The *Mahābhārata* and the Revival of Brahmanism

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Abstract There are good reasons to think that Brahmanism initially belonged to a geographically limited area, with its heartland in the middle and western parts of the Gangetic plain. It was in this region that Brahmanism was at that time the culture of a largely hereditary class of priests, the brahmins, who derived their livelihood and special position in society from their close association with the local rulers. This situation changed. The most plausible hypothesis as to the reasons of this change sees a link with the political unification of northern India, begun by the Nandas and continued by the Mauryas. Both the Nandas and the Mauryas had their home base in the region called Magadha and had no particular interest in brahmins and their sacrificial tradition. As a result Brahmanism as an institution was under threat; it either had to face disappearance, or reinvent itself. It did the latter. Brahmanism underwent a transformation that enabled it to survive and ultimately flourish in changed circumstances. This paper will argue that the *Mahābhārata* can be looked upon as an element in this Brahminical project. Far from being a mere collection of stories and general good advice, it was an instrument in the hands of a group of people who were determined to change the world in ways that suited them, and who to a considerable extent succeeded in doing so during the centuries that lay ahead.

Keywords Brahmanism · āśramas · *Mahābhārata* · agrahāras

Recent years have witnessed the rise of a need to rethink the history of Brahmanism. Various factors indicate that it makes sense to think that this tradition underwent a major transformation during the final centuries preceding the Common Era. It seems no longer possible to look upon Brahminical culture and religion as the more or less
universal background of most other cultural and religious developments in the Indian subcontinent. Quite the contrary, Brahmanism presents itself as initially belonging to a geographically limited area, with its heartland in the middle and western parts of the Gangetic plain. It was in this region that Brahmanism was at that time the culture of a largely hereditary class of priests, the brahmins, who derived their livelihood and special position in society from their close association with the local rulers. This situation changed. The most plausible hypothesis as to the reasons of this change sees a link with the political unification of northern India, begun by the Nandas and continued by the Mauryas. Both the Nandas and the Mauryas had their home base in the region called Magadha, outside the area where Brahmanism held sway. The Nandas and the Mauryas had no particular interest in brahmins and their sacrificial tradition. As a result Brahmanism as an institution was under threat; it either had to face disappearance, or reinvent itself. It did the latter. Brahmanism underwent a transformation that enabled it to survive and ultimately flourish in changed circumstances.

Brahmanism had been a priestly religion with heavy emphasis on elaborate sacrifices. The transformed Brahmanism that in due time succeeded in spreading all over the Indian subcontinent and into Southeast Asia was primarily (though not exclusively) a socio-political ideology. Brahmanism had clear ideas about the correct hierarchical order of society (with the brahmins at the top), and about the correct manner of running a state. Brahmanism did not abandon its elaborate sacrificial heritage, to be sure, but now it came to include less elaborate (and sometimes totally unconnected) forms of religious practice. In this way it could adjust to a variety of religious cults, with one non-negotiable condition: brahmins were the ones most suited to establish and maintain links with “higher” realms; they were the ones to advise rulers on social and political matters; and they were the ones to occupy the highest place in the social hierarchy.

The outcome of this Brahminical transformation was quite extraordinary. A thousand years after the establishment of the Maurya empire (presumably a catastrophe for the brahmins), Brahminical socio-political ideology had come to predominate in an immense geographical area, reaching from Vietnam and Indonesia at one end to western India at the other. This dominating presence found expression in various ways, including the use of Sanskrit (the sacred language of Brahmanism) in political inscriptions, in courtly literature, and even in an important part of the literature of Buddhism and Jainism. The American Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock (1996 and 2006) has coined the term “Sanskrit cosmopolis” to designate this phenomenon.

In order to understand the incredible success of the Brahminical vision of society and politics, it is crucial to recall that it was not the outcome of political conquest or colonization. In general, Brahmanism spread by other means than the force of arms—initially in the Indian subcontinent, then also into Southeast Asia. The spread of Brahmanism was also not a mere question of religious conversion. As noted above, Brahmanism should not exclusively or even primarily be thought of as a religion, but rather as a socio-political ideology with a variable religious dimension. Rulers who adopted it did not necessarily convert from one religion to another, and Brahmanism had no missionaries in the religious sense of the term.