

## Historical and Contemporary South Asian Religions

Knut A. Jacobsen

Historical and contemporary South Asian religions are studied by a number of different academic disciplines globally and constitute vivid and flourishing fields of critical research. There are good reasons for this great worldwide academic interest in South Asian religious traditions. Several of the world's largest religions originated in South Asia and these religions have had, and continue to have, a significant impact on the cultural and social formations not only in South Asia, but also in large parts of Asia, and increasingly also in the rest of the world. A significant percentage of humanity lives in areas dominated by them. Moreover, South Asian religions are extremely complex, with numerous regional forms and sub-traditions. They are continuously changing, and they are part of dynamic and intricate cultures and societies, which they influence and are influenced by. They have an impact on most areas of human life such as settlement patterns, work, diet, marriage, knowledge traditions, festivals, calendars, art, music, literature and languages, different forms of social organization, economy, law, politics, national identities, and more. Many of these areas and their complexities have attracted extensive academic interest. In general, religious practices are localized, but the strong relationship between religions and nation states and the use of religion for political power has been a striking feature of religion in South Asia during the last decades.

### **Religions in South Asia**

Hinduism and Buddhism are two of the world's largest religious traditions in terms of the number of people identifying or being identified with them, and South Asia is the geographical origin also of two other important religions, although much smaller in terms of numbers of people, Jainism and Sikhism. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism have ancient roots. Mahāvīra and Buddha lived between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, and the earliest part of the Veda, which is the textual foundation of the early Brahmanical tradition, is one thousand years older, dated as early as c. 1500 BCE. The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nānak, lived from 1469–1539 and this religion's early development in northwest India was mostly during the Mughal Empire (founded in 1526). While the mosaic of traditions today labelled as Hinduism are the largest of the South Asian religions, Buddhism was a dominant

religion for periods in early Indian history and has had a great impact on the Indian civilization. Jainism and Sikhism are smaller religions, but they have for periods dominated or greatly influenced some regions in South Asia. In addition, South Asia was for many hundreds of years, from the thirteenth century, a centre of the Islamic civilization, and Islam continues to dominate large parts of South Asia. Christianity has a longer presence in South Asia than in most European countries and its followers are minorities in all nations, although they form majorities in some of the states of northeast India (Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya). Other religions with a very minor, but continuous presence here are Judaism and Zoroastrianism, whose followers in India are called Parsis. Buddhism spread early on to other areas of Asia, especially eastern and northern Asia, and Hinduism had a significant presence in historical Southeast Asia. Both Buddhism and Hinduism have over the last two hundred years also gained a large global presence because of migration, conversions, and adoptions of ideas and practices derived from Buddhism and Hinduism, such as meditation and yoga.

The names of the different South Asian religions, especially ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’ refer to a plurality of traditions and practices, and ‘Hinduism’ above all is better considered a label for an enormous mosaic of religious traditions and practices without a centre, a label for a collection of regional religious traditions, ritual practices, and religious narratives and views (see Jacobsen 2009). Religious traditions have localized forms wherever they are present. Many such localized practices have over time been identified with Hinduism without losing their localized forms. Other and new practices and interpretations have also been added. However, all South Asian religions are comprised of multiple traditions and they are divided by different interpretations. The various religions have separate textual traditions, and in some cases, such as in Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, they are associated with separate founding figures, Buddhism with *buddhas*, Jainism with *tīrthāṅkaras*, and Sikhism with their ten historical human gurus and their living guru, the book *Gurū Granth*. However, in South Asian history, sacred figures, teachers, temples, sacred sites, and festivals have historically attracted devotees across traditions (see the chapter in this volume by Kumar). Ritual clients have in many cases been pragmatic in their attitudes and have been more interested in ritual results than religious doctrines and identities. Although such attitudes have perhaps not always been consistent across the traditions, these sorts of pragmatic attitudes have in modern South Asia increasingly been challenged by identity politics and majoritarian nationalism.

South Asian religions refer to religions of South Asian origin as well as religions of non-South Asian origin present in South Asia. One forerunner of Hinduism, the Vedic religion, arrived with people from outside the region who also brought Indo-European languages to South Asia (see the chapter by C. Lopez in this volume). The speakers of Vedic Sanskrit, which was the language of the Veda, came originally as pastoralist migrants from Central Asia and introduced the Indo-European language to India. While this historical fact first became known through the study of languages, it has received firm support also from genetic research (Joseph 2018). The earliest sacred texts of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions were composed in Indo-European languages (in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit languages). South Asia is a centre for the preservation of religious traditions with a number of traditions going back several thousand years. However, religion in the early period probably developed in different geographical centres and did not arise from a single source or a single region (for a discussion of this point, see the chapters by Bronkhorst and McGovern in this volume). Christianity and Islam arrived much later, but did develop characteristic South Asian religious forms.

Although the labels Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on, which are used in this volume, are modern labels for relatively plural and heterogeneous religious traditions with many different schools and regional and local forms and institutions, their invention had some influence on Western constructions of knowledge and the labels have also had a significant influence on religious movements in South Asia. The term Hinduism has been accepted by many Hindus but other terms have also been promoted, such as *sanātana dharma*, Indic traditions, and Dharma traditions. The Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka used to call their religion Caiva (Śaiva) but are now increasingly using the term Hindu. Notable is their use of the term Hindu for their temple organizations in their global diasporas, which illustrates the success of the modern terms Hinduism and Hindu religion. The modern concepts of Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. gave rise also to new movements that took advantage of the modern terms in order to invent new traditions. A famous Indian case is Navayana Buddhism, created by B. R. Ambedkar (see the chapter by Chatterjee in this volume), which was influenced by the creation of Modern Buddhism, a form of Buddhism understood as different from the religious practices and teachings of contemporary Buddhist countries and identified instead with new interpretations of early Buddhism. The creation of Modern Buddhism also had an enormous influence on Sri Lanka, with Dharmapala as the main partisan, and here it led to a Buddhist revival and furthermore to political and militant Buddhist nationalism (Seneviratne 1999, and see the

chapter by Schalk in this volume). Hindu nationalism was promoted by V. D. Savarkar, who popularized the concept of *Hindutva*. Savarkar was an atheist and advocated a Hindu political identity and Hindu culture, and not Hinduism per se. However, in the Hindu nationalist political movement that has unfolded especially in the last thirty years in India and among Indian Hindus settled abroad, Hinduism has become a main ingredient in the ideology, and increasingly there has been an attempt to make equal Hinduism and the *Hindutva* political agenda.

### **South Asian Nations**

The geographical region of South Asia is currently (2020) divided into seven nations and includes the country of India and six of its neighbouring countries, Pakistan in the west, Bangladesh in the east, Nepal and Bhutan in the north and the island nations of Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the south.<sup>1</sup> The name India was before 1947 used for a larger geographical area than the current Indian nation state and included also the areas of today's Pakistan and Bangladesh. Consequently, India in contemporary usage can refer both to the nation state of India and to the historical pre-1947 larger geographical area of the Indian civilization. However, the term South Asia is now commonly used for this larger geographical area to distinguish it from the modern nation state of India, and since South Asia includes also Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, it is a mistake to call all pre-1947 South Asians Indians as is sometimes done, as Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives were not part of pre-1947 India.

One characteristic of contemporary South Asia is the close connections of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam to the nation states and their ideological power. These religions have probably most often been part of structures of power but the emergence of the nation as a social form produced radical changes in South Asia. The institution of the modern nation state influenced the contemporary developments of these religions, and religions have become increasingly politicized and politics religionized (see the chapters by Chatterjee, Nanda, Boivin, Riaz, Schalk, Gellner and Letizia, and Naseem in this volume). This does not at all mean that all religious life has been politicized. Ritual food and festival traditions continue to be celebrated in traditional ways (see the chapter by Hüsken), but food has also a symbolic social significance as the marker of purity and pollution, and as religious identity. However, it is striking that many of the seven South Asian nation states promote strong religious identities and connect their foundation as well as their history and identity to religion. The dominant

majority religions in the South Asian nations are Hinduism (in India and Nepal), Islam (in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives) and Buddhism (in Sri Lanka and Bhutan), and the most significant minority religions are Sikhism, Christianity, and Jainism. However, notably, all the majority religions are also minority religions in other South Asian countries. These religions, therefore, which are used to dominate citizens in some countries, are at the same time voices of opposition and even victims of persecution in other countries. So while Hindus are dominant in India and a majority in Nepal, they are minorities in the other countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. In South Asia, religions have been used for establishing nations and also for creating political majorities. Since religions promote obedience to and ideas of dependence on supreme divine powers, they may function to legitimate state and ideological power, and to some degree as useful tools for creating and maintaining social stability supported by these majorities. Religion is also about identity and it is notable that the South Asian nations, which are characterized by enormous diversity, including religious diversity, have to such a large degree used religion as a tool for creating nations and majorities within these nations. Accordingly, two nations have made Buddhism an essential part of the national identity of the country (Sri Lanka, Bhutan) and state in their constitutions that they are based on Buddhism. Three nations have adopted Islam as national ideologies and state in their constitutions that they are based on the principles of Islam (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives). The last two have Hindu majorities (India and Nepal) and although these two nations both have secular constitutions, Nepal was until a few years back the only Hindu kingdom in the world, and India is currently undergoing a quite dramatic Hinduization process under the political rule of the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Perhaps the use of religion in this way in the South Asian nations is also a function of their enormous diversity. Religions do give legitimation of power. However, such means of legitimation create tensions between religious majorities and minorities, and such tensions will probably remain part of the developments, with global and international events and trends also influencing the situation.

The national borders in South Asia are recent inventions, and religious traditions therefore naturally cross them. The Īlam Tamils (Sri Lankan Tamils originating from the northern areas), the Hill Country Tamils of Sri Lanka, and the Tamils of India have a common language and follow similar Tamil religious traditions. The Bengali Hindus live in both the Indian state of West Bengal as a majority, and in the nation of Bangladesh as a minority, and both follow Bengali religious traditions. Punjab was divided between Pakistan and India,

which meant that the religious centres of the Sikhs became divided between two nation states, with almost all the Sikhs living in India, and with the loss of the memory of a shared past of India and Pakistan (Virdee 2016). The historical Greater Punjab is different from the Indian state of Punjab. In this volume there are separate texts on the religious developments for each of the different South Asia nations. There are no separate texts for the many regions, but Chapter 13 by Anne Murphy analyses the historical underpinnings of the Sikh connection to Punjab. Even though religion in India, and also in some other South Asian nations, is better understood as collections of regional traditions, we have not included texts on all the Indian regions or used the regional approaches, which would be more appropriate for an encyclopaedic methodology that aims to cover all aspects.<sup>2</sup> Instead, in this volume, in the case of India, there are a number of essays dealing with different research topics, both historical and contemporary, and different religions.

The term South Asia is both geographical and political and perhaps also cultural. Exactly what these cultural commonalities are, which have been created by these connections, is difficult to establish (Jacobsen and Kumar 2004: ix). One reason for the difficulty of identifying commonalities is that South Asia is one of the most diverse regions in the world in terms of ethnicity, language, and also religion. In her essay in the volume, Chapter 24 on South Asian festivals, Ute Hüsken notes that all South Asian communities are locally specific, and so are their festivals, as can be seen from the importance of a specific festival food for individual participants. The celebrations of local communities tell us about their local groundedness and dynamics, she argues. The interest of Hindu nationalism in the larger India has perhaps also made any search for a commonality specific to “South Asia” both intellectually and politically problematic. Historically South Asia has not been dominated by any single religion. On the contrary, throughout history different religions have been culturally and politically dominant in South Asia, and South Asia has been shaped by a plurality of traditions, and the distribution of these religions today is quite different from some earlier periods.

### **Historical South Asian Religions: Formative Developments**

The essays of this Handbook exemplify critical research on a number of important aspects of South Asian religions and the volume is divided into two main parts, “Historical South Asian Religions” and “Contemporary South Asian Religions”.

The first part analyses the early and formative developments of religions in South Asia, how some dominant practices and ideas became established and how some changes and transformations occurred. The essays focus on the current research on the Veda; the rise of classical Brahmanism and the Brahman identity in the early period; *dharma* as the dominant concept; religion and rationality; how *pūjā* became the main Hindu ritual; how pilgrimage became an integral part of the Brahmanical Hindu tradition; the place of historical Nepal and Sri Lanka in the history of South Asian religions; Nāth yoga and yogīs; rise of Vaiṣṇava bhakti; Aurangzeb, and Islam in India; and Sikhism and the territorialization of Sikh history.

The first essays of Part I deal with some early formative developments. For the early Brahmanical Sanskrit tradition the Veda was the textual foundation, preserved for a long time only in an oral form, and the Veda has remained significant as a textual category considered to be non-human (*apauruṣeya*) in origin throughout the history of the Hindu traditions. In Chapter 1, Carlos Lopez notes that the Veda is the earliest accessible literature from South Asia and that there have been continuous attempts to extend its authority by denoting other texts, both post-Vedic compositions in Sanskrit as well as in vernacular languages, as additional or other Vedas. Lopez points out that *Veda* has “functioned as an indigenous, multi-valent, and expansive category to order the complex cultural, linguistic, political, and social diversity of South Asia”. In the post-Vedic period, the Veda was comprehended in two textual categories, *śruti* and *smṛti*. *Śruti* was originally only the Saṃhitā part of each Veda, but was expanded to include Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads, and *smṛti* texts, which derived their authority from the Veda, included Vedāṅgas, Epics, Dharmaśāstras, and Purāṇas. Continuous research on the Veda has made more knowledge available on this early period of South Asian history and Carlo Lopez presents some of the current knowledge.

The second chapter analyses the rise of classical Brahmanism, which happened after the Vedic sacrificial tradition had been challenged by Buddhism and other *śramaṇa* traditions. Johannes Bronkhorst notes that from the Brahmanical point of view, the Brahmans considered themselves to always have been at the top of the social hierarchy. Bronkhorst shows, based on a critical analysis of the early history that this claim, which is so essential for the Hindu Brahmanical ideology, is not historically correct. His essay analyses the Brahmanical response to the ending of the Vedic political order, caused by a succession of political events, which brought an end to the Vedic sacrificial tradition. Subsequently, with the support of the Śuṅga King Puṣyamitra, a new form of Brahmanism was invented, which emphasized

especially smaller, individual rites of purity and knowledge of the Veda, and it borrowed a number of elements from the culture of Greater Magadha. This form of Brahmanism spread all over South Asia and beyond. Bronkhorst's chapter describes and analyses this early formative development.

Chapter 3 by Nathan McGovern is also about the early formative development, and the emergence of those identities that we today recognize as Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain. He is interested in the references to such terms as Brahman, *śramaṇa*, Nigantha (Jainism), Ājīvika, and Sakyaputtiya (Buddhism) in early Indian religion and distinguishes between two approaches in understanding early South Asian religion, explaining religious change as an internal dynamic of a single tradition ("orthogenetic approach"), and describing religious change in terms of an indigenous substratum ("substratal approach"). McGovern attempts an orthogenetic approach and criticizes the assumption of a metahistorical dichotomy or opposition between *śramaṇa* and Brahman. He argues that the opposition between *śramaṇa* and Brahman emerged over time and that various groups contested the appellation Brahman. McGovern argues in his chapter that "reactionary householder Brahmins undertook a programme, through the twin ideological tools of *varṇa* and *āśrama*, to invalidate ascetic (*śramaṇa*) lifestyles and arrogate the title Brahman to themselves".

In Chapter 4, David Brick and Donald R. Davis give an account of the early developments of the single most important term in classical South Asian religions, *dharma*. They show that *dharma* was a marginal concept in Vedic religion. This goes against the view commonly held in contemporary Hinduism and also older scholarship. This older scholarly belief originated in the Mīmāṃsā view of *dharma*, they argue. The authors show that the rise to prominence of the concept of *dharma* in Hindu traditions was not a natural or gradual cultural evolution from Vedic religion, but was caused by the rise of Buddhism and non-Brahmanical ("heterodox") religious traditions and the reign of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka. They explain that it was non-Brahmanical groups, especially Buddhists, who made *dharma* the central term before it had become a main term in Brahmanical Hinduism. Aśoka expressed his worldview in terms of *dharma* and this led some Brahmins to attempt to frame their own religion also in terms of *dharma*. A whole genre of literature, the *Dharmaśāstras*, was produced for this purpose. David Brick and Donald R. Davis analyse the concept of *dharma* and its sacred foundation in the *Dharmaśāstras* and the Hindu Epics and detail the development of *dharma* from ritual to social customs and the law of the king and his state.



In Chapter 5, Sthaneshwar Timalisina investigates the place of reason in South Asian religions, especially in the Hindu traditions, and focuses on *dharma* in Mīmāṃsā and Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. He investigates interpretations of *dharma* as engagement (*pravṛtti*) and detachment (*nivṛtti*). *Pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are the two modes of *dharma* as well as of truth (*satya*), argues Timalisina. He investigates how Hinduism “as *dharma* grounds reasoning in these two apparently conflicting domains” and shows in his detailed investigation of the sources that reason in the tradition of Mīmāṃsā and Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta functions, on the one hand, to explore the limits of desire and provide a method for examination of its moral dimension and, on the other, as a guide for individuals to encounter one’s inner structure and recognize human suffering and its transcendence. Timalisina concludes by commenting on the contemporary situation of Hinduism in South Asia, stating that *dharma* differs from faith and that *dharma* does not conflict between the pluralism of voices and the rational inquiry of norms, and that the modern transformation of Hinduism into a faith tradition has demanded the sacrifice of reason and a homogenization of identity. Hinduism as faith opens itself mostly to the elements that contradict rationality, concludes Timalisina.

In Chapter 6 Marko Geslani discusses the puzzling relationship between Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*) and Hindu image worship (*pūjā*). Geslani wants to resituate the problem of image worship in the study of Hinduism and he starts his essay by giving a critical outline of what he argues has been an “iconocentric” pattern of thought in the study of Hinduism. The dominating idea of this “iconocentric” pattern was that image worship represented religious decline. Geslani discusses the politicized discourse of the early European Orientalists and the missionaries’ reception of Vedic and Hindu religion, and the preference for textual antiquity in contrast to contemporary Hindu “idolatry”, which for these Orientalists and missionaries illustrated barbarism. After discussing the “iconocentric” pattern of thought in the study of Hinduism, Geslani reviews some new questions that have been raised about the early history of South Asian religions (the period 500 BCE to 1000 CE). The time of the Guptas (320–500 CE) is usually considered to be the beginning of Hindu temples with the earlier period being dominated by Buddhist monuments. At the end of the time of the Guptas we find the earliest great monumental temples. Geslani’s main argument is that we should seek the history of the Hindu cult of images among the elite and in the rest of his essay he attempts such a history in

relation to institutional and political history and in historical continuation with early Vedic and Brahmanical ritual patterns.

In the next chapter, Knut A. Jacobsen looks at the early history of pilgrimage in South Asia. Sacred sites that were believed to offer rewards to those who visited them have been a feature of South Asian religious traditions probably since at least the first centuries CE. This chapter suggests that some pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious rituals in north and central India associated with sacred trees, pools of water, and shrines, might have been objects of ritual travel also in pre-historic times. The worship of *yakṣas* was probably widespread in parts of north and central India, and these *yakṣas* were possibly guardians and gatekeepers of places and connected to sites. The chapter suggests that perhaps the later Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain pilgrimage traditions were influenced by traditions associated with pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious rituals connected to these divine beings. In the chapter Jacobsen analyses statements about pilgrimage in two early texts that promoted pilgrimage, the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* and the *Mahābhārata*. The chapter suggests that different forms of ritual travel associated with pilgrimage are found and argues that they had different roots, which indicates that perhaps the pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious traditions were of some importance for the development of South Asian pilgrimage.

While it is true that Buddhism mostly disappeared from India, it did not disappear from South Asia, and it has a continuous presence in both Sri Lanka (Theravāda) and Nepal (Mahāyāna). The next two essays analyse the position of historical Sri Lanka and historical Nepal in the history of South Asian religions. In Chapter 8, Justin Henry investigates the early history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its relations to India and Southeast Asia. Sri Lanka is the oldest continuous place of Buddhism and, as Justin Henry notes, Sri Lanka “distinguishes itself as a unique preserve of Buddhism globally”. It has imparted idiosyncratic templates of Buddhist historiography, ritual orthopraxy, and rites of kingship, and these have influenced religious and political life elsewhere in the region. The early history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is not least important for the understanding of the Buddhist textual traditions and Henry gives a critical discussion of this and the dissemination of canonical, commentarial, and historical Pali works throughout the Buddhist world of South Asia. Henry finally analyses the Buddhist continuum between Sri Lanka and South India, and argues that it was especially the relations with Southeast Asia that shaped the Pali Buddhist world.

The religious history of Nepal is dominated by Hinduism and Buddhism. Kathmandu Valley was one of the first areas outside of India where Mahāyāna was established. Hindu traditions came with the immigration of Brahmans from various areas of India. In Chapter 9, on the place of Nepal in the history of South Asian religion, Axel Michaels observes that inscriptions show that Nepal saw itself as part of the Holy Hindu subcontinent, Āryāvarta, but that Nepal was never colonized and also did not allow Western foreigners to enter the country. Nepal is famous for Buddhist-Hindu syncretism and Michaels notes that “meetings of Hinduism and Buddhism characterize from the very beginning Nepal’s place in the religions of South Asia”. In his text he explains how different forms of Hinduism and Buddhism are densely interwoven with each other and describes the many ancient ritual traditions that have been preserved only in Nepal.

The next chapters take up selected topics in current research on religion in South Asia in the second millennium. The arrival of Islam and, from the 13th century, the emergence of the Delhi Sultanate and the 16th century the Mughal Empire caused changes in religion. In Chapter 10 Patton E. Burchett explains the dramatic rise to predominance in North India of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* (devotionalism) in the early modern period. Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* became a dominant form of Hindu religiosity in North India and Patton E. Burchett investigates how this came about. From the seventh century, writes Burchett, rulers looked to tantric rituals and gurus for empowerment and legitimation, and by the tenth century temples and *maṭhas* had become central economic, political, and religious institutions. In these traditions *bhakti* was a subordinated ritual. But, notes Burchett, “tantra’s rise to prominence in early medieval India was inseparable from the growth of popular traditions of worship and devotion”. Burchett argues for the co-existence in this early period of lay Śaiva devotion and the rich and powerful Śaiva lineages. When Persianate Turkish power spread in India from the twelfth century the relationship between rulers and tantrics declined, and tantra as a mainstream public tradition disappeared and became subordinated to Hindu practices more congenial to the new Islamicate worldviews, Burchett argues. He shows that Sufis played a key role in the development of vernacular literary culture. His text explains the changing religious landscape under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire.

The next chapter deals with asceticism and yoga. Yogīs gained increased significance from the eleventh century CE. Adrián Muñoz analyses the Nāṭh Sampradāya, a Śaiva tradition, its history, identity, and understanding of yoga. Nāṭh Yogīs have been the only ascetic group that

have always referred to themselves as yogīs and used that term as their identity marker, which makes them the most important group for understanding the history of yoga in South Asia. Muñoz points out that the identity of the order relies not only on their relationship to yoga, but also on groups of legendary yogīs, as well as the Nāth network, especially in northern India. His chapter investigates the shifting nature of Nāth formation in order to shed light on the origins and development of their multiple identities and how at one point their need for sponsorship led to attempts to “canonize” the order. The recent politicization of the Gorakhnāth Mandir, the Nāth headquarters (its head priest is since 2017 the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh) makes it even more important to understand this movement.

In the next essay Tilmann Kulke gives a critical assessment of how the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb has been presented in historical literature. Aurangzeb ruled the Mughal Empire for nearly fifty years until his death in 1707 and brought it to its greatest extension. His goal was to finally subjugate the entire Indian subcontinent under the rule of a glorious Mughal dynasty. Instead of being recorded in the history of his dazzling dynasty as the most glorious ruler and conqueror, historiography has presented him as a bigot tyrant and Muslim fundamentalist who was responsible for the Mughals’ demise, the division of India’s society and, moreover, for the Indian-Pakistani separation 240 years after his death, notes Kulke. His essay presents this complex Indian ruler from a different perspective. He compares Aurangzeb to contemporaries in Europe and classifies the emperor’s often controversial decisions into a broader context. In the main part of this text, he discusses the problematic parts of the classic narrative of Aurangzeb and presents new and alternative approaches.

In the sixteenth century a new lineage of gurus was established in South Asia, with Guru Nānak as the first, which later developed into the Sikh religion. Sikhism is closely associated with Punjab and in Chapter 13 Anne Murphy investigates the historical foundation of the Sikh claim to Punjab and the Sikh community’s notions of place making. Murphy asks if this place making is a modern phenomenon, as some have claimed, or if it draws on longer affiliations. The chapter shows how the past and its representation were important for the Sikhs also prior to the nineteenth century, and how representation of the past was not only connected to the landscape of Punjab, but also that it exceeded this territory. Murphy analyses texts and relics and also examines developments from the middle of the nineteenth century and central developments of Sikh place making under colonial rule, when the British controlled the territory, which are important also for understanding the present situation.

### **Contemporary South Asian Religions: Religious Pluralism**

The essays in the second part of this book analyse important aspects of contemporary religion and society in all the South Asian nation states, such as religious pluralism, identities, and some religious practices, representations, and examples of global developments. The first four essays of Part II concern religion and society in India. According to the most recent Indian census from 2011 (the next census is scheduled for 2021) around 79% of India's population are considered to be Hindus, around 14% Muslims, around 2% Christians, 2% Sikhs, a little less than 1% Buddhists, and less than 0.5% Jains. The total population of India is (in 2020) 1.38 billion, which is more than 17% of the world's total population. In the first chapter of Part II, Chapter 14, Debi Chatterjee takes up the issue of caste, and the religion of the most marginalized sections of the Indian populations, the religion of dalits. Caste is central in Indian society both in terms of ideology and materiality; caste appears both as values and belief and as a set of stable social relationships. In her chapter, Chatterjee shows that dalits have often attempted to find liberation through religion, either negotiating within Hinduism or searching for dignity outside of this religion, and she analyses several such attempts in Indian history. Chatterjee notes that attempts of negotiation within Hinduism have had a limited effect on wider society and these movements have remained trapped within the Brahmanical frame. Conversion to other religions has been somewhat more successful, especially in the case of converts to Navayana Buddhism, who have made a significant contribution to the rise of a new awareness and impacted the establishment of new organizations.

In Chapter 15, Mukesh Kumar analyses the teaching and followers of the saint Lāldās, who transcended Islam and Hinduism and also rejected social hierarchy. His teachings appealed to both Hindus and Muslims and he still has a Hindu-Muslim following in India. The Hindu-Muslim composite culture has been a significant feature of religion in South Asia but it has been threatened by Hindu and Muslim mobilization on religious identities. However, Kumar argues that shared religious plurality is still a widespread norm in South Asia, and he asserts that the case of the followers of Lāldās complicates the standard definitions of Hindu and Muslim in South Asia as bounded identities. Lāldās preached *nirguṇa bhakti* to the god Rām, followed vegetarianism, and was also a Muslim who established mosques and, based on fieldwork, Kumar documents how contemporary followers of Lāldās similarly follow these mixed practices.

Chad Bauman's essay presents the relations of Christians with non-Christians in India and Sri Lanka. The relationship is characterized predominantly by tolerance and mutual respect, but also moments of inter-religious tensions and conflicts. The essay deals with these tensions and conflicts. Bauman argues that conversion has been the main issue of conflict and in his chapter he traces Hindus' increasingly hostile attitude towards proselytization and religious conversion. The chapter also discusses increased anti-Christian violence in contemporary India and Bauman shows that violence is also related to the issue of proselytization. The chapter concludes that the dynamics in India manifest in Sri Lanka in very similar ways.

In Chapter 17, Meera Nanda investigates a significant development of Hindu nationalism (*Hindutva*): the idea that Hinduism is scientific or a "religion of science". This is a characteristic of Hinduism from Vivekananda in the last decade of the nineteenth century to the present prime minister of India, Narendra Modi. Nanda shows that this idea of scientific Hinduism is just a restatement of Hindu theology using scientific-sounding words, but the idea that science was encompassed in the worldview of the Vedas has nevertheless had a deep impact on many aspects of Hinduism and Indian society. It has, argues Nanda, turned science into the handmaiden of Hindu nationalism. The chapter tells the story of how this came about by analysing the arguments used by the Hindu nationalists. These arguments, she shows, are rooted in the history of Hindu apologetics, but are also modern in their deployment. The strategies of Vedic orthodoxies have throughout history brought new and alien ideas into the field of the Vedas and Nanda shows this ancient strategy at work also in relation to modern science.

The next six essays cover contemporary religion and society in the other six South Asian countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Chapter 18 is about Pakistan, a nation created in 1947 that today (2020) has a population of more than 210 million, with Muslims counting for around 90% (75% Sunnis and 25% Shias) and with small Hindu (2–5.5%) and Christian (2%) minorities. Michel Boivin writes about how society and religion are intertwined in Pakistan and how beyond "normative Islamist discourses that are prevailing in the public sphere", adjustments are made by different sections of the population. Pakistan was founded in order to protect the interests of the Muslims but the country soon developed into an Islamist state. Boivin describes and explains how this movement from a state for Muslims to an Islamic state happened. Boivin notes that before the founding of Pakistan, Muslims in this area were more connected to social and tribal customs than by rules

relating to Islam, and in the chapter he focuses on the social structures of Pakistan and the traditional forms of social domination such as the *jāgīrdārī*, *birādarī*, and the *pīrī-murīdī* system. The final part of his essay deals with the role of the middle class and the spread of a connected piety, which is often linked with migration.

Bangladesh became an independent nation in 1971 after a war of independence against Pakistan. Of a population of approximately 160 million, around 90% are Muslims, around 10% Hindus, and there is also a very small population of Buddhists and Christians. The relationship between religion and society in Bangladesh is multi-layered and complex, notes Ali Riaz in his chapter. Riaz argues that inter-religious harmony has for centuries characterized the Bangladeshi society and that the Islamic tradition successfully adapted to Hinduism. Riaz also explains that Hindu mysticism strengthened pluralism and closeness to Muslim mysticism, but that this inter-religious harmony started to wane in the nineteenth century with the rise of identity politics based on religion. Riaz traces the roots of how a Bangladeshi community defining itself primarily as Muslims came about and notes that one reason was that the urban English-educated middle class based in Kolkata was mainly Hindu while the East Bengal Muslim peasants remained marginalized. Muslim identity became a means of mobilization.

Sri Lanka became independent in 1948, and is a Buddhist majority country, with around 70% Buddhists in a population of around 21 million. Of the minorities, 12% are Hindus, around 10% are Muslims, and around 7% are Christians. In Chapter 20, Peter Schalk argues that the political conflicts between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka have been based on a politicized Buddhism, which has interpreted its role to be the complete cultural sovereignty of Buddhism in the whole country of Sri Lanka. Deep ethnic divisions and a lack of power sharing in a unitary state have created a non-consociational society that is a breeding ground for politicized antagonism between different ethnic and religious groups. Schalk in his analysis distinguishes between idealized and politicized Buddhism, and argues that in Sri Lanka politicized Buddhism uses idealized Buddhism for its own purpose. In the last part of the text, Schalk examines the role of the Sri Lankan state and the sovereignty of Buddhism and its relationship to religious minorities.

The developments in Nepal, a nation of around 28 million people, have been different from the other South Asian nations, with the abandonment of the state-sponsored religion of what

was officially a Hindu kingdom, the emergence of secularism, and Nepal's transformation into a secular republic. Secularism in Nepal has similarities to Indian secularism, which means that the state should support all religions equally. The chapter by David N. Gellner and Chiara Letizia investigates the effects of the concept of secularism in Nepal propagated by the state, especially since 2015, on distinct religions and ethnic groups through three case studies. First, the effect on conversions and the relation of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity to the state and to Hinduism; second, the diverse Hindu responses to secularism; and third, the controversy over animal sacrifices at the Gadhimai Festival. The essay shows the state having to engage itself on various levels in the legal understanding of religion and religions.

Bhutan is a Buddhist state with around 750,000 inhabitants, with Vajrayāna Buddhism being the official state religion. The chapter by Dorji Gyeltshen and Manuel Lopez covers the consequences of introducing secular education in this country. Education had been the monopoly of Buddhist monasteries for centuries, but in 1959 the country introduced universal secular education. The success of secular education forced religious institutions to rethink the goals and values of Buddhist education, note Gyeltshen and Lopez. The chapter explores in particular how the introduction of universal secular education affected the education of nuns in the country. Gyeltshen and Lopez argue that the historical, cultural, and religious constraints imposed on nuns, as reflected in the lack of full ordination, forced nuns to rely on a transnational network of Buddhist institutions as well as on local non-governmental organizations, in order to improve their situation. One consequence has been the enormous growth of nunneries in Bhutan.

The island nation of the Maldives was a Buddhist kingdom for over one thousand years before it became Muslim in the twelfth century. Islam is the only religion practised there and this religious homogeneity, the population of around a half million is 100% Muslims, has been decisive for the national identity. Only Muslims are allowed to become Maldivian citizens according to the Constitution. The chapter by Azra Naseem focuses on how Salafism took over the Maldives. In the 1980s a phasing out of the age-old rituals that characterized the almost syncretic Islam began, and at the end of the 1990s Salafism emerged as a minority belief, but since the 2000s wealthy Salafi actors have increased the funding of the Salafi movement, and the Maldives was seen as fertile ground for missionizing this form of Islam. As a result, Maldivian Salafism came to power in 2008. Naseem notes that democracy in the Maldives did not function as an antidote to radicalization; instead, Salafi terrorism followed.



In her chapter Naseem analyses the persecution of those in the Maldives who did not want to follow the Salafi form of Islam.

The large number of festival traditions in the pluralistic societies of South Asia seems to be a characteristic of this geographical region. In Chapter 24, Ute Hüsken notes the ubiquity of festivals in daily life in South Asian societies, and argues that religious festivals here are primarily celebrations of local communities, and are always unique to their local and historical setting. In her chapter she discusses a variety of festivals that allows her to address some issues of special relevance in the South Asian settings. She notes that festivals in general are contact zones between the world of the gods and the human world, but are always localized. For instance, local deities might be considered forms of trans-regional deities, but it is the local form that is celebrated. Looking at the diverse modes and ways of celebrating one and the same festival in different regions, one has to recognize the festival as “one festival and many different festivals at the same time”, argues Hüsken. In conclusion, Hüsken suggests that, most importantly, festivals accomplish valuable social work, and this becomes especially evident when looking at South Asian festivals celebrated outside South Asia. When people move and make new homes, they tend to take their festivals with them.

Chapters 25 and 26 are about South Asian religions outside of South Asia. Prema Kurien analyses the manifestations of these religions in the United States and Amanda Lucia analyses the Hindu guru in a global context. In Chapter 25 Prema Kurien shows the importance of religion in the South Asian migration to the US. Religion formed migration, communities, and identities. The Indian diaspora in the US is one of the largest Indian populations outside of South Asia – 4 million and growing – and it also one of the most influential globally. Interestingly, before the 1980s, Indians in the US assembled in pan-Indian organizations, but with the growth of Hindu nationalism in India, argues Kurien, Indians in the US started to mobilize around religious organizations instead. Consequently, there are far more religious than secular Indian American organizations. Kurien’s chapter discusses how religion shapes the pattern of migration and the immigrant community formation, and the politicization of Hinduism in the US by people who support Hindu nationalism. Hinduism has been recast and reformulated. South Asian minorities in the US mobilized as religious minorities to gain recognition and identity, and, argues Kurien, assertive Hindu identity was one way to contest racial marginalization. The chapter also shows the importance of religion for Sikhs, South Asian Muslims and Christians, as well as Dalits in the US.

In the final chapter Amanda Lucia presents a significant twentieth-century development in Hinduism, the global manifestation of the phenomenon of the Hindu guru. Lucia notes that there is something expansive in the modern guru phenomenon and suggests that the ecumenical universalism of one type of the Hindu guru is a heritage of the betwixt and between theology of the *sants* and the *bhakti* movement. Another type of Hindu guru is the political Hindu guru, who has increasingly become associated with Hindutva politics although their Hindu supremacy ideology, argues Lucia, “is thinly veiled by a cryptic universalistic humanism”. Her chapter divides the global guru phenomenon into two parts: the global gurus who travelled west and attracted Western devotees, a phenomenon which peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, and a phenomenon that followed after, the global gurus who focused on growth in India, encouraged by the rapid expansion of the Indian middle class, and which is often connected to Hindu nationalism.

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South Asia has historically been a centre for religious innovation and expansion, and several of the world’s major religious traditions have their roots here. Change and transformations characterize the history of South Asian religions as well as the present situation. South Asian religions, whether they originated inside or outside South Asia, have been shaped by South Asian cultures and societies but they have also shaped them. Because of the importance of religions in South Asia, the academic study of South Asian religions past and present constitutes a significant interdisciplinary field of study and a number of disciplines are engaged in the research of religion in this geographical area. Critical scholarship is continuously evaluating accepted academic models and truths, and researchers draw attention to new empirical material and new insights replace old ones. The essays in this book present some of these developments of critical scholarship on South Asian religions.

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<sup>1</sup> India also shares borders with three other nations, China in the north, which belongs to East Asia, Myanmar in the Far East, which belongs to Southeast Asia, and a short border with Afghanistan, a Southwest Asian nation.

<sup>2</sup> For such an approach to Hindu traditions in India, see Jacobsen et al. 2009.