In fact, it was considered as strategies of control, allegiance which was an accepted part of political operations.

The patronage to religious establishments ranged from political elites to laity. While for the former it was a path to greater individual glory, for the latter it was to reach the glory of the other world. For example, the coins of Kushana ruler Kanishka depict him as a Buddhist as well as patronizing other Indian, Greco-Roman and Iranian religious traditions. A more logical explanation to this is that royal policy had to be represented in such area of India like the North-West which was a confluence of diverse and fluid religious influences. Hence it made more sense for an external ruling house like the Kushanas to be proclaiming their allegiance to regional cults, languages and traditions. Thus, they patronized the Brahmanas, promoted the Gandhara School of Art, encouraged Sanskrit language.

It was this institutionalization of religious activity that initiated the tradition of permanent structures for the Immortal by the mortal. In turn, the mortal was immortalized through the erecting of the hero stones for the warriors whose death ranged from having occurred in battlefield to in cattle raids. Identified as martyrs these memorials were sanctified as objects of worship by the regional religious establishments and embellished as the heroic voice of the community thereby suppressing a virtual reality that “these hundreds of inscribed and un-inscribed memorial stones found in various parts of peninsular India reflect different kinds of violence and conflict in the society of their time.”<sup>15</sup> Known as *Viragals* they constitute an important part of the larger emotional and religious psyche of ancient and medieval southern India.

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<sup>15</sup>S. Settar, “Memorial Stones in South India,” in *Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origins, Significance and Variety*, eds. S. Settar and D. Gunther, Sontheimer Institute of Indian Art History, Karnatak University, Dharwad and South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany, 1982, 285.

## 5. Conclusion

Interpretations of ancient and early medieval Indian history have swung into extremes. The Oriental tradition of history writing by William Jones and others created the aura of the 'Golden Age' in India's past that in turn created myths of extreme righteousness as the guiding principle for all institutions. While the arguments of righteousness cannot be denied, given the extraordinary emphasis to it in all scriptures and *smritis*, an uncritical acceptance of the same would deprive an understanding of the complex and heterogeneous linkages that existed between various political, religious, economic, and cultural institutions. Urbanization, taxation, emergence of specialized crafts and trades, architectural trends, political prioritizations, all were inexplicably linked in a complex and variegated manner with religion, dharma, monasteries, seminaries, temples, and priests, thereby creating a vast framework of institutionalized structures. The social fabric in ancient and early medieval Indian subcontinent was extensively heterogeneous and diverse. Alongside the indigenous population was also the entry of communities, outside of the subcontinent, all of whom had to be welded into a larger workable and viable whole. This necessitated the invention of certain parameters that would bind the varied fragments without stifling their essential individual compositions. It was this need that propelled various institutions to adapt the concept of Righteousness/Dharma, to sustain, expand, regulate their functions into a seamless grid.

While the aim of this paper is to understand this vast network, it by no means undermines the spiritual and the pious facets of the Beliefs and Believers. On the contrary there is a deep sense of awe and respect for the strength of the faiths and the faithful for the inexplicable energy that drove them into structuring institutions of such magnitude. However it is also true that a one-dimensional study of History as a Given would deprive a more comprehensive understanding of various perspectives that looks into aspects of political flux, different bases of legitimation, institutionalization of religious sects and validation of social and political status.