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The Brahmin, the Aryan, and the Powers of the Priestly Class: Puzzles in the Study of Indian Religion

Marianne Keppens ^{1,2} and Jakob De Roover ^{2,*}

¹ Department of Archaeology, Ghent University, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium; marianne.keppens@ugent.be

² Department of Comparative Sciences of Culture, Ghent University, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium

* Correspondence: jakob.deroover@ugent.be

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Abstract: The classical account of the Brahmin priestly class and its role in Indian religion has seen remarkable continuity during the past two centuries. Its core claims appear to remain unaffected, despite the major shifts that occurred in the theorizing of Indian culture and in the study of religion. In this article, we first examine the issue of the power and status of the Brahmin and show how it generates explanatory puzzles today. We then turn to 18th- and 19th-century sources to identify the cognitive conditions which sustained the classical account of the Brahmin priest and allowed for its transmission. Three clusters of concepts were crucial here: Christian-theological ideas concerning heathen priesthood and idolatry; racial notions of biological and cultural superiority and inferiority; and anthropological speculations about ‘primitive man’ and his ‘magical thinking’. While all three clusters were rejected by 20th- and 21st-century scholarship, the related claims about Brahmanical ritual power continue to be presented as facts. What accounts for this peculiar combination of continuities and discontinuities in the study of (ancient) Indian religion? We turn to some insights from the philosophy of science to sketch a route toward answering this question.

Keywords: Indian religion; Brahmin; ritual; priesthood; Aryan invasion theory; magical thinking; homology; Vedism

1. Introduction

If a mid-19th-century European expert on Indian religion were to come to life in today’s world and examine the current state of his field of study, he would be in for some surprises. Prima facie, he would discover major challenges to the consensus of his time. Some of its basic claims and concepts have become subjects of controversy: that Hinduism is the ancient religion of India and that an Indo-Aryan people invaded and conquered the Indian subcontinent from about 1500 BCE, for instance. Both these claims counted as facts 150 years ago; both have lost this status today. Scholars now suggest that ‘Hinduism’ refers to a body of culturally related traditions rather than one religion and that tribes speaking Indo-European languages migrated to the Subcontinent in several waves.¹

To contemporary readers, the same discovery cannot come as a surprise. After all, the past centuries saw many shifts—both radical and subtle—in the frameworks for the study of humanity. The dominance of Christian theology and biblical chronology declined with the rise of the social sciences: no archaeologist now dates his findings in terms of the biblical deluge, while linguists and historians would frown upon any attempt to trace nations and their languages to the sons of Noah. We no longer measure people’s physiognomies to make predictions about their psychologies or refer to

¹ About ‘Hinduism’, see [Frazier \(2011, p. 3\)](#); [Lipner \(2010, pp. 6–7\)](#); [Michaels \(2004, p. 3\)](#); [Stapelfeldt \(2006\)](#). For overviews of the Indo-Aryan invasion/migration debate, see [Bryant \(2001\)](#) and [Bryant and Patton \(2005\)](#).

climatic conditions to explain their national characteristics. Racial theories of superiority and inferiority stand rejected, as do evolutionary accounts tracing the development of religion from the primitive to the civilized. Most of our theories about human physiology, psychology, society, and politics have changed substantially. No wonder, then, that today's study of Indian culture and religion looks different from its status quo more than 150 years ago.

Yet, a closer look reveals continuities that should be as surprising to us as the discontinuities would be to a 19th-century scholar. One salient instance is the account of the Brahmin and his role in Indian religion. Consider some of its building blocks: as a priesthood, the Brahmins claim to mediate between the devotees and their deities by means of sacrificial rituals. They are the creators of a four-tiered hierarchy of classes, which assigns the highest position and status to their own priestly class and the lowest to the Shudra or servant class. Traditionally, the learned Brahmin is the recipient of many privileges; in fact, he was represented as a higher being, to be revered by lesser humans. As a minority lacking military prowess and political and economic power, the Brahmins drew on their ritual status to seek a special alliance with the warrior-ruler class. They reduced the lower castes to a state of subjugation by imposing all kinds of restrictions, such as denying their members access to the Vedas and treating them as impure or untouchable, and generally sought to prevent upward mobility between castes.

These claims were commonplace in mid-19th-century Europe and continue to have this status today. They populate introductory works, encyclopedia entries, and other sources as elementary facts about the history of Indian culture and religion (e.g., [Aktor 2018](#); [Dimock et al. 1998](#); [Elder 2006](#); [Klostermaier 2007](#), pp. 288–97; [Wolpert 2009](#), pp. 111–25). In this article, we aim to bring to the surface the peculiarity of this state of affairs. We will do so by raising a basic question: how could this cluster of claims retain its 'factual' status for more than 150 years, despite the substantial changes in the conceptual frameworks for the study of humanity that occurred in between? What allowed for this continuity and stability in the account of the Brahmin and his place in Indian religion, given the many shifts in the general thinking about religion, culture, and society?

It may be tempting to look for answers in the modes of explanation that resulted from the debates concerning Orientalism of the last four decades ([Said 1978](#); [Irwin 2006](#)). Some might argue that the continuities in the study of Indian culture originate in the West's inclination to represent 'Eastern' cultures as superstitious counterparts to its rational self, or in the colonial power-knowledge nexus constituting Orientalist scholarship, or in the theological and ideological framework of European scholars (e.g., [Adluri and Bagchee 2014](#); [Ganguly 2017](#); [Inden 1990](#); [King 1999](#)). Others may insist that the Orientalists' search for knowledge simply produced lasting insights into Asian cultures. Rather than taking any of these routes, we intend to have a closer look at the problem situation. Given the competing explanations, we aim to identify some key puzzles that should be addressed by any hypothesis seeking to account for the continuities in the scholarship on Indian religion.

2. The Mystery of Brahmanical Power

Wherefrom did the Brahmin class derive its exceptional authority and status in ancient Indian religion? In the classical account that dominated this field of study until about three decades ago, Brahmanical power could be traced to several interrelated elements. The first was that of the Aryan invasion: the claim that an Indo-European people invaded the Indian subcontinent in the period around 1500 BCE and brought their Vedic religion with them. When the Aryans entered India, they encountered an indigenous population, whom they ended up defeating in warfare. This conquest allowed the Vedic culture, religion, and language to gain dominance over the traditions of the local tribes. The priesthood played a central role in this process, since its religion revolved around the performance of sacrificial rituals to a range of gods in return for protection, wealth, prestige, and success in battle. Only the Brahmins possessed the required ritual expertise, which was highly sought-after by chieftains who functioned as patrons for the rites. Gradually, Vedic religion took on a new form (sometimes called

Brahmanism) by reinforcing the power of this priestly class and absorbing practices and beliefs from local religions (e.g., [Burrow 1975](#); [Havell 1924](#); and the authors cited below in Section 3.3).

The second element of this account further clarified Brahmanical authority in terms of ritual. Vedic thought allegedly postulates a relation between ritual acts and objects or events external to the ritual; it does so by establishing connections (*bandhus*) between the ritual realm and the cosmic and human realms. This practice of “constructing ritual homologies” has long been considered “the quintessence of Vedic ritualism” ([Hatcher 1999](#), p. 74; also see [Heesterman 1991](#), pp. 297–98; [Flood 1996](#), pp. 48–49; [Jamison and Brereton 2014](#), pp. 22–24; [Witzel 1979](#)). In its original form, this characterization of ancient Indian religion explicitly relied upon the notion of ‘magical thinking’:

The size and complexity of the ritual kept increasing and thus the function of expert held by the functioning priest became increasingly important: he knew with which spell or act some or the other power could be controlled, some god could be placated, rain could be generated, life could be prolonged. In the circles of these Brahmins, powerful because of their “knowing” (namely of ritual, the words and their results), and also because of their office . . . a “pre-scientific science” emerged now, based on the belief of magical-thinking man that he could by means of certain spells and acts, and especially through their systematized form in the ritual, influence invisible powers. More and more the sacrifice became in their eyes a means whereby the man “who knows” could compel and control powers and beings in the cosmos. ([Gonda 1943](#), pp. 72–73)

In other words, the Brahmin priest derived his authority from his access to a network of ritual homologies and the capacity to control invisible powers, attributed to him by “magical-thinking men” who believed his rites and spells could cause events in the natural and social world.

Both the Aryan conquest and ritual homology meet in the third element: the idea of the varna system. In the late Vedic era, it is said, this system began to emerge in society and developed into a four-tiered hierarchy of Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors-rulers), Vaishyas (traders, artisans, and landowners), and Shudras (servants). The conquest of the local tribes living in India relegated them to the lowest rungs. To garner legitimacy for this social order, Brahmins claimed it was divinely ordained and rooted in a primordial sacrificial ritual. A Vedic hymn traces the four classes to the sacrificed body of the Purusha or cosmic being: from the mouth emerged the Brahmins, from the shoulders and thighs came the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, respectively, and the Shudras originate from the feet. Later, when Brahmanical supremacy was threatened by the rise of Buddhism and other ascetic traditions, the Brahmins codified strict rules and consolidated the varna system in the tradition of Dharmashastra or ‘Hindu law’ (see [Kulke and Rothermund 2004](#), pp. 41–43; [Olivelle 2011](#), pp. 155–78; [Yamazaki 2005](#)).

To sum up, the classical account traces the power of the Brahmins to their ritual status and expertise, which (a) gave them apparent control over invisible forces in the natural and social world, (b) made them indispensable to tribal leaders and warriors seeking wealth, prestige, and success in warfare, and (c) sustained their supremacy in a varna system that expanded as the Indo-Aryan invaders subjugated the indigenous population.

Each of these elements is challenged by recent changes in the study of Indian culture. From the complex debate about the Aryan invasion theory, one point is crucial: in the search for evidence in support of the theory of the foreign origin of the ‘Aryans’, scholars concluded that a large-scale invasion cannot plausibly have taken place. Instead, many now speak of migration over long stretches of time, which involved interactions between different groups of people speaking Indo-European and Dravidian languages (see [Avari 2016](#), pp. 60–85; [Doniger 2010](#), pp. 89–102; [Kulke and Rothermund 2004](#), pp. 31–35; [Staal 2008](#)). Similarly, the explanation of Brahmanical ritual power could not survive in its simple form, because the notion of ‘primitive man’ and his ‘magical thinking’ lost traction during the later decades of the 20th century ([Janowitz 2002](#), pp. 2–4; [Kuper 2005](#); [Da Col and Palmié 2018](#); [Tambiah 1990](#)). Regarding the varna system, most scholars now agree that it

reflects “a social ideal rather than a social reality” or “the ideologies and aspirations of the priestly class” (Jamison and Brereton 2014, p. 57; Aktor 2018, pp. 60–64). But the system is also said to have “stubbornly survived to the present day, despite the fact that we do not notice it readily in everyday life,” since it provided the theoretical “framework,” “basis,” or “model” for the caste system (Yamazaki 2005, pp. xiii, 3–4; Smith 1994b).

These changes generate new questions: given that no forceful invasion occurred, how could peaceful migration and prolonged contact between groups account for the growing dominance of the Vedic religious and social order? If the hold of magical thinking and the need for success in warfare cannot explain the centrality of sacrificial ritual to the Indo-European people, what gave the priestly class its status? If the varna system was only a social ideal and large-scale military conquest did not take place, how could this hierarchy spread in society and absorb the local population as its lowest rungs? More generally, how did the Brahmanical elite keep its social ideology in place for hundreds or even thousands of years and spread it among substantial sections of the people living on the Subcontinent, without building an institutional apparatus for sustaining, disseminating, and implementing this social ideal?

To explain how the Brahmin class succeeded at having the populace succumb to its ideology, scholars have drawn upon the notion of homology. The outlines of these accounts are relatively simple: the priestly class spread its social ideology by encoding it into creation myths and sacred texts, thus providing the mystifications and legitimations that supported “an extremely rigid, hierarchic, and exploitative social system” (Lincoln 1986, p. 4). The Brahmin priesthood connected the four social classes to parts of a sacrificed body and to cosmic and natural objects through the postulation of homological correlations. Similarly, they transferred the canonical status of the Vedas to the caste system by linking the varnas to these texts; thus, the Brahmins’ position of privilege was sanctioned by sacred scriptures. In this way, their normative hierarchy was inscribed into the natural order and presented as stable, self-evident, and beyond dispute (Lincoln 1986; Smith 1994a, 1994b).

Such explanations are variations on a general ‘theory’ of ideology, where a priestly elite promotes a social order under the guise of religion and instills false consciousness into the populace (Goldie 1989; Rosen 1996). But the picture takes a more idiosyncratic form, when scholars explicitly address the issue of Brahmanical power from within this framework. Listen to Brian Smith discussing the varna system and its relation to ritual:

The resemblances that guided classification according to varna made ritual activity possible. Ritual depends for its supposed efficacy on “symbols,” that is, on the substitution of a controllable thing for another that is not so easily manipulated. Classification of [this] type . . . assumes that any member of the class can substitute for any other and makes it possible for the ritualists to effect changes on one entity through operations performed on a substance which shares its same class. *Priests who wielded such knowledge could, by means of the substitutes the varna system provided, control the natural, supernatural, and social worlds from within the confines of their ritual world.* (Smith 1994a, p. 316; emphasis added)

Another expert on ancient India, Johannes Bronkhorst, has more to say concerning “Brahmanical power”:

Brahmins had supernatural powers. In the good old days these flowed through the performance of the solemn ritual. Without clients for these expensive rites, the supernatural powers of the Brahmins were in danger of being underused and overlooked. Fortunately there was a solution to this problem: the magical formulas that came to be collected in the *Atharva-Veda* . . . [I]t will be clear that the formulas collected in the *Atharva-Veda* provide *opportunities to Brahmins to use their supernatural powers also outside the realm of extensive and expensive solemn rites.* These kinds of formulas and the associated rites made it possible for Brahmins to exert their powers even in hostile situations, in circumstances where the support of the ruling classes was not guaranteed or worse. (Bronkhorst 2016, pp. 225–26; emphasis added)

Similarly, Gen'ichi Yamazaki refers to a struggle between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas during the Later Vedic Age and claims that these two classes “manipulated one another in ruling over the vaiśya and śūdra majority”:

That is to say, kṣatriyas began to recognize the superiority of the brāhmaṇa varna and supported its members through almsgiving, while brāhmaṇas conducted ceremonies, beginning with the enthronement ritual, thus ensuring the sanctity and legitimacy of kṣatriya kingship. Furthermore, *brāhmaṇas employed their magical powers to protect kings and their realms from the danger and misfortune they had predicted.* (Yamazaki 2005, p. 3; emphasis added)

Each of these authors appears to attribute extraordinary powers to the Brahmin priestly class: through knowledge of the varna system, they could control the natural, supernatural, and social worlds by performing rituals; these magical powers were used to protect kings and have them accede to Brahmanical supremacy; and when the Brahmins lost the support of the ruling classes, they could always fall back on their supernatural powers.

Naturally, these scholars may insist they are describing beliefs held by the ancient Brahmins (and their followers) about the supposed efficacy of rituals.² But then they confront another issue: the fact that this priesthood succeeded at having other groups endorse its exceptional status—even though several had far more military, political, and economic power—indicates that these groups must have attributed some such powers to the Brahmin. No matter the self-image of the priestly class, it could gain a special status in society only if others also embraced this image. In his recent work, *How the Brahmins Won* (Bronkhorst 2016), Bronkhorst suggests that “knowledge” played a crucial role in this process:

For many centuries, Brahmins presented themselves—and were accepted by a growing proportion of the population—as the masters of all knowledge worth knowing. This included forms of knowledge that provide power, among these rites and spells. Clearly this aspect of Brahmanical knowledge added immensely to their attraction, not least among those with access or aspirations to worldly power. Generally speaking, Brahmins were thought of—and thought of themselves—as being closest to what we may call the sacred. (Bronkhorst 2016, p. 221)

The status of the Brahmins (partially) derived from the knowledge attributed to them: forms of knowledge that give power, such as rites and spells. But how could these provide power? Performing rites or casting spells would do so, in case the rites and spells also ‘work’, i.e., they must be shown to have the desired effect in the world. Reasonable minds would not attribute this power to some magician merely on his say-so; they would want proof of the knowledge by witnessing its efficacy, Bronkhorst admits. He points out that the Brahmins owed their special position to a privilege they never renounced, namely “their role as sacrificial priests.” Even when few sponsors were left for Vedic sacrifices, the “ritual and otherworldly competence” of the Brahmins remained a crucial asset, “used to provide services to other members of society.” This not only concerned rites of passage but also “interpreting signs, predicting the future and other such activities that only Brahmins could perform in virtue of their other-worldly competence.” Naturally, they had to prove their competence:

All of these activities emphasized the Brahmins’ role as intermediaries between this world and a higher reality. Their constant private preoccupation with ritual confirmed it further.

² This type of ambiguity recurs frequently. See Brian Hatcher (1999, p. 84): “Clearly, then, the search for bandhus in the world of Vedic ritual yielded an intellectual tool of astounding power, since by means of such connections one could ostensibly construct anything out of anything else . . . Cosmic order, long life, wealth, and offspring could all be ensured by a proper manipulation of ritual knowledge and action. At the heart of such knowledge was the homology.” See also Witzel (1979, pp. 7–8).

However, here as elsewhere, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The proof of successful ritual activity is the ritual power that results from it. (Bronkhorst 2016, pp. 224–25; emphasis added)

Since the Brahmins succeeded at establishing their ‘other-worldly’ competence and ‘sacred’ status, they must have proven their ‘ritual power’ to others. In other words, Bronkhorst seems to suggest that the Brahmin class was able to *show* that it possessed forms of power-providing knowledge. This added immensely to their attraction, he says, especially among people “with access or aspirations to worldly power.” Doing so would require a *demonstration* of the efficacy of rites and spells by offering proof that the desired or anticipated consequences occurred. But how could the Brahmins do that, unless they truly had the required powers or had the capacity to instill into other people’s minds the illusion that this was the case?

When Bronkhorst (2016, pp. 224–25) reflects on the observation “that Brahmins were looked upon, or wanted to be looked upon, as gods,” he points to the peculiar nature of this claim. This divine status, he says, may help to explain why “the imitation of Brahmins by those who are not Brahmins themselves” was a crucial feature of “a brahmanized society.” However, “it does not answer the question why others would be willing to accept the divine status of Brahmins. Did they not have eyes to see that Brahmins were human beings like themselves?” This sums up the issue: either the people living in India could not see the obvious, or the Brahmins had the capacity to deceive people into seeing and believing what was not there, or a combination of both.

Contemporary scholars cannot possibly mean to ascribe supernatural powers to the Brahmin class; yet this is what their sentences do. The problem is not just one of ambiguous syntax. If it were, it could be resolved by clarifying whether the author is stating his own beliefs or those of the ancient Brahmins and their followers. Instead, the classical account *presupposes* that Brahmins must have possessed extraordinary powers. Suppose we assume that Brahmanical supremacy was widely accepted. In that case, they must have sustained their own ‘sacred’ status and subordinated groups which were politically, economically, and militarily far more powerful. If we instead maintain that the varna hierarchy was only a theoretical ideal, Brahmanical power becomes more subtle and sinister: it could disseminate an oppressive social ideal in disguised forms and thus give shape to Indian social life for centuries, often in ways “not readily noticeable” (Yamazaki 2005, p. xiii).

3. Europe’s Brahmin, Europe’s Aryan

Did the classical account of the Brahmin and his role in Indian religion indeed remain stable during the past two centuries? If it did, certain cognitive conditions must have sustained it. That is, to allow for its transmission across generations, such an account must have relied on other clusters of ideas widely shared among the educated layers to whom it was transmitted. Examining these conditions can help us gain insight both into the conceptual development of the classical account and into the puzzles raised by contemporary scholarship.

3.1. The Timeless Brahmin

To illustrate the conditions under which European descriptions of Indian culture and religion were transmitted, we will analyze a teaching-oriented text that embodies this process of transmission: in 1799, a popular Dutch periodical targeting children between six and twelve years old devoted one of its issues to the Indians (“*De Indiaanen*”), meaning the inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent. Several of its pages concerned the Brahmins and their place among the Hindus.³

³ The periodical *Weekblad voor kinderen* was published on a weekly basis from 1798 to 1800 by Johannes Van Der Hey in Amsterdam. It was well-received and described by contemporaries as “an appropriate handbook for the youth” and a summary of “what every member of a civilized society should know, from natural science, history and morals” (see van Vliet 2020).

Almost everywhere, the periodical's author noted, the bond that held human society together had been broken, namely, the original equality (of rights and duties) of all human beings. But nowhere had this happened so completely and irreversibly as on the fertile banks of the Indus and the Ganges: the Hindus are divided into tribes, which are called "castes" here. Of the four main castes, that of Brahmins is the noblest and most distinguished and enjoys the highest of privileges. Their life is dedicated to contemplation and the observance of religious ceremonies; they are responsible for the worship of idols in the temples. In the religion of the Hindus, "the idle Brahmin" is considered holy, while "the useful servant" is held to be "scandalously impure." Consequently, the latter is subject to a variety of cruel restrictions and punishments, whereas the killing of a Brahmin is the severest crime of which one can be found guilty. There is also a fifth caste of "*Parias*," which consists of the refuse of all the others; they cannot touch others, are refused entry to temples and markets, and cannot even walk the streets where Brahmins live. The oppressed castes are compelled to revere the Brahmins as higher beings from a distance, without ever hoping to improve their own condition and attain a higher dignity (Van Der Hey 1799, pp. 393–404). A man may be brought down to a lower caste, but he can never climb to a higher one. In fact, the four main castes are prohibited from mingling with each other and scholars even take them to have a different racial origin:

These two tribes or castes of the Hindus, namely that of the Brahmins and that of the warriors, are considered pure descendants of the Caucasian lineage of the human species. The two lower castes...are taken to have a Mongolian origin or originate from the intermingling of both these main lineages of mankind. Certain it is that their physical appearance, colour, and even mental capacities are usually of lesser quality than those of the two highest castes. (Van Der Hey 1799, pp. 402–3)

In other words, the highest two castes stemmed from fair-skinned nomadic tribes, who had originally lived in the region south of the Caucasus Mountains and moved into the Indian subcontinent and settled there.

This periodical's content is revealing. Several core constituents of the classical account of the Brahmins and their religion were already being taught to European children in the late 18th century. What were the cognitive conditions under which this happened? The first thing to note is that these claims were presented as *facts* about the world. Looking at the periodical's sequence of issues for the year 1799, we see how it was carefully planned to teach the basics of human knowledge to children in weekly episodes: its topics start from nature, the earth, the moon, air, water, trees and plants, planets, mines, raw materials . . . , to move onto domestic animals, wild animals, predators, snakes . . . , to then come to the human being and his senses, passions, intelligence and reason, human rights and duties, society, forms of government, religions, geography, the purpose of humanity, to finally provide an overview of the Asian, African, and American peoples. In this arranging of its material, the magazine attributed the same cognitive status to its account of "the Indians" as it did to its descriptions of metals and snakes: both were to transmit elementary *information* about the world to children aged between six and twelve. "The Brahmins are idle priests who oppress the lower castes among the Hindus" was a statement of the same nature as "the earth revolves around its own axis," "air expands when heated" or "oak makes the best timber to build houses".

Second, the magazine's publication date compels us to consider its sources. Which knowledge about Indian culture and society was available to a Dutch author writing in the 1790s? Scarcely any texts had been translated from Sanskrit into European languages; the information about India came from classical Greek sources, travel accounts, and reports by Christian missionaries, merchants, and officials. In this case, we can trace the author's claims about Indian religion to a handful of works published in French and English in the decades before. His 'facts' about the Brahmins relied upon the following sources:

- Second-hand descriptions and reflections by two French philosophers: a large part of the periodical issue consisted of translated sections from the Abbé Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (Raynal 1770),

a controversial work compiled by a former Jesuit, which collated descriptive passages on the West Indies and East Indies and used these as inspiration and illustration for philosophical diatribes (the work contained contributions by the philosopher-encyclopedist Denis Diderot).

- Nathaniel Halhed's introduction to *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (Halhed 1776): this was a translation of a Persian compilation produced by a group of Sanskrit pundits, who had been hired by the East India Company to compose and translate a digest of 'Hindu law'.
- The observations of a few European travelers.

Inevitably, an 18th-century author could not but work under such constraints and with very limited information. But how does one reconcile the scarcity and inadequacy of his sources with the fact that the resulting claims about the Brahmins and their religion are still being endorsed today?

Third, the magazine clearly placed its themes within a larger framework. The editors explicitly wrote that they aimed to educate the children into "good people, citizens and righteous Christians" (van Vliet 2020). The issue on 'nature' explained that, when we say, "Nature does this or that," this means the following: "Such is the order, which the Creator has determined for that particular thing." In other words: "Nature is the law and God is the legislator, without whom there would be no law" (Van Der Hey 1799, p. 2). Much like the author's accounts of nature, his claims about India were located within the same framework, that of education in the Christian religion. He noted that the doctrines of the Brahmins "clearly show some traces of the great truths concerning the eternal and immutable existence of God, the creation of the world, and the fall of humanity from its original state of innocence and happiness" (Van Der Hey 1799, p. 397). Such observations relied upon the Christian idea that all of humanity had once upon a time been aware of the biblical God and his relation to humanity, while the more civilized nations retained fragments of this knowledge. Biblical chronology also came in: even though the Hindus belong among the most ancient peoples, the author said, they appear to have no knowledge or memory of the Deluge. In any case, the few traces of truth should not delude us about the idolatrous character of this people: "While the Brahmins are convinced of the unity and spiritual existence of the Supreme Being, they nevertheless maintain the worship of a multitude of idols of different names and imaginary dignity" (Van Der Hey 1799, p. 406).

Fourth, the same religious framework gave shape to the author's moral assessment of the Hindus. He asked his readers: "Should one not be astonished and filled with sadness, esteemed pupils! when one sees that people who know of such elevated truths as God's unity, eternity, immutability, and omnipresence can also believe in ridiculous stories?" The Hindu myths have the objective of establishing the inequality of estates ("*standen*") among the people: they mislead the populace into venerating its own chains, as though these were forged by the Deity himself; this is what their ancient laws impel them to do. Consequently, no Indian—even of the lowest and most despised caste—has ever voluntarily left his tribe. Above all other castes, the unjust and arrogant priestly tribe betrays the hunger for power ("*heerszucht*") of the ancient lawgiver and his callous indifference towards the happiness of the entire nation. Hence, the author called for some heartfelt compassion: the Hindus are both benign and weak, both sensitive and lustful, but because of their own prejudices, the humiliating distinctions of imagined ranks, and repeated plunder by conquering nations, they lead a miserable life in the earth's most beautiful regions. "How heavily these people are burdened by the yoke of superstition!" (Van Der Hey 1799, pp. 394–97).

Finally, in his explanation of the origin of the four castes, the author revealed how his reasoning about humanity was shaped through and through by racial notions of the superiority and inferiority of nations. He wrote that the Celtic branch of the Caucasian lineage "without any doubt forms the most excellent section of the human species": all nations of this branch are white of skin, have a beautiful and well-proportioned physique, and possess a special ability for the arts and sciences. "Beloved pupils," he asked, "how would a barren list of names of countries and nations be of use to you?" You should instead contemplate men *as human beings*, both "those who are still at the lowest rungs of civilization and enlightenment and those who have climbed to a significant height on this ladder" (Van Der Hey 1799, pp. 387–89). In turn, these notions were embedded in a larger framework of ideas

about God's providence and the purpose for which he created humankind. The northern part of the globe, the author argued, is suitable for inhabitation by people who have been formed by their Creator to exercise their own powers towards becoming more perfect and more susceptible to rational and moral greatness and true happiness. Since man had to struggle and labour to survive in this region, virtue could not but offer him the blessing of a pure conscience (Van Der Hey 1799, pp. 343–44).

The aim of our analysis is not to blame the periodical's author for holding outdated ideas about humanity and "Hindustan." What else can we expect from a source more than 220 years old? Instead, a crucial issue confronts us: more than two centuries later, we possess far more empirical information about Indian culture than he had access to; a plethora of texts in Sanskrit and other Indian languages have been translated into Western languages and studied in depth; current scholarship operates with a very different framework, which no longer endorses Christian doctrines about superstition and idolatry or theories of the racial and civilizational superiority of Europeans; consequently, most basic ideas held by this author stand rejected in the academic study of religion. Nevertheless, the core elements of his description of the Brahmins continue to be presented as facts about Indian culture in our times. They appear to have lost little of the factuality attributed to them in the Europe of 1799.

3.2. *The Heathen Priesthood of Hindustan*

That the Brahmins traditionally constituted a priesthood or priestly class is one of the central claims of the classical account. Today, it appears as self-evidently true as it was two centuries ago. But wherefrom did this claim derive its self-evidence?

By the 19th century, the Brahmin had long been viewed as the local Indian incarnation of a larger category: that of "the heathen priest." From the early Middle Ages onwards, the "Brachmanes" were known as a legendary nation of wise men, whose most eminent representative Dandamis had apparently met Alexander the Great and given him some spiritual counsels (Stoneman 2012). As new travel reports reached the home front in the 16th and 17th century, however, the Brahmins living in modern India were transformed into representatives of false religion and idolatry. Much similar to the priests of the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, and other pagan nations, they were responsible for the sacrifices to the idols and prone to all the sins of a corrupted clergy (Gelders 2009).

In early modern Europe, texts meant for educating the elite soon began to contain passages concerning this group. The influential 16th-century humanist Justus Lipsius, for instance, included the Brahmin priest in a work intended for the teaching of princes. To show how the maintaining of superstition would be an irremediable error for any Christian prince, he provided some illustrations of its ridiculous nature. The Egyptians had surpassed all other nations in "idiotic and foolish superstition," for they transferred the honor of God not only to living men but also to the vilest of beasts (Lipsius 1606, pp. 17–18). But the pagans living on the Malabar coast contributed their share to the many forms taken by superstition, "all equally defective, without grace, and far removed from truth." They call their priests "Brahmins," a name taken from the old philosophers of lore, from whom they also inherit their knowledge of magic and astrology. With their divinations, these Brahmins feed the hopes and fears of the common people. Their goal is the gain that comes along with the performing of sacrifices to the gods, namely, the foodstuffs and money demanded as offerings from the people, which these priests use for their own benefit (Lipsius 1606, pp. 21–22).

In the following centuries, more details would be added to this descriptive scheme, but its core remained invariant. A popular 17th-century travelogue noted that the Brahmins are highly respected among the pagans of India:

They expound the Mysteries of their Religion to the ignorant, and by that means make what impressions they please in the minds of superstitious people, in as much as they give what Interpretation they fancy themselves, to the Auguries and other vanities, about which they are perpetually consulted. They are believed as so many Oracles...They heighten and improve the popular superstition, by the Relations they make of thousands of false Miracles,

done by their Pagodes and Saints, whom they perswade people to worship, as Intercessors with God for them. (Johan Albrecht de Mandelslo, in [Olearius 1669](#), p. 53)

Along with references to the ancient Brachmanes of lore, similar claims about the modern Brahmins populated the philosophical dictionaries, universal histories, encyclopedias, and other popular texts of the 18th century: these priests not only claimed to be masters of magic, augury, and rites, but also posed as mediators between the people and God; they kept the secrets of religion to themselves and deceived the other pagans; from the elevated status attributed to them resulted their excessive ambition and pride (e.g., [Moreri 1718](#), p. 1009; [Chambers 1728](#); [Anquetil-Duperron 1771](#), pp. 178–79; [Terry 1777](#), pp. 326–27; [Forster 1785](#), pp. 23–24).

How could this conception of the Brahmins as a heathen priesthood spread so widely in Western Europe? Bringing together notions of magic, sacrifice, superstition, and idolatry into a coherent whole, this account was easily digestible to educated Europeans. It relied upon a widely held cluster of ideas about the functioning of the ‘religion’ of pagan nations, which had been circulating for many centuries. Early Christian apologists had drawn upon some biblical passages and classical Greek terms to clarify how false religion worked and held people in its thrall. In brief, they argued that the worship of false gods and idols consists in *trafficking with demons* (‘*daimones*’ was a term used by the ancient Greeks to refer to some of their deities) ([Rampton 2018](#); [Martin 2010](#)). That is, when the ‘*magi*’ or pagan priests sacrificed to idols, they were actually addressing demons: evil spirits and fallen angels who had several kinds of powers and acted upon the world. These ritual experts learnt to invoke the demons by rites and incantations and thus to have them serve the desired ends. In his *Contra Celsum*, Origen explained pagan worship along these lines:

The truth about daemons is . . . made clear by those who invoke daemons for what are called love-philtres and spells for producing hatred, or for the prevention of actions, or for countless other such causes. This is done by people who have learnt to invoke daemons by charms and incantations and to induce them to do what they wish. On this account the worship of daemons is foreign to us who worship the Supreme God. The worship of the supposed gods is also a worship of daemons. (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 7.69; [Chadwick 1953](#), p. 452; emphasis added)

Because of the sacrifices and spells, the demons performed the petitions of those who brought requests to them; by means of magic and formulas, men could enchant them and have them obey. These evil spirits were the minions of their ruler, Satan or Beelzebub, the lord of this world. As masters of deception on a “ceaseless mission to ensnare humankind,” they had the capacity to deceive people and “subdue all who make no strong opposing effort for their own salvation” (Justin Martyr, cited in [Rampton 2018](#), pp. 3–4). The Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and many other pagan nations knew of priests and magicians who could call upon these demons for all kinds of purposes.

Such was the standard Christian explanation of the worship of false gods: so many attempts to invoke demons and have them effectuate desired events in the world. Importantly, it explained how heathen religion *could sustain and reproduce itself on an everyday basis*. Why would people keep worshipping deities and revering the priests who performed the rites, if the idols were merely dead objects and the priests only impostors? The account answered this question: idolatry had the capacity to reproduce false religion and keep it in place, because its magic invoked demons who could *either* cause the desired effects *or* instill this illusion into the idolaters.

Naturally, Christian discourse on heathen religion knew of variation and disagreement also. One of its major exponents, Augustine of Hippo, agreed that the worship of false gods had as its object “most vile spirits and malignant and deceitful demons,” who had their misdeeds “celebrated for them at their own festivals” (The City of God, 4.1; [Augustine 1998](#), p. 143). But he also insisted that “most of the putative powers of the fallen angels were fraudulent” and that “demons’ seeming abilities to contravene natural law were delusionary” ([Rampton 2018](#), p. 4). Nonetheless, these same demons

succeeded at tricking weak human beings, with evil desires, into embracing precisely that delusion (*On Christian Doctrine*, 23, §35).

This account of idolatry was not some fanciful speculation by a handful of church fathers. For more than a millennium, it served as a standard explanation for the everyday reproduction of heathen religion in pagan societies and for the seductive power held by similar practices even in Christian societies. Along with the variations, its basics kept recurring in Western thinking well into the modern era. They became commonplaces about idol worship, the power of sorcery, and the agency of demons, which were central to several debates and practices in European history. The long-lasting concerns about witchcraft and the accompanying practices of persecution drew upon these commonplaces (Stephens 2003), as did the early modern descriptions of the Brahmin class as the priesthood of Indian heathendom.

For our purposes, the account's conceptual structure is crucial, since it establishes a connection between the 'rites' and 'formulas' of pagan priests, on the one hand, and the occurrence of certain effects in the world, on the other. The required causal forces—which should allow the priestly rites and magical spells to have the desired effects—are *the acts of demons*. These could either truly cause events in the natural and social world or create the delusion among human beings that such events occurred *because of* the rites and spells. As this cluster of ideas percolated into common sense in Western societies, it continued to be available for explaining the religions and rituals of non-Western cultures. In early modern scholarship, however, the demons gradually ceased to play the role of existing agents whose actions had effects in the world. Consequently, the causal forces became a variable or placeholder that needed to be accounted for in other ways.

The notion of 'magical thinking' that crystallized in 19th-century European theorizing on religion took up this task. Its structure shows a remarkable correspondence to the basic form of the earlier explanations: instead of the practice of trafficking with demons, a distinctive mode of thinking now allegedly characterized the mental world of "primitive (pagan) man." That is, the invisible spirits no longer counted as a genuine connection between rites and spells, on the one hand, and events and objects in the world, on the other. Rather, pre-modern humans lived *under the delusion* that such causal forces operate in the world because of their magical and pre-scientific thinking (Tylor 1871; Frazer 1922). In the course of the 19th century, this explanatory scheme also entered scholarship about ancient India and its Brahmanical religion.

3.3. Aryan Rites

Along with the concept of priesthood, the ritual status and power attributed to the Brahmins constitute another core element of the classical account. The idea that the performance of rituals provided this class with exceptional powers was closely related to the growth of the Aryan invasion theory during the 19th century. Today, it is widely known that this 'theory' was fed by biblical ethnology and attempts to trace the descent of human nations and languages from the sons of Noah (Arvidsson 2006; Bryant 2001; Poliakov 1977; Schaffer and Lichtenstein 1995; Trautmann 1997). But its claims about the nature of sacrificial ritual have not received as much critical attention; on the contrary, these are still taken to represent facts about Vedic religion.

By mid-19th century, as the idea of an ancient invasion entered standard histories of India, German scholars began to produce detailed accounts of the invading people and the status of its priesthood. Rudolph von Roth, an early expert on Vedic philology, traced the name of "the priestly caste" to the Sanskrit word '*brahma*', which he translated as 'prayer'; this etymology convinced him that the caste's origin lay in the growing importance of rituals. In the Vedic age, he claimed, the people increasingly depended on the performance of prayers to implore the help of the gods. Consequently, a distinction emerged between the commoners, who sought refuge in the gods, and the priests, who possessed the knowledge and authority to perform rituals. Even kings needed the Brahmins to gain the favor of the gods, so these priests acquired tremendous respect and prestige among the populace. When the function of priesthood became hereditary, the families responsible for performing rituals united into

one community. But they became a genuine caste only after they left the Punjab and moved southward. Roth imaginatively described the difficult journey: after chasing the indigenous population into the mountains, the Vedic people suddenly gained control over an enormous area, which was unsuited for accommodating the many little kingdoms of which it consisted. Consequently, conflict erupted among the different kings and their tribes, leading to a power vacuum. Eventually, the Brahmins took advantage of this chaos to occupy the vacuum and rise to an even higher level by usurping the supreme position in society (Roth 1847, pp. 80–81).

Albrecht Weber, another German Indologist, told a similar story. He identified the Shudras as the original inhabitants of India, who had been enslaved by superior Aryans when the latter moved southward. These indigenous tribes—“partly black, partly brown of skin, and all of the lowest cultural level”—outnumbered the Aryans, who therefore had to unite their tribes against this “wild force” (Weber 1868, p. 4). Here, Weber followed scholars such as Müller (1848, p. 348), who suggested that the warrior-like Aryan people had reduced “the aboriginal inhabitants” to a state of slavery and degradation and absorbed them as the lower classes of the Hindus (see Schleiermacher 1835, p. 72; Campbell 1839, pp. 106–7). Weber could also access the psychology of the Aryans: the constant battle against the indigenous people and the hostile climate had generated tremendous uncertainty among these invaders. They felt a growing need for protection from the gods and, hence, ritual and sacrifice became a crucial aspect of their religion. In this context, the Brahmin priesthood acquired its prominent position by monopolizing the knowledge needed for performing rituals:

The knowledge of the old songs and customs became hereditary as it was now transmitted only within their families; with each generation, the scope and substance of their influence and position expanded, until they finally reached the superstitious level..., where they no longer acted merely as mediators between gods and men, but now as physical representatives of the divine, as earthly gods. (Weber 1868, p. 5)

Weber’s colleague Martin Haug agreed that the Brahmins had made use of the significance of sacrificial ritual among the Aryan people to declare themselves gods on earth. They were “the makers of thunder and rain” and “the possessors of ‘Brahma’,” who provided growth, prosperity and food. Clearly, these notions must be ancient, Haug speculated, and had deep roots in the sentiments of the Indian people. “Since the science of the Brahmins was considered so indispensable, these cunning minds soon succeeded at expanding the scope of their activity.” They kept their science secret and could thus exploit the people’s superstition to their own benefit. “Not only did they want to be honoured with the most extravagant gifts (*dakshina*), but they also claimed an exceptional social position; in a word, they did not want to be below, but above the law” (Haug 1871, p. 21).

The story about the Brahmin’s arrogation of a supreme, or even divine, status soon spread across Europe. While some details differed, its core elements remained the same. Much like Müller, the Frenchman Théodore Pavie presented the Aryans as a civilized family of tribes, possessing the expansive vitality of the Japhetic races (descendants of Japhet, one of the three sons of Noah), who had encountered the black aboriginal peoples of India, probably Chamites (descendants of Cham). To conquer these aborigines, the Aryans needed to transform themselves into an organized nation. Eventually, their settling on Indian soil resulted in the “exceptional regime” of caste, which was fully established by the 12th century CE. Here, the Brahmins were placed at the first rank because of their knowledge of the ritual tradition; in contrast, the Vaishya’s inferior position and the even more degraded status of the Shudra, Pavie insisted, had its origin in the military conquest and occupation of a land inhabited by less civilized and less intelligent people (Pavie 1854, pp. 277–79).

Similarly, the early *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explained how the interaction of the conquering people with the indigenous tribes had generated a predicament: the pious Aryans, and especially their priestly class, saw “considerable danger to the purity of their own faith from too close and intimate a contact between the two races.” Hence, they devised measures to restrict the intercourse between the races as much as possible. “Meanwhile the power of the sacerdotal order having been gradually enlarged in proportion to the development of the minutiae of sacrificial ceremonial and the increase of sacred lore,

they began to lay claim to supreme authority in regulating and controlling the religious and social life of the people" (Eggeling 1889, p. 203). All of this would end up resulting in Brahmanical supremacy.

In these 19th-century accounts, the Christian belief that the heathen priesthood manipulated invisible forces through its rites and incantations had been transformed into a 'meta-level' explanation: the Brahmins *claimed* that they possessed this power and the superstitious people *believed* in this delusion. What had earlier functioned as a religious account of the functioning of idolatry took on a new form in these 'scientific' studies; it did so by being re-described as the belief system of the ancient Indians (which the modern scholar of course did not endorse). Despite this shift, the new explanations could not but retain central concepts of the original: 'priesthood', 'superstition', 'the sacerdotal order', 'mediators between man and God'... And along with these came the anticlericalism that pervaded the 18th- and 19th-century intellectual world in Europe, especially its Protestant and philosophical circles: a general critique of priesthood, which ascribed a similar degenerated status to the Roman-Catholic clergy and the ritual experts of non-Western religions. Hence, the Brahmins could be represented as cunning priests, posing as privileged mediators between man and god, who had used their monopoly on ritual knowledge to arrogate a position of supreme authority over the people's religious and social life.

It is difficult to miss the second conceptual scheme at the heart of the 19th-century accounts: the discourse about the biological and cultural superiority and inferiority of races, which was so popular in this era. The conquering of an 'inferior', 'dark-skinned' race by another 'superior' one with a lighter skin; "the vitality of the Japhetic races"; the low cultural level of the indigenous population and its subjugation as the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy; the attempt of one race to avoid contact with another out of fear of the corruption of its faith . . . : each of these explanatory factors derived from this framework and would fail to make sense in its absence.

Both conceptual schemes—the theological and the racial—were crucial to the speculations about the Vedic people and the rise of its Brahmin priesthood. If we were to remove them, little would remain but a handful of just-so stories about the ancient history and tribal warfare of India. Early on, such speculations had already led critics to exasperation:

Whether the primeval inhabitants of this country migrated from Persia, or were natives of the soil, is a question which has given rise to much learned and ingenious discussion. But the various arguments which have been employed upon it serve rather to amuse the fancy than to satisfy the understanding. Inquiries into the origin of nations of remote antiquity, though they may furnish curiosity with entertainment, are in effect detrimental to the growth of rational knowledge by deluding with specious theories the common sense of mankind. (Campbell and Samuel 1800, p. 2)

In fact, the entire story seemed implausible, so Lieutenant-Colonel Low observed. The Brahmins must inevitably have been a minority, when they arrived on the Indian frontier, and the fact that they remained in the Punjab rather than settling in other, more pleasant quarters, indicates that they feared "the people then possessing India." It is improbable that such a minority would succeed at imposing its customs, laws, and religion upon the majority. To render this plausible, "it would be requisite first to shew, if indeed that even would be sufficient, that the then occupants of India were a savage, unlettered, and unreligionized race or races, ready to view the strangers as demigods, and to bend their necks to their civil and spiritual domination—and to yield up their native freedom to the unmitigated thralldom of caste" (Low 1849, p. 99).

3.4. Pre-Scientific Science

The idea of Brahmanical ritual power travelled from the 19th to the 20th century, as it was transmitted by key authors such as Hermann Oldenberg. His account of ancient India was embedded in a familiar story about the evolution of religion through different stages. In the savage stage, "the religion of the lowest orders of man" looks the same all across the world: magicians are called

upon to manipulate the many spirits that populate the world and animate its objects. Later, the spirits give way to divinities, personifications of natural forces in superhuman form, whose favor is sought by means of sacrifice and prayer. Vedic religion is still a barbaric one, Oldenberg wrote, since it had not yet taken “[the] step of incomparable importance in the evolution of religion—the association of the ideas of God and good” and was “as yet too far removed from pure spirituality for a purely spiritual form of adoration” (Oldenberg 1898, pp. 70–73). Instead, this religion transmuted the deities into divine lords, “protectors of the different conditions and interests of human life.” The cult devoted to these divinities assumed the form of the sacrifice, where they are to be pleased with food, intoxicating drink, and prayers that seek to flatter them:

Thereupon is the proper moment for the worshippers, who sit around the sacrificial ceremony “like flies about honey,” to lay their desires before the gods: desires which—corresponding to the spirit of the age—are ever directed to the palpable goods of earthly existence,— a long life, posterity, the acquisition of property in horses and cattle, favorable weather, triumph over all enemies. The art of properly performing these sacrifices and prayers is the main theme about which the whole spiritual life of the poets of the Rig-veda revolves . . . To utter such a prayer and to offer up such a sacrifice not every one is called or fitted whom the inner impulse moves, but only the trained priest, one belonging to certain families who have formed an exclusive spiritual caste from time immemorial . . . (Oldenberg 1898)

Within this larger framework emerged the idea that the Brahmins had created a “pre-scientific science” of correlations or homologies (Oldenberg 1919). That is, these priests postulated a web of hidden interrelations connecting the ritual realm to the cosmic and human realms; drawing on their privileged access to this esoteric system, they claimed the power to perform rituals that obtained the desired effects. “This ‘ritual science’,” Michael Witzel insists, “is based on the *strictly logical* application of the rule of cause and effect, even though its *initial* propositions (e.g., ‘the sun is gold’) are something that we would not accept” (Witzel 2003, p. 81). And this set of ideas kept being reproduced in more recent accounts of ancient Indian religion and ritual homology (Eliade 1959; Lincoln 1986; Smith 1994a; Jamison and Brereton 2014).

Our aim is not to trace the many historical variations on the account of Brahmanical religion, but to identify the cognitive conditions under which it could appear sensible and plausible. Clearly, its explanations of the status and power of the Brahmin were intertwined with other clusters of ideas: the Aryan conquest of a racially and culturally inferior people and the latter’s subordination as the lower class(es); the priest’s capacity to manipulate deities and spirits by means of sacrifice and prayer; his arrogation of social supremacy through a monopoly on ritual knowledge; the evolution of religion from a primitive belief in invisible forces to a more elevated spiritual faith in God; etc.

Today, Christian doctrine and biblical ethnology have no place in the scientific study of religion, while theories about the superiority or inferiority of races and religions are anathema. Yet, the classical account of the nature and role of the Brahmin largely survives, even though it originally depended on concepts drawn from these frameworks. The mystery of Brahmanical power seems to emerge from the discarding of these concepts: neither “heathen priesthood” and “superstition” nor “Aryan conquest” and “magical thinking” can account for the Brahmin’s extraordinary status, since both sets of notions have been rejected by 20th- and 21st-century scholarship. To fill in the missing link, scholars are compelled to introduce an alternative force that accounts for the connection between the priesthood’s ritual role and the success of its social ideology. This is where “ritual power” and “homological thought” come in. In other words, scholars of ancient Indian religion appear to be caught in a double bind: the explanatory structure of their accounts requires attributing supernatural powers to the Brahmin class, but, in our day and age, they cannot do so in explicit terms; hence, the ambiguity about Brahmanical power and status.

4. Conclusions: Immunizing a Core

How could the standard claims about the Brahmin class and its role in Indian religion retain the status of ‘facts’, in spite of the rejection of so many of the ideas with which they were originally entangled? How can we explain their remarkable continuity and stability, given the collapse of the cognitive conditions under which they survived and flourished from the 17th to the 20th century?

One type of answer would argue that these claims describe basic ‘first-order’ facts, whereas the discarded ideas constituted ‘second-order’ explanations of these facts. Consider an analogy: planetary motion is a fact, while the model of rotating celestial spheres and Newton’s gravitational theory are two competing explanations of this fact. Similarly, one could argue the following: that the Brahmins form a priestly class of ritual experts—who occupied the role of mediators between the worshippers and their deities, arrogated a sacred status in society, and oppressed the lower castes—are basic facts, whereas theological notions of priesthood, racial theories of superiority and inferiority, anthropological speculations about magical thinking, etc., are so many attempts to account for these facts. According to this type of answer, continuity at the level of factual observation goes together with discontinuity at the level of theory formation.

The problem with this route is that it clashes with the consensus which emerged from philosophical and historical studies of science during the past 75 years (Godfrey-Smith 2003). Today, we know that scientific research does not produce a collection of theory-independent facts, which are then explained by competing theories; instead, our observations (certainly those involving some level of complexity) take the form of descriptions already structured by theoretical schemes. Consider words such as ‘religion’, ‘priest’, ‘mediators’, ‘sacred’, ‘worshipper’, ‘caste’, and ‘ideology’. These are not theory-neutral observational terms, but theoretical terms embedded in larger clusters. Hence, the resulting descriptions of ‘facts’ concerning Indian culture must be structured by such larger theoretical schemes.

If we wish to explain the continuity between contemporary accounts of Indian culture and those of 18th- and 19th-century Europe, we need to respect this consensus, rather than turn back to outdated notions of science. We will briefly explore a route that does so. Imre Lakatos, a major 20th-century philosopher of science, characterized scientific progress in terms of competition between research programs: larger frameworks forming the basic units of science, within which a succession of theories is produced. Every research program, Lakatos suggested, consists of three elements: a “hard core” of basic theses and assumptions; a “protective belt” of auxiliary hypotheses that surrounds this core; and a “heuristic” or problem-solving machinery consisting of sophisticated techniques. Since any research program moves in “a permanent ocean of anomalies,” scientists regularly encounter observations that conflict with a theory’s predictions and other types of problems. But a research program is not discarded by its advocates simply because it faces some set of anomalies; instead, its protective belt allows the scientists to cope with these problems by immunizing its hard core against falsification and generating new auxiliary hypotheses. Giving up this core of fundamental assumptions would result in the disintegration of the entire research program, which has generated or promises to generate a succession of theories. To avoid this, scientists can neutralize the anomalies and continue to develop new hypotheses within the program’s framework, by revising the more flexible set of ideas forming the protective belt (Lakatos 1978; for analysis, see Laudan 1977, pp. 76–78; Carrier 2002; Worrall 2002).

If we view the contemporary study of Indian culture as a research program with this kind of structure, we can begin to make sense of its peculiar combination of continuities and discontinuities. The basic assumptions about the religion of the Brahmin are part of this program’s hard core, whereas the claims concerning the Aryan invasion, racial superiority, magical thinking, and the varna ideology are part of its protective belt. The latter ideas form a more flexible set of auxiliary hypotheses, which can be modified and revised in the face of anomalies, so as to protect the research program from refutation. Indeed, this has happened regularly, not only during the past three decades, but also in the centuries before. Between the 17th and the 21st centuries, various accounts of Brahmanical religion succeeded each other; each of these relied upon specific ideas that were dominant or popular in some

era. In the face of empirical and conceptual problems, the auxiliary hypotheses moved from theological notions of heathen idolatry to anthropological concepts of magical thinking and to the current claims about homology and ideology; or they could shift from the idea of an Aryan invasion and conquest to peaceful migration and contact. But the hard core of assumptions concerning the religion and priesthood of ancient India needed to be immunized against falsification; if scholars failed to do so, their entire research program would break down (and this in the absence of any promising alternative).

Inevitably, characterizing the contemporary study of Indian culture as such a research program generates new questions. How did its hard core come into being and wherefrom did it derive its basic assumptions about Indian religion and the Brahmin class? What is its relation to the centuries of Christian-theological reasoning about the religion and priesthood of 'pagan' nations? Are we dealing with two (or more) competing research programs or with a succession of theories sharing the same hard core? Do the internal problems that plague recent scholarship show that the program's protective belt has exhausted its heuristic potential and is losing its capacity to generate new hypotheses in the face of accumulating anomalies?

We cannot address these questions within the confines of this article. What we hope to have done, though, is point out a promising route toward identifying and resolving some puzzles raised by the contemporary study of Indian religion. The fact that this route generates new questions indicates its potential to help make sense of the peculiar state of this field. If Lakatos is right, however, it will eventually take the growth of an alternative research program to tackle and supersede this problem situation.

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