

Book review

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McGovern, Nathan: The Snake and the Mongoose: The Emergence of Identity in Early Indian Religion. New York: Oxford University Press 2019. 313 pages. ISBN 9780190640798.

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The purpose of this monograph, based on the author's doctoral thesis (McGovern 2013), is to critique a received "metahistorical" model for interpreting the origins of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, which "implicitly posits an essential characteristic" that explains the development of the three traditions throughout history: "an intrinsic dichotomy between the 'Brahmanical' and the 'non-Brahmanical'" (2019: 3–4).

The model is based on the narrative of a conflict between two categories of philosophical-religious person in ancient India: *brāhmaṇa* and *śramaṇa*. *Brāhmaṇas* were householders who were born into the priestly class (*brāhmaṇa*), educated in the *Vedas*, and represented Brahmanism. *Śramaṇas* were non-Brahmanic celibate ascetics – the leaders of renunciant communities, like Śākyamuni, Mahāvīra, and Gośāla, and their followers – who rejected the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition and created "the *śramaṇa* traditions": Buddhism, Jainism, and Ājīvikism. Hinduism developed from orthodox Brahmanism, but only after Brahmanism had absorbed certain *śramaṇic* elements, including the concept of *saṃsāra* and the practice of renunciation/asceticism for liberation, which were alien to Brahmanism (cp. Bronkhorst 2007).

The narrative derives in part from interpretations of texts that date from a century or more after Śākyamuni, Mahāvīra, and Gośāla had passed away. Ancient Greek authors (late 4th century BCE onwards) mention *brāhmaṇas* (*brakhmanas*) and *śramaṇas* (*sarmanai*, *samanaioi*, *garmanas*) as two distinct groups of "philosophers" (*philosophoi*) or "naked wise men" (*gymnosophistai*). The inscriptions of king Aśoka (3rd century BCE) designate as *brāhmaṇa* and *śramaṇa* (in Middle Indo-Aryan = MIA) those who are worthy of receiving gifts, without indicating an opposition between them. Some scholars have claimed that already in ancient times the antagonism between *brāhmaṇas* and *śramaṇas* was likened to the natural enmity between the snake and the mongoose,¹ but McGovern points out that although Patañjali (2nd century BCE) gives *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa* as an example of a Pāṇinian 'oppositional compound' (*virodha-dvandva*), it is only much later (7th century CE) that grammarians identify 'snake and mongoose' (*ahi-nakula*) as a compound of that kind. The compound *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa* and the phrase "*śramaṇa* and/or *brāhmaṇa*" appear in early Buddhist and Jaina literature, but often as a single class of ascetics/philosophers, against which one's own identity can be constructed, rather than as two groups opposed to one another. McGovern argues that the formula "*brāhmaṇa* and *śramaṇa*" was wide enough to include all those whom one wished to criticise: those who saw themselves as both *brāhmaṇa* and *śramaṇa*, and those who saw themselves as *brāhmaṇa* only (2019: 131–132).

¹ "An important feature of the heterodox texts" is the use of the "expression *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa* to denote the two opposing religious systems [...]. While the *śramaṇas* were against Vedic tradition and were upholders of renunciation, the *brāhmaṇas* were upholders of the Vedic tradition and the householder status. This is evident in [...] Patañjali's use of the example of *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa* to illustrate an 'antagonistic compound' where he remarks that the opposition of the two was eternal like that of the snake and the mongoose" (Chakravarti 1983: 72–73). In Thapar's collection of articles we find this claim several times (2000: 223–224, 423, 460, 848, 918, 967). Cp. Flood 1996: 82.

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Previous studies have often noted that the ideal renouncer, the celibate mendicant monk, is called *brāhmaṇa* in early Buddhist and Jaina literature. McGovern argues that we should not assume, as do for example Gombrich (2006: 20) and Bailey & Mabbett (2003: 197, 200), that the renouncers simply usurped or borrowed the epithet from “the real” *brāhmaṇas*, those who belong to the priestly class. The *śramaṇa* is defined by his ascetic ‘toil, exhaustion, exertion’ (*śrama*), not by opposition to the *brāhmaṇa* (2019: 131). Although the post-Vedic *Dharmasūtras* do not use the term *śramaṇa*, they apply the term *āśrama* ‘place of *śrama*’ to the *brāhmaṇa*’s lifestyle (later often as the four successive stages in life). The *Aṭṭhakavagga*, considered to be one of the earliest Buddhist texts, criticises *śramaṇas* and identifies the ideal person as a *brāhmaṇa* (2019: 130–131). Thus, the conflict was not between *brāhmaṇas* and *śramaṇas*, but over the contested category *brāhmaṇa* (2019: 217); “the earliest identity we find articulated by the Buddhists and Jains is a self-consciously Brahmanical identity.” (2019: 99, cp. 87)

Whereas the oldest Buddhist texts identify with the earlier Brahmanic tradition, we see “an increasingly antagonistic position in the later literature.” (2019: 22) Prose passages, which frame ascetic poetry, explain as responses to householder-*brāhmaṇas* the stanzas that call the perfect mendicant renouncer a *brāhmaṇa*. In encounter-dialogues, the conflict between the categories *śramaṇa* (represented by Śākyamuni) and *brāhmaṇa* (represented by the interlocutor, a householder-*brāhmaṇa*) is unintentionally normalised by the Buddhist authors (McGovern 2019: 36). By also referring to householder-*brāhmaṇas* as *brāhmaṇas*, Buddhist and Jaina ascetics provided them with “free publicity”; the proponents of Neo-Brahmanism did not do the same for the radical ascetics, but rather ignored them (2019: 196). After some time, the Buddhist and Jaina monks stopped referring to themselves and their ideal (*buddha*, *jina*, *arhant*) as *brāhmaṇa*, and Brahmanism won the term for itself.

McGovern argues that “we should abandon the metahistorical assumption of an intrinsic dichotomy between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical in Indian religions, as is implied by the usual narrative of the *śramaṇa* movements having arisen in opposition to a preexisting Brahmanism” (2019: 4). Rather, the three traditions “emerged out of a period of dialectical identity formation” (2019: 26). Brahmanic orthodoxy “was still in a state of flux at the time that Buddhism arose” (2019: 52). The Brahmanism of the *Dharmasūtras*, which McGovern calls “Neo-Brahmanism” (inspired by the term “New Brahmanism” in Bronkhorst 2011), is a product of the post-Vedic period; it is innovative and “reactionary”, rather than old and “conservative” (2019: 23). Neo-Brahmanism introduces new central concepts: the *varṇa*-system, according to which *brāhmaṇa*-status is based on birth; and the *āśrama*-system, according to which being a married householder is the most important of four allowed lifestyles for a *brāhmaṇa*, or even the only acceptable lifestyle, which is “a polemic against Buddhists, Jains, and other proponents of celibate Brahmanhood” (2019: 140; cp. 222). However, by referring to ascetic lifestyles, the *Dharmasūtras* “gave them an implicit legitimacy, even when [...] they explicitly rejected them.” (2019: 216) Thus, the householder-supremacists succeeded in arrogating the category *brāhmaṇa* for themselves, but “failed to reject *śramaṇic* ideals of renunciation” (2019: 5).

Altogether, *The Snake and the Mongoose* is an important contribution to the study of “the *śramaṇa* movement” and the emergence of Buddhist, Jaina, and Brahmanic identities. It joins other monographs that revise key terms and institutions in ancient India, such as *āśrama* (Olivelle 1993), *gr̥hastha* (Olivelle ed. 2019), and *vrātya* (see af Edholm 2017). The study does three important things. It (1) identifies a model in previous studies, places it in a context, and critiques it; (2) looks at how the terms *śramaṇa* and *brāhmaṇa* are actually used in (a selection of) early texts; and (3) provides an alternative to both the notion that renunciation began as a revolt against a pre-existing orthodox Brahmanism (“Lutheran model”), and the notion that the renunciant traditions originated in a separate non-Vedic/Brahmanic culture (Bronkhorst 2007 etc.). McGovern suggests that the renunciant tradi-

tions go back to an avant-garde, which was rooted in the Vedic tradition (2019: 219–221).² This idea of a continuum, the Vedic-Brahmanic background of the renunciant traditions, and Buddhism and Jainism as “Brahmanisms” (2019: 86), is essentially not new, but McGovern presents it in a new way.

I will now make a few remarks that do not concern the main arguments of the book.

McGovern uses the anglicised “Brahman” instead of *brāhmaṇa*, in order to avoid too many italicized foreign words (2019: 37), yet he writes “*Brahman*”, as if it was a foreign word, when referring to the category/word *brāhmaṇa*, and he sometimes writes “*brāhmaṇa*” when referring to it as a term/word, which can be a bit confusing. Also, “Brahman/*Brahman*” becomes almost indistinguishable from *brāhmaṇ* and from *brahmán*, which overlaps semantically with *brāhmaṇa* but is rarely used about the ideal ascetic.³ Further, if one of the points of the study is to look at the category *brāhmaṇa* as neutrally as possible, would it not be better to leave it as it is, free from “the historical baggage that the word *Brahman* has acquired” (2019: 93, cp. 24)? And, lastly, to write “*śramaṇa* and *brāhmaṇa*”, instead of “*śramaṇa* and Brahman”, makes more obvious the assonance and/or homoioteleuton, which is probably one of the reasons for the frequent use of *śramaṇa* (MIA *samaṇa*) and *brāhmaṇa* (MIA *brāhmaṇa*, *māhaṇa*, *bambhaṇa*, **bāhaṇa*) in phrases and as a compound (cp. “*sukha* and *duḥkha*”), rather than, for example, “*bhikṣu* and *brāhmaṇa*”. For these reasons, I think that it would have been better to retain the term *brāhmaṇa* (/MIA equivalents).

McGovern argues that *brāhmaṇa*-status was originally based on the practice of *brahmacarya*, i.e. celibacy, especially as part of a lifestyle of purity, during a longer period of Vedic study or as a renunciant, wherefore we should take seriously the Buddhist and Jaina ascetics’ claim to be *brāhmaṇas* and to practise *brahmacarya* (2019: 85–112). He discusses some passages on *brahmacarya* in the Vedic *Samhitās*, to show the similarities between the practice of the Vedic *brahmacārin* and that of the Buddhist or Jaina monk. That *brahmacarya* is the basis of *brāhmaṇa*-status is indeed the view in, for example, the following stanzas in ascetic literature, which are not cited by McGovern: *Suttanipāṭa* 655, *Theragāthā* 631, *Majjhimanikāya* 98.62 (“by *tapas*, *brahmacarya*, restraint, and taming [of oneself], one is a *brāhmaṇa*”), *Dhammapada* 142 (“a *brahmacārin*, having laid down violence towards all beings, he is a *brāhmaṇa*”); *Uttarajjhayaṇa* 25.32 (“by *brahmacarya* one is a *brāhmaṇa*”); *Mahābhārata* 12.213.18 (“a *brahmacārin* with defeated senses, [...] a *brāhmaṇa*, should stick to the *vratas*”), *Hari-vaṃśa* 35.37, and *Matsyapurāṇa* 175.37 (“by *brahmacarya* is the *brāhmaṇa*hood of a *brāhmaṇa* [realised]”).⁴ When discussing *brāhmaṇa* and *brahmacarya* it would also be relevant to compare the use of other *brahma*-terms, such as *brahma-√bhū* and *brahmaloka*, in ascetic and Vedic texts (Pontillo & Neri 2014).

McGovern writes that the early Buddhist and Jaina literature (he refers mainly to *Aṭṭhakavagga*, *Pārāyaṇavagga*, *Āyāra*, and *Sūyagada*) “is replete with claims that the founder of the respective monastic community [...], as well as monks and nuns who successfully follow his example in attaining liberation”, are *brāhmaṇas* (2019: 85, my emphasis). In a footnote he adds: “Since most early Jain and Buddhist texts are written with an assumed audience of male monastics”, *brāhmaṇa* “is usually used in the masculine gender when referring to the ideal person”, and he refers to *Therīgāthā* 290 as an exception that calls a nun “*brāhmaṇa*” (2019: 249). But this seems to be a misunderstanding, since the stanza (and its parallel, stanza 251, not mentioned by McGovern) refers to a man who used to be merely a *brahmabandhu* (*brahma*-kinsman, i.e. one belonging to the *brāhmaṇ*-class), but now, having

2 Cp. McGovern 2021: 58: In the Vedic thought-world “there was a clear intellectual development leading to the innovations associated with the rise of Buddhism and Jainism.” Around the 5th century BCE we find “a single Brahmanical field characterized by a range of ideologically inflected modes of praxis”, rather than two opposing traditions.

3 In *Suttanipāṭa* 519 the ideal person, the one who has passed beyond *saṃsāra*, is a *brahmán* (*brahmā*) (McGovern 2019: 171). In *Pārāyaṇavagga* 5 Dhotaka refers to the Buddha as *brāhmaṇa* and *brahmán* (2019: 96). In Vedic texts *brahmán* is one who has higher knowledge, the priest who oversees the ritual.

4 *Brāhmaṇa* is, of course, not the only epithet associated with *brahmacarya* in ascetic poetry.

gone to the three refuges, and being one with triple *vidyā*, accomplished in *veda*, learned, and a *snātaka* (Vedic terminology, here used for the Buddhist ideal person), he is a *brāhmaṇa* (see Norman 1971, in McGovern's bibliography). In contrast to how the term *brāhmaṇa* is applied to the male ascetic in *Theragāthā* (140, 221, 554, 631, 745, 747, 751, 948) and *Therīgāthā* (64, 251, 290), the feminine form *brāhmaṇī* is not used of a woman by virtue of her being an ascetic. *Brāhmaṇī* only means that she is from a family of the *brāhmaṇ*-class (313, 323f.). Likewise, in the early Jaina texts, *brāhmaṇa* appears only in masculine form (as do *muni*, *śramaṇa* etc.). Therefore, it seems to me that the ideal person is given the masculine epithet *brāhmaṇa* (and *muni*, *ṛṣi*, *arhant* etc.) not simply because the early Buddhist and Jaina *gāthā*-texts are addressed primarily to monks, but because the basic ideal – which is shared by the early Buddhist, Jaina, and Brahmanic traditions – likely originates in an all-male ascetic milieu, prior to the introduction of nuns (af Edholm 2024: chapter 7).

Although the author states that *samaṇa* is simply the MIA form of Sanskrit *śramaṇa* (2019: 37), which is probably etymologically correct, it is interesting to note that the Pāli and Ardhamāgadhī verses derive *samaṇa* not from $\sqrt{\text{śram}}$ 'toil, strive, become exhausted' (the verbal root behind *śramaṇa* and *āśrama*), but from $\sqrt{\text{sam}}$ 'be calm, tranquil, at peace' (cp. 2019: 171) or *sama* 'same, equanimous, impartial' – terms with more positive meaning (tranquillity or impartiality) than $\sqrt{\text{śram}}$ (toil, exhaustion) (Negribs 2022: 132–134; af Edholm 2024: chapter 5).

McGovern bases his arguments on the use of *brāhmaṇa*, *śramaṇa*, and a few other epithets in a selection of text-passages, rather than on a thorough investigation of terminology in a larger source-material. Therefore, it is desirable that future studies explore systematically the use of these and other terms in individual texts (cp. Lee 2024 on the *Aṭṭhakavagga*/*Arthapada*) as well as in larger textual corpora. In my study of a type of non-narrative ascetic poetry that characterises the *Khagga-visāṇa*- and *Muni-suttas* in *Suttanipāṭa*, for example, I found that, on the basis of more than 1500 stanzas in the *Suttapiṭaka*, the epithets *bhikṣu*, *brāhmaṇa*, and *muni* are overall much more frequently used than *śramaṇa* when describing the ideal person/monk (af Edholm 2024: chapter 5).

Jaina texts receive considerably less attention in the book than Buddhist and Brahmanic texts. The author acknowledges this, but states that the earliest Jaina literature is slightly later than the earliest Buddhist literature and thus is less useful for his purpose (2019: 62). Even if this is the case, which is not beyond dispute, the study could have benefited from more references to the Jaina material.

Finally, it would have been more practical to have the footnotes at the bottom of each page, instead of at the end of the book.

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