

Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca
Cluj Center for Indian Studies

Romanian Journal of Indian Studies



Editor-in-Chief:
Mihaela Gligor

Presa Universitară Clujeană



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ARGUMENT

Mihaela GLIGOR

Cluj Center for Indian Studies

Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca

“India is seen as a country of immense diversity, of distinct hopes, of vast and disparate beliefs, of extraordinary customs and a genuine feast of opinions. The cultural heritage of contemporary India combines the Islamic influences with the Hindu ones, as well as those pertaining to other traditions, and the outcome of the interaction among different religious communities can be fully seen in literature, music, painting, architecture and many other fields.” (Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize laureate)

India is a mixture of emotions, colours, feelings, music, happiness, sorrow, life and death, gods and people. India is an endless puzzle which each soul that meets its mystery tries to solve. India is infinite, just as untrammelled as the fascination that it produces in the others.

India is an incredibly rich culture, with a history of thousands of years. It saw the rise of various civilizations, religions, dynasties, human groups, cultures, and arts. India has been presented and represented in many forms in literary discourses, arts, and heritage symbols. But the country is so vast that there always remains an area to be explored. Moreover, there are many new things to be interpreted. Any discussion on anything belonging to India and its culture is incomplete without interdisciplinary dialogue between various cultural aspects and elements.

Through its incredible stories, India has always attracted people of distant places from archaeologists, travelers, merchants, artists to scientists, and academic researchers. Its rich diversity and its myths, legends, arts or music fascinated and allured many minds. The languages of India, from Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Tamil, the regional languages from the ancient times, to Persian and Urdu from the medieval times, and English, Bengali or Hindi from the modern period, were and still are fascinating for linguists and researchers.

The *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* seeks and encourages interdisciplinary approaches in linguistics, literature and literary studies, Indian philosophy, history of religions, political philosophy, and history of ideas, science, anthropology, sociology, education, communications theory, history, and performing arts. One of its primary aims is the integration of the results of the several disciplines of the humanities so that its studies will have a synthetic character in order to acquaint the reader with the progress being made in the general area of Indian Studies.

The *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* is affiliated to the *Cluj Center for Indian Studies*, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca. The Journal appears once per year, and it is dedicated to Romanian and international researchers with various interests in Indian cultures.

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PORTRAITS

Nālandā: The Revival of a Global Intellectual Legacy

**Tosabanta PADHAN
Nālandā University, India**

Abstract: Nālandā University, one of the most celebrated centres of learning in the ancient world, holds an extraordinary place in the history of education and intellectual exchange. Founded under the Gupta dynasty in the 5th century CE and sustained until the 13th century CE, Nālandā flourished for nearly eight centuries under the patronage of Indian rulers and patrons from abroad. It became a magnet for scholars, philosophers, monks, and seekers of knowledge from across Asia.

The modern Nālandā University, re-established in 2006 at the initiative of Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the President of India at that time, stands as an international centre of learning. This paper traces the history of Nālandā and celebrates its leading role in education and the exchange of intellectual ideas, both in antiquity and in the present.

Keywords: Nālandā University, philosophy, monastery, higher education, ideas and intellectual exchange.

More than a monastery, Nālandā¹ developed as a major residential centre of higher learning, where thousands of students and teachers lived, studied, debated, and exchanged ideas. At the heart of the Mahāvihāra was its celebrated library building *Dharmaganja* the “Treasury of Knowledge.” It comprised three other library building, *Ratnasāgara*, *Ratnadadhi*, and *Ratnarañjaka*, which housed manuscripts covering

¹ Also written as Nalanda.

philosophy, medicine, grammar, astronomy, mathematics, fine arts, metallurgy, spiritual traditions, and other fields of knowledge. Scholars travelled from distant parts of Asia to study and copy texts preserved at Nālandā. The Chinese monk Xuanzang (602-664 CE) records the *Pañcavidyā*, or five branches of learning, within Nālandā's broad intellectual curriculum: *śabdavidyā* (grammar and language), *śilpasthānavidyā* (arts and crafts), *cikitsāvidyā* (medicine), *hetuvidyā* (logic), and *adhyātmavidyā* (philosophy and religious thought). This breadth reveals Nālandā as a genuinely multidisciplinary institution.

The roots of Nālandā's sacred landscape reach further back. Buddhist textual traditions associate the site with Śāriputra, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, who is believed to have been born and attained parinirvāṇa at Nālandā. Archaeological evidence points to an even earlier history, including a stupa associated with King Aśoka, traditionally identified with the monument dedicated to Śāriputra at Temple 3. These early associations created a powerful religious and cultural foundation upon which the great Mahāvihāra emerged centuries later.

The archaeological remains reveal the sophistication of Nālandā's planning. Established within a predominantly agrarian landscape extending over several square kilometers, the Mahāvihāra developed according to a carefully organised spatial plan. Monasteries, temples, stupas, shrines, wells, ponds and large water bodies were arranged in an integrated architectural landscape that combined practical requirements with religious symbolism. Excavations have exposed eleven monasteries and six brick-built temples, providing a glimpse into the scale and organisation of this remarkable institution. Its history is reconstructed through archaeology, inscriptions, seals, copper-plate charters, literary sources, and the accounts of foreign travelers.

From the 5th to the 12th centuries CE, Nālandā became one of the most cosmopolitan centres of learning in Asia. Students and scholars travelled to it from South, Southeast, East, and Central Asia. Among its most celebrated visitors were the Chinese monks Xuanzang, who studied

at Nālandā in the 7th century, and Yijing, who arrived in 671 CE. Their accounts provide invaluable descriptions of Nālandā's intellectual life, curriculum, discipline, architecture, and international connections.

After centuries of intellectual and institutional vitality, Nālandā entered a period of decline. During the later Pāla period, royal patronage weakened and other monastic centres gained prominence. The invasions of the late 12th century brought catastrophic destruction. The Persian chronicler Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani, in his *Tabaqāt-i-Nāsiri*, records the attack on the “fort of Bihar” and the subsequent destruction associated with Nālandā. When the Tibetan monk Dharmasvāmin visited around 1235 CE, only a small number of monks remained amid the ruins. Many had fled to safer regions. The institutional life of Nālandā had effectively collapsed, but its intellectual traditions survived through monks, manuscripts, and Buddhist centres across Asia.

Reviving Nālandā

In 2006, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the President of India at that time, proposed the re-establishment of Nālandā as an international centre of learning. The proposal received strong support, particularly from the 17 member states of the East Asia Summit in 2007. The Government of Bihar provided 455 acres of land for the new campus, and the Parliament of India enacted the Nalanda University Act in 2010, giving institutional form to the vision of reviving Nālandā's intellectual legacy. With the support of the Government of India, particularly the Ministry of External Affairs, and successive academic leadership, the University has developed into an international institution that seeks to connect India's civilizational knowledge traditions with contemporary global scholarship.

On 19th June 2024, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi inaugurated the new campus of Nālandā University at Rajgir, Bihar, marking a historic milestone in the revival of one of the ancient world's most renowned centres of learning. Situated near the archaeological remains of ancient Nālandā, the new campus seeks to reconnect the contemporary institution with the intellectual and cultural traditions that once brought

scholars and students from across globe to this celebrated seat of Buddhist learning. The inauguration, attended by representatives from 17 countries, also reaffirmed Nālandā's historic role as a bridge connecting India with the wider Asian world through knowledge, scholarship, and cultural exchange. Reflecting on the significance of this revival, Prime Minister Modi noted that

“Nalanda is not just a name. Nalanda is an identity, a respect. Nalanda is a value, a mantra, a pride, a saga. Nalanda is the declaration of this truth that even though books may burn in the flames, the flames cannot extinguish knowledge.”²

The inauguration therefore represented more than the opening of a new campus. It marked the renewal of a civilizational idea in which knowledge transcends boundaries and Nālandā once again serves as a meeting point for scholars, cultures, and intellectual traditions from India and the wider Asian world.

The University's permanent campus embodies this vision through an architecture that draws inspiration from the intellectual and environmental ethos of ancient Nālandā. Conceived as a Net-Zero and zero-waste campus, it incorporates more than 100 acres of water bodies, extensive green spaces, a 6.5 MW solar farm, a 1.5 MW biogas plant, water-recycling systems, rainwater harvesting, renewable-energy generation and smart-grid technologies. Traditional Indian architectural principles, including elements of *Vāstu Śāstra*, have been integrated with modern technologies to create a sustainable and culturally resonant learning environment. The campus consequently serves not only as a centre of education and research but also as a living laboratory for sustainable development. From its initial two postgraduate programmes, the University has expanded its academic portfolio substantially. It

² Prime Minister's address at the inauguration of Nalanda University Campus in Rajgir can be read here:

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2026473®=48&lang=2>

currently offers 16 master's programmes in fields including Archaeology, Historical Studies, Ecology and Environment Studies, Buddhist Studies, Philosophy and Comparative Religions, Hindu Studies, World Literature, International Relations and Peace Studies, Economics, Mathematics, Hindi, Sustainable Development and Management, Data Science and Artificial Intelligence, and Science and Technology Policy Studies. The University also offers a Global PhD programme and post-doctoral opportunities, supporting advanced research across its interdisciplinary academic landscape. Its schools bring together the study of history, archaeology, Buddhism, philosophy, languages and literature, ecology, management, information sciences and technology, reflecting an approach that places India's intellectual traditions in dialogue with emerging areas of knowledge.

Nālandā's commitment to Asian and global intellectual exchange is reflected in its language and cultural programmes, offering diploma and certificate courses in a wide range of Asian and European languages. Students from more than 35 nationalities have studied at Nālandā, while academic partnerships, student and faculty exchanges, conferences and collaborative research have strengthened its position as a contemporary bridge between India, Asia and the wider world.

Under the leadership of Hon'ble Vice Chancellor Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Nālandā University has entered a new phase marked by greater academic outreach, international engagement and community participation. A significant initiative is *Sahabhāgitā Saṃvāda*, through which the University partnership with five neighbouring villages in areas including education, agriculture, livelihoods, women's empowerment and knowledge exchange. The Nālandā University Self-Help Group has created opportunities for local women through traditional crafts and sustainable livelihood activities, strengthening the relationship between the University and its surrounding communities.

The University has expanded its academic collaborations in archaeology, heritage, Indian Knowledge Systems, and Asian studies,

while initiatives such as the Raj Bhavan – Nālandā University Lecture Series, international conferences, and dialogues on Dharma, global ethics, and the Global South have further strengthened its intellectual and public profile. It has also emerged as a platform for major international dialogues on economics, higher education, and regional cooperation, including the East Asia Summit (EAS) Conclave of Heads of Higher Education Institutions in September 2025. The EAS Conclave brought together academic leaders and policymakers from India and East Asia to advance educational collaboration, research partnerships, student exchange, and sustainable development. In early 2026, Nālandā University signed a cooperation agreement with Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. Together, these initiatives reflect a broader vision of Nālandā University as a contemporary institution that brings academic excellence, cultural heritage, community engagement, sustainability, and international cooperation into a shared framework of learning and dialogue.

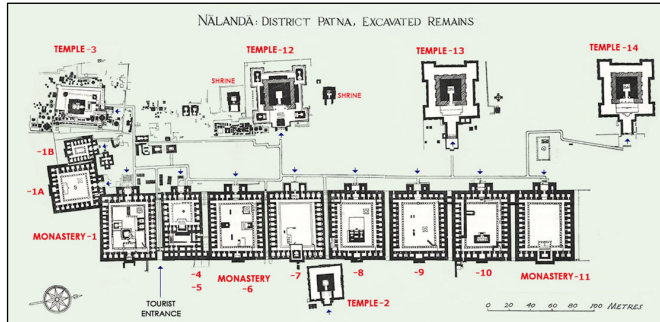
The Nālandā University logo presents a powerful message which embodies the philosophy of ‘The Nālandā Way’: “man living in harmony with man, man living in harmony with nature, and man living as part of nature,” representing harmony between human beings, nature, and the environment. The tree at the centre symbolizes nature, life, growth, and the spirit of giving, while the interlinked human figures represent people coming together in a shared pursuit of knowledge and constructive endeavour. Together, these elements reflect Nālandā’s vision of integrating the humanities, sciences, and sustainable community living in harmony with nature.

About the Author: **Tosabanta Padhan**, PhD, is Assistant Professor at School of Historical Studies, Nālandā University, Rajgir, Bihar, India. His areas of interests include Field Archaeology, Prehistoric Archaeology, Historical Archaeology, Experimental Archaeology, Geoarchaeology, Ethnoarchaeology, Digital Archaeology and Heritage Management.

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Terracotta Seal mentions the name:
Sangh of monks of Sri Nalanda Mahāvihāra



Plan of the excavated area of Nalanda Mahāvihāra
(Source: A. Gosh, 1939)



Excavated structural remains of the entrance gateway of Monastery No. 1, with Temple No. 3 in the background, Nalanda Mahāvihāra



The modern Nālandā University

From Learned Society to Knowledge Ecosystem: The Transformation of The Asiatic Society

Pritam GUREY
The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, India

Abstract: The Asiatic Society was founded in 1784 in Kolkata with the leadership of Sir William Jones, represents one of the earliest enduring institutional platforms that conducts systematic research on India and Asia. However, the significance of the Society goes far beyond its antiquity. Through the simultaneous development of a research library, manuscript and other museum collections, conservation and reprography facilities, scholarly publications and academic programmes, the Society established an institutional continuum linking the collection, organisation, preservation, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge.

This article examines that continuum through a multidisciplinary Indian Studies approach. It proposes the concept of the knowledge-lifecycle institution to interpret the Society's historical and contemporary functions. Library collections, manuscripts, museum objects, conservation practices, reproduction technologies, metadata creation, digitisation, research fellowships and scholarly communication are considered interconnected rather than departmentalised activities. Particular attention is given to the Society's transition from analogue preservation and reproduction towards digital preservation and its role as a Cluster under the Gyan Bharatam Mission of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

This article argues that the continuing relevance of The Asiatic Society lies in its transformation from a learned society into a networked knowledge ecosystem capable of connecting India's documentary and material heritage with contemporary scholarship and global intellectual communities.

Keywords: The Asiatic Society, Indian Studies, Asian Studies, Knowledge Institutions, Manuscripts, Cultural Heritage, Digitisation, Digital Preservation, Gyan Bharatam.

Introduction

The history of knowledge institutions is also a history of the ways in which societies collect, organise, preserve, interpret and communicate what they know. Libraries, museums, archives, learned societies and research institutions are frequently treated as distinct organisational categories. Historically, however, their functions have often overlapped. A manuscript may simultaneously be a text, an artefact, an archival document and a research object; a museum object may require cataloguing, conservation, photography and scholarly interpretation; a publication may emerge from a manuscript collection and subsequently become part of the institutional research record.

The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, offers an exceptional example of this convergence. With its foundation, the Society emerged as an institutional forum for systematic inquiry into the history, antiquities, arts, sciences and literature of Asia.

Its development contributed to the institutionalisation of research at a time when many branches of what would later become specialised academic disciplines were still developing. Society's subsequent history brought together philology, history, archaeology, epigraphy, literature, anthropology, art, science, numismatics and manuscript studies within a common institutional framework.

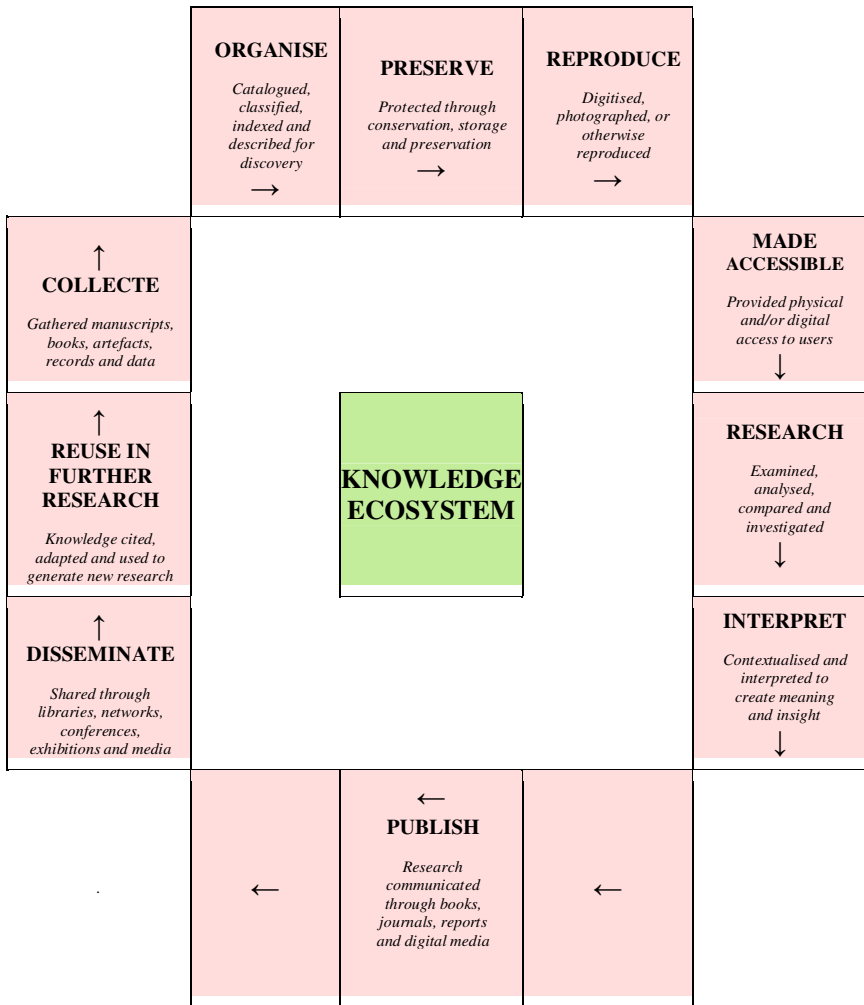
At present, the Society continues to reflect this multidimensional character. In its bicentenary year, the Society is recognised as an Institute of National Importance under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Its institutional infrastructure includes Library, Museum, Academic and Research Activities, Publications, Conservation, Reprography and Digitisation. Its collections contain books and journals

in numerous European, Indian and Asian languages and a substantial body of rare manuscripts and material heritage.

The diagram shows The Asiatic Society as a developing knowledge ecosystem in which collection, organization, preservation, reproduction, access, research, interpretation, communication, and reuse are interrelated activities. Its collections such as manuscripts, books, artifacts, and archives are organized and preserved systematically, reproduced by using the relevant technology, and accessed for research purposes. Research and interpretation convert these collections into new knowledge, which is then communicated through various means such as publications and conferences. This knowledge is again used for future research; hence the whole process becomes cyclic in nature. This model thus explains how the Society converts its preserved heritage into research resources, leading to its development from a traditional learned society to a knowledge lifecycle organization and ecosystem.

The central idea of this article is that The Asiatic Society is best understood not merely as an 18th century learned society or as a repository of antiquities, but as an evolving knowledge-lifecycle institution. The paper discusses the contribution of the Asiatic Society in organised research and studies the Society's library, manuscripts and museum collections, conservation and reprography facilities as an infrastructure for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, in addition to the transformative power of digitisation and the Gyan Bharatam mission of the society.

The significance of the Asiatic Society does not reside in the antiquity of its collections but in its continuous power to transform preserved heritage into knowledge.



The Knowledge Lifecycle: an integrated model of collection, preservation, access, research and scholarly reuse.

The Foundation of an organised Research Institution

The setting up of the Asiatic Society in 1784 is important because it provided a stable institutional base for intellectual research. It must be mentioned in this regard that the vision of Sir William Jones was rather wide. The domain of study was vast and covered the entire continent of Asia and included such disciplines as history, antiquities, languages, literature, arts and science.

This variety was crucial to its later development. The study of Indian civilisation had to go beyond a single discipline. The study of Sanskrit literature involved linguistic and textual analysis; the study of inscriptions, epigraphy and history; the study of coins, numismatics and archaeology; the study of manuscripts, textual and material conservation; the study of geographical and natural-scientific phenomena empirical documentation. All this happened within the same Society.

The importance of such an approach can be better seen from a historical perspective. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the modern boundaries between disciplines had not been established yet. Learned societies often fulfilled the function that universities and specialised research institutions would perform later. As a result, the Asiatic Society became a place where information gathered from different disciplines was collected and scholars had an opportunity to exchange their discoveries with a scientific community. The focus of its early work on gathering observations and publishing them became an important idea: research should be made institutionally durable through documenting, preserving and disseminating it.

The Society's own history of publication illustrates this principle. The first volume of *Asiatick Researches* was released in 1788 after Sir Jones's initial proposal for an annual publication. The publication contained research on the history, arts and antiquities, sciences and literature of Asia. The later *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* developed this scholarly communication function further. Thus, from its beginnings, the Society united three functions which are often artificially

distinguished in contemporary institutional analyses: Research, Documentation and Dissemination of Knowledge.

Historical and Intellectual Evolution since 1784

The history of The Asiatic Society can be seen as a process of growth and development of institutions.

- The first stage was the creation of a learned Society and a programme of investigation.
- The second stage was the accumulation of documentary and material sources. Books, manuscripts, inscriptions, coins, paintings, maps and many other objects were gathered as they served as sources for research.
- The third stage was related to the organisation and distribution of sources by means of catalogues, publications and research services.
- The fourth stage related to professional conservation, reproduction and preservation.
- The fifth stage, which emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is associated with the trend to digitalise sources and create digital and networked access to them.

It should be emphasised that none of these stages should be seen as a substitution for each other. New stages contain all the previous functions. Contemporary The Asiatic Society works on digitalisation and digital preservation but still uses physical sources, cataloguing, conservation and reference services and publications. Thus, continuity is the main feature of its institutional development.

Eminent Scholars and the Institutional Production of Knowledge

The history of the Society includes scholars who have left their mark on the intellectual history of India and Asia. Sir William Jones set the foundation of the Society. Charles Wilkins worked in the Sanskrit language and translations. H. T. Colebrooke contributed to Sanskrit literature, law, and philosophy. H. H. Wilson made his mark on Sanskrit scholarship and historical study. James Prinsep was an innovator in epigraphy and numismatics, among whom he included the decipherment

of the Brahmi script. The intellectual history of the Society is also enriched by the work of Nathaniel Wallich, Brian Houghton Hodgson, Buchanan Hamilton, Rajendralala Mitra, and Haraprasad Shastri. Their contributions should not be assessed only within the framework of individual biography. The significance of the Society lies in the institutional context within which individual scholarship could become a form of collective intellectual memory.

A scholar could study a manuscript, inscription, or coin; the Society would then conserve the material, describe it, help study it, publish the results, and thus pass the findings on to future generations. In other words, the institution becomes a mediator between individual intellectual effort and collective memory of knowledge. This is especially relevant regarding Raja Rajendralala Mitra (first Indian as President of the Society) and Pandit Haraprasad Shastri, whose scholarly works show the increasingly significant role played by Indian scholars in the development of Indian studies.

The history of the Society should therefore not be reduced to the history of European Orientalism. Its longer trajectory includes the participation of Indian scholars, researchers and intellectuals and the gradual transformation of Indian Studies into a broader field of scholarly inquiry.

The Asiatic Society, Indian Studies and Asian Studies

The intellectual scope of The Asiatic Society has always extended beyond a narrowly defined conception of India. Its collections and publications reflect interactions among Indian, Central Asian, Tibetan, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Southeast Asian and European intellectual traditions. This makes the Society particularly relevant to contemporary Indian Studies, where India is increasingly understood through networks of cultural and intellectual interaction rather than as an isolated civilisational unit.

The study of Buddhism, for example, may involve Indian, Tibetan and Southeast Asian sources. Persian manuscripts illuminate dimensions

of Indian political and cultural history. European-language publications preserve evidence concerning the formation of Oriental studies. Manuscripts in different scripts and languages demonstrate the movement of texts across regions. The Society therefore provides a physical and intellectual environment in which Indian Studies and Asian Studies intersect.

Its historical publications also reveal an early attempt to bring knowledge concerning Asia into an organised scholarly discourse. The Society's current research programme continues this interdisciplinary orientation through projects involving archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, history, literature, manuscript studies and cultural heritage. This multi-disciplinarity is not simply an administrative convenience. It is intrinsic to the nature of the collections themselves.

The Asiatic Society as a Transnational Knowledge Network

The importance of the Society on a global scale can be appreciated through the circulation of texts, objects, scholars and publications. Right from its inception, the Society has been associated with scholarly networks that transcend the confines of Bengal. Publications of the Society were distributed all over the world and books, manuscripts, correspondence and scholarly information reached the collections of the Society from various geographic locations. The multilingual nature of the collections reflects this. European languages are found along with Indian and Asian languages, which create documentary evidence of intellectual exchanges across geographic boundaries.

However, this international aspect must be understood from a critical perspective. The knowledge production concerning Asia during the colonial era was marked by unequal political structures and intellectual exchanges. The history of the Society therefore needs to be appreciated in both these contexts. The collections can be used as primary sources in studying the process through which knowledge moved around, how categories were made, how translations were made and how intellectual traditions got into global scholarly discourse. The Asiatic Society is not

only an institution that preserves knowledge about Asia; it is itself an archive of the history of knowledge about Asia.

Library, Manuscripts and Museum: An Integrated Knowledge System

The institutional development of the Society's Library and Museum reflects its gradual evolution into an organised knowledge institution. The Collection has been built up with gifts received from members, dating back to 25th March 1784. It was in 1796 that the Library and Museum emerged as significant elements in the functioning of the Society, whereas it was in 1808 that it was decided that a Librarian would be appointed to organised management of the Library. This step indicated that professionalisation of the Library management system was initiated by the Society to achieve the objective of managing its increasing documentation and materials effectively. With the abolition of the Fort William College at around 1854, a large collection of historical and other works on India, especially the whole of its Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and Urdu works, mostly in manuscript, was placed under the custody of the Society, with two prerequisites – that it be preserved safely and that the collection be accessible to all users.

The reorganisation of the Library took place in 1970 in four specialised units: (i) Printed Materials (Books and Periodicals); (ii) Manuscripts, Arts, Antiquities and Archival Records; (iii) Reprography; and (iv) Conservation and Binding. These units were under the general supervision and administrative control of the Librarian of the Society. These units were indicative of the Society's transformation from a traditional learned Society to an integrated knowledge institution with specialised functions for collection management, preservation, reproduction and access.

The Society's present library possesses a collection of 1,35,414 books and 1,09,323 bound journal volumes and 22,553 microfiches. They span a wide spectrum of subjects and languages, namely, European

languages, Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, modern Indian languages, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and many others.

The textual nature of a manuscript renders it a library item; the physical nature of the document renders it an object of material culture; the origin of the document renders it an archival item; the illumination and handwriting of the document render it an art historical object; and the preservation of the document calls for conservation science. Thus, the manuscript collection of the Society clearly highlights the inadequacy of institutional classifications.

The manuscript collection offers a new chronology and language dimension. The manuscript collection of the Society includes 51,022 manuscripts in many Indian and Asian languages and scripts. Out of these, there are 36,349 manuscripts that are of Sanskrit material dating from the seventh century. In addition to this, there are many illustrated manuscripts, Islamic material 6,203, Sino-Tibetan 6,729 and other Asian collections. This is not just a book collection.

This rule applies to inscriptions, coins, paintings and other artefacts. Their scientific value is determined by their documentation and interpretation. Their physical preservation is ensured by conservation. Their availability for scientific work is ensured by cataloguing, photography, reproduction and referral services. The Museum's development was also based on research purposes of the Society. Objects were gathered because they could "illustrate" Oriental history, culture, art, and nature. Later, the museum collection of the Society expanded to include manuscripts, archival documents (correspondence), lithoplates, coins, inscriptions, paintings, sculptures and other objects. Also, the current organisational structure of the Society proves this interrelation. Its units combine library sections, manuscripts and museum facilities, scanning and reprography sections in one organisational unit. Consequently, the Library and Museum are not just two repositories but together form the infrastructure of research evidence.

Items	Total Collection
Manuscripts	51022
Rare Books (<i>identified</i>)	1424
Chinese Books	590
Oil Paintings / Images	147
Coins	773
Plates (Litho + Photo + Mss. Drawings)	613
Maps	275
Copper Plates	43
Bust	19
Photo (Framed)	95
Photograph with engraving	37
Tibetan Thangka	02
Tibetan Tripitaka (Peeking version) (Printed)	168
Printed Inscription	23

The collection of the Society's Museum

Some Examples from the Society's Collection include:

Oldest Book:

Julii Firmici Astronomicorum Libri Octo Integri (1499)

Rare Books:

Kitab-ul-Qanun (1595)

Bhagavat Geeta / tr C. Wilkins (1785)

Grammar of the Bengali Language (1778)

Grammar of the Tibetan language / Csoma de Koros (1826)

Rare Journals:

Philosophical Transactions of Royal Society of London (1665)

Acta Physico Medica (1727)

Asiatick Researches (1788)

In addition to the diverse collection, the library also runs internship programs in collaboration with LIS departments of various universities, which give young professionals an opportunity for practical training in

library operations, heritage collections, preservation, conservation, documentation and digital initiatives. These programmes bridge academic learning and professional practice and demonstrate the Society's role as a knowledge ecosystem extending beyond the traditional functions of a learned society.

Conservation and Reprography as Knowledge-Preservation Functions

Conservation: Conservation and preservation are among the fundamental conditions of research. In the case of manuscript and book materials, their deterioration to the point of unusability is not just the problem of damaging the object but also the potential loss of the text, history, language, and culture contained in the text. Conservation has its epistemological dimension – it preserves the physical foundation of knowledge production.

Society's Conservation Section specialises in the preservation and conservation of books, manuscripts, plates, maps and other materials. Such activities as surface cleaning, repair and reinforcement of damaged paper, tissue lamination, encapsulation, deacidification where necessary, binding and re-binding and other preservation and conservation measures are performed by the specialists in conservation, considering the state of each particular item and its material composition. The activities of the section are vital for the extended physical durability of the collections.

Reprography: Another important unit of the Society, the Reprography Section, provides photocopying, photographic reproduction and digital reproduction of the collection materials. Historically, microfilm and microfiche enabled researchers to consult reproduced versions of rare material without repeatedly handling originals.

Photocopying and photography subsequently expanded this service. The Society's manuscript documentation specifically records the provision of microfilms, microfiche, digitisation and making soft copies, photocopies of manuscripts and printed materials to readers, researchers

and institutions. The significance of reprography becomes clearer when viewed as part of a knowledge lifecycle rather than as a technical service. Digitisation is therefore not an entirely new institutional objective. It is a technological transformation of an older preservation-access principle.

Thus, the two types of activities, conservation and reprography provide the combination of physical preservation with access control and knowledge dissemination. Reprography complements conservation by creating alternative forms of access.

Digitisation, Digital Preservation and Digital Archive:

Digitisation is often seen as a technological process, but for a heritage research organisation, digitisation is more than that – it is an institutional shift. Previous digitisation efforts by the Society entailed scanning of books, conversion of microfiche to soft copy and digital collection building. Digitised documents include publications of the Society – *Asiatick Researches*, *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, *the Journal of the Asiatic Society* and the *Bibliotheca Indica series*; microfiche – *Modern Review*, *Calcutta Review*, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, etc.

Digital preservation becomes another form of institutional memory. The physical manuscript becomes the cultural artefact while the digital one becomes another method to access and preserve it. While doing so, digital preservation gives rise to some new responsibilities as well. A digital object needs good storage, backup, integrity, format sustainability, metadata and technology planning. Therefore, digitisation does not mean that there is no need for further preservation, but rather a new level of preservation begins.

The digital archive named *VidyaRatna Kosha* has also been developed using DSpace, an open-source repository platform. The strengths of this archive include accessibility, secure storage, dissemination and multidisciplinary research. However, the importance of having a repository extends far beyond mere convenience. Customisation of the

archive is currently underway in accordance with the requirements of the institution and is expected to be made available shortly.

Academic Activities, Research Fellowships and Projects

Collections become intellectually meaningful when they are activated through research. The Society's Academic Wing supports research fellowships, formal research projects, seminars, conferences, lectures, workshops and exhibitions. Its research programme encompasses Indology, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, folklore, Sanskrit studies, history, Persian and Arabic studies and related areas of Indian and Asian Studies.

The Society's research projects demonstrate the multidisciplinary character of this agenda. Examples include studies of Buddhism and South and Southeast Asian relations, Vedic culture, Buddhist art and archaeology, the history of science, North-East India, folklore, Bengali script, inscriptions, tribal heritage, Persian and Arabic studies and the history of The Asiatic Society itself.

The fellowship system is particularly important because it establishes a direct relationship between institutional collections and new scholarships. A manuscript becomes newly meaningful when a scholar edits or translates it. An inscription becomes historical evidence through epigraphic analysis. A collection of letters becomes a source for institutional history. A museum object can become evidence for art history, religious studies or material culture.

The Society's academic activities have remained substantial in the contemporary period. Government of India data records research projects, research fellows and academic activities including seminars, lectures, workshops, exhibitions, publications and fellowship programmes. The Society has also been a catalyst for research through fellowships and research projects in varied fields of Indian scholarship and heritage. These fellowships include the Sir William Jones Fellowship in Sanskrit Studies, History of Science Fellowship, History of Medicine Fellowship, Folklore & Culture Fellowship, James Prinsep

Fellowship in Epigraphy & Numismatics, and Language & Linguistics Fellowship. Through such research initiatives, the Society provides a platform for research in different fields and helps in the study, analysis and dissemination of India's intellectual and scientific traditions. This shows that the Society is not only a storehouse of knowledge, but a research institution as well.

Seminars enable intellectual interaction; conferences bring scholars together; lectures disseminate research knowledge to broader audiences; workshops disseminate research knowledge and preservation skills; exhibitions turn specialised collections into public knowledge.

Publications and Scholarly Communication

The history of The Asiatic Society cannot be separated from its publishing history. The first volume of *Asiatick Researches* came out in 1788. Publication activities were further expanded via journals, monographs, catalogues, bibliographies, seminar publications and other scholarly series. At present, the publication programme of the Society consists of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, *Monthly Bulletin*, together with scholarly books and other publications.

Publication has changed the status of the Society from a place of research to a point of scholarly dissemination of knowledge. It is a significant difference. While a research institute generates local knowledge, it is scholarly communication that defines whether this knowledge is included in the intellectual network.

Through publication, the Society provided the possibility for the research done in India to become accessible to researchers outside the country. On the other hand, the Society has received books, papers, correspondence and research contributions from scholars living outside its direct geographical vicinity. Thus, the publishing history of the Society can be viewed as a knowledge infrastructure. In the digital environment, the above function has additional meanings. Journals, catalogues and manuscripts become accessible online, thus increasing geographical access to the intellectual capital of the Society.

Currently, the Society is working on web portal modules for publications, allowing researchers to upload their articles and making it easier to carry out the following processes, which include editorial review, peer review, revision, and publication. This effort will help improve scholarly communication and contribute even more to the Society's evolution into a digitally enabled knowledge ecosystem.

Gyan Bharatam and the Transformation from Repository to Network

The Gyan Bharatam Mission represents a particularly important development in this institutional evolution. Initiated in India's Union Budget 2025-26, the Gyan Bharatam mission is an important flagship program of the Ministry of Culture in India that is committed to undertaking activities related to a) survey and cataloguing, b) conservation and capacity building, c) technology and digitisation, d) linguistics and translation, and e) research and publication.

The Mission's five verticals also reinforce the knowledge-lifecycle concept. Survey and cataloguing correspond to discovery and organisation; conservation protects the physical resource; digitisation creates digital representations; linguistics and translation facilitate interpretation and access; research, publication and outreach activate the knowledge resource.

The Asiatic Society has been designated a Cluster Centre to perform all these functions within the institution, along with twenty other organizations having their collection of manuscripts. The Society had digitised 11,528 manuscripts comprising of 572,890 pages from its collection and at present under Gyan Bharatam initiative, 5,198 manuscripts comprising of 2,99,222 pages had been scanned as of 31st August 2026.

Historically, the Asiatic Society functioned primarily as a geographically concentrated repository. Through Gyan Bharatam, it participates in a distributed national manuscript infrastructure. This transformation expands the Society's role from steward of its own

collections to facilitator of manuscript preservation and digitisation across a wider institutional network.

From Knowledge Repository to Global Knowledge Ecosystem

The concept of a ‘knowledge ecosystem’ is useful because no contemporary heritage institution functions independently. Libraries interact with museums. Museums depend on conservation. Conservation interacts with digitisation. Digitisation depends on metadata. Metadata enables discovery. Discovery facilitates research. Research produces publications. Publications generate new knowledge and new questions.

The Asiatic Society embodies this interdependence.

- Its library provides documentary resources.
- Its museum preserves material evidence.
- Its manuscript collection connects text and object.
- Conservation protects the physical carrier.
- Reprography provides alternative forms of access.
- Digitisation creates digital representations.
- Cataloguing and metadata provide discoverability.
- Academic programmes activate collections.
- Publications communicate research.
- Seminars and conferences create intellectual exchange.
- Gyan Bharatam extends the institutional network.

These are not isolated services. They form an institutional ecology.

Within the 21st century heritage research organisation, the library is no longer just about books and reading rooms. The scope includes the development of collections, bibliography, research services, electronic documents, metadata, scholarly communications, digitalisation, information services, and knowledge management.

Contemporary International Relevance

The Contemporary relevance of The Asiatic Society is founded upon three important strengths.

- First, it possesses primary sources that cannot easily be replicated elsewhere. Manuscripts, rare books, archival records, inscriptions, coins and other objects constitute evidence rather than merely secondary interpretations.
- Second, its collections support interdisciplinary scholarship. A single manuscript may be relevant to literature, linguistics, history, religion, art history, codicology and conservation science.
- Third, digitisation creates the possibility of global scholarly access.

The Society's international relevance therefore need not depend exclusively upon attracting scholars physically to Kolkata. Digital repositories, online catalogues, digitised publications, scholarly collaborations and networked research can extend its intellectual presence internationally.

The international significance of the Society thus does not have to rely solely on bringing academics physically to Kolkata. Through digital archives, catalogues, digitised material, research partnerships and collaboration, its intellectual footprint can be made internationally relevant. In view of the increasing significance of international Indian studies centres, a forward-looking Asiatic Society thus can serve as a valuable link between South Asian archival resources and international Indian studies.

Conclusion

The Asiatic Society is an institute whose historical importance cannot be measured simply in terms of its age. As a learned society whose focus is on research about Asia, it slowly acquired a rich and complicated institutional structure, encompassing research collections, manuscripts, museum items, conservation, reproduction, publication and scholarship. The historical importance of this institute comes from its multifunctional activities.

The central argument of this article has been that the Asiatic Society can be considered an institution for the lifecycle of knowledge.

- The Library is thus not only a storage place for books and periodicals but an information infrastructure.
- The Museum is not only a place to exhibit objects but a storage place for evidence.
- Conservation is not only repairing items but preserving the conditions of future knowledge.
- Reprography is not only reproduction but a means of balancing preservation and accessibility.
- Digitisation is not only scanning but reformatting information into new discovery and scholarly tools.
- The academic programmes are not only institutional activities but a collection of activation and knowledge production.
- Publications are not only records of research but connections between institutional scholarship and wider intellectual communities nationally and internationally.
- Gyan Bharatam is a step in developing this idea by involving The Asiatic Society in a Cluster Centre of manuscript digitization nationwide network.

The outcome is an institutional revolution:

- from learned society to research institute;
- from collection to knowledge infrastructure;
- from material collection to digital resources;
- from local institutions to knowledge network ecosystem.

It also offers an interesting methodological approach to Indian studies. The history of India and Asia does not exist only in scholarly publications, but in manuscripts, books, inscriptions, artefacts, catalogues, correspondence, images and archival documents. Thus, institutions preserving such material become a part of the evidential apparatus of Indian studies.

The future relevance of the Asiatic Society depends on its ability to combine its historical strengths with new types of digital scholarship.

Collections give the necessary depth; scholarly programmes add interpretation; conservation ensures continuity; digitisation increases accessibility; international collaboration extends the intellectual reach. The long-term contribution of the institution can thus be viewed not just as preservation of the past, but as continuous conversion of heritage into knowledge. In that regard, the journey of the institution started in Kolkata in 1784 has not been completed yet. Transformation from a learned society of the 18th century to a knowledge network ecosystem of the 21st century is not an abandonment of its historical mission, but its contemporary realisation.

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The Asiatic Society of Bengal during 1900
(Old Building built in 1808)
Courtesy: Bicentenary Souvenir of the Asiatic Society: 1784-1984



The Asiatic Society in the present days.
Aerial view of the New & Old-Heritage Building
Courtesy: Media Cell of The Asiatic Society

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STUDIES

The Paradox of Effort: Abhyāsa, Vairāgya, and the Problem of Willed Liberation in Pātañjala Yoga and the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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Abstract: Pātañjala Yoga defines its goal as the cessation of the modifications of the mind, yet the means it prescribes, sustained practice or abhyāsa, is itself an activity of that very mind. The instrument of liberation thus appears to belong to the category liberation abolishes. This paper distinguishes three objections the paradox generates, from simultaneity, self-reference, and efficacy, and argues that the Yoga Sūtra answers each: sequentially, through the graded dispassion of YS I.12 to I.16 and I.50 to I.51; qualitatively, through the division of the vṛttis into afflicted and unafflicted; and causally, through Vyāsa's farmer of YS IV.3, whereby effort removes barriers but produces nothing. The *Bhagavad Gītā* resolves the same difficulty structurally, by removing the ownership of action rather than the action. Set against the Advaita claim that no act can free, the two yield distinct Indian logics of self-transcending effort.

Keywords: Pātañjala Yoga, abhyāsa, vairāgya, kaivalya, *Bhagavad Gītā*, niṣkāma karma, kleśa, nimitta-kāraṇa, Advaita Vedānta, liberation.

Stating the Paradox

The second sūtra of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* defines the discipline with famous economy: *yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*, yoga is the cessation of the modifications of the mind (YS I.2). Everything that follows serves this definition. The state in which cessation is complete, and the seer abides in its own nature (YS I.3) is what the fourth chapter calls *kaivalya*, aloneness, the final disentanglement of consciousness from the mental apparatus it had mistaken for itself.

The difficulty appears the moment Patañjali tells us how this is to be achieved. The means, announced in YS I.12, are practice and dispassion, *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*, and practice is defined in YS I.13 plainly: *tatra sthitaḥ yatno 'bhyāsaḥ*, practice is the effort toward steadiness in that cessation. The operative word is *yatna*, effort, the deliberate exercise of will. An objector may say this generates no paradox, since the five *vṛttis* enumerated in YS I.5 to I.11, valid cognition, error, conceptualization, sleep, and memory, do not list volition among them. The premise survives, for two reasons. First, whatever its classification, effort is an activity of the *citta*, and the cessation Patañjali intends is total, the seer abiding in its own nature (YS I.2 to I.3), not the stilling of five named kinds only. Second, and more consequentially, YS I.5 itself divides the *vṛttis* into afflicted and unafflicted, *kliṣṭā akliṣṭāḥ*, and Vyāsa glosses the unafflicted as those whose sphere is discrimination. The bhāṣya thus invites us to say that the resolve, attention, and discriminative cognition through which practice operates are *vṛttis* of this unafflicted kind, even though Vyāsa does not enumerate resolve and attention as such.¹ It is worth noticing that the very sūtra which states the taxonomy of *vṛttis* plants, in the same breath, the seed of the resolution: Patañjali answers the objection from self-reference in the words with which he raises it. Effort, then, is a *vṛtti* after all, but a *vṛtti* of a special class, and this

¹ Whether volition counts among the *vṛttis* was debated in the tradition, as was the question, associated with Vijñānabhikṣu, of whether *nirodha* involves a subtle *vṛtti* of its own. See Larson and Bhattacharya, 2008.

detail, easily passed over, will carry much of the argument to come. For the moment the paradox stands in full force: the system prescribes mental activity as the cure for mental activity, and the instrument of liberation belongs to the category liberation must be abolished. One is asked, it seems, to fight fire with fire.

Every serious practitioner meets it in experience before meeting it in a book: the student who strains to concentrate finds the straining is itself the loudest noise in the mind. Looking closely, that one paradox generates three distinct objections, and much confusion comes from running them together. The objection from simultaneity: willingness and its cessation cannot coexist in one moment. The objection from self-reference: the instrument belongs to the category it must abolish, so its use seems to feed what it fights. The objection from efficacy: either effort produces liberation, which would make liberation a manufactured and perishable product, or it does not, and practice is pointless. The argument of this paper is that the *Yoga Sūtra* answers all three, and answers each differently: the first sequentially, through the graded self-consumption of practice and dispassion (YS I.12 to I.16, I.50 to I.51); the second qualitatively, through the division of *vṛttis* into afflicted and unafflicted; the third causally, through the distinction between removing a barrier and producing a result (YS IV.3). The *Bhagavad Gītā*, confronting the same difficulty in the vocabulary of action and bondage, adds a fourth answer of a different order, one that dissolves the trichotomy itself. It neither sequences the paradox in time, nor classifies the activity by kind, nor re-describes its causation; it refuses the premise shared by all three objections that the problem concerns the fate of activity at all and re-describes agency: not the ending of action but the ending of its ownership. Read together, and set against the *Upaniṣads*, the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, and the Advaita denial that any act can free, these answers show that the paradox is not a flaw in the architecture of yoga. It is architecture.

The Machinery of Practice:

Yoga Sūtra I.12 to I.14 with the Vyāsa-bhāṣya

Vyāsa opens his comment on YS I.12 with an image that governs everything afterwards. The mind is like a river that flows in two directions: toward the world, in the direction of evil, and toward discrimination, in the direction of good. Dispassion dams the outward channel, and practice opens and strengthens the inward one (Vyāsa on YS I.12).² The metaphor quietly reframes the problem: a river is not stopped by another river but redirected, starved in one channel and fed in another, until the water runs where it is wanted.

Patañjali's own definitions carry the same implication. Practice becomes *dr̥ḍhabhūmi*, firmly grounded, only when cultivated for a long time, without interruption, and with devoted care (*sa tu dīrghakālanairantarya-satkārāsevito dr̥ḍhabhūmiḥ*, YS I.14). Length of time and absence of interruption are not moral exhortations but a psychological mechanism. Repeated activity deposits *saṃskāras*, subliminal impressions that dispose the mind to repeat what it has done. A practice performed once is an act of will; performed daily for years it becomes a groove in the mind, and what began as effortful becomes dispositional. The third condition, *satkāra*, reverent care, guards the quality of the impression laid down: as one might gloss it, a practice performed grudgingly deposits the *saṃskāra* of grudging. Patañjali is describing a technology for converting will into habit and habit into nature. The effort is real but front-loaded, heaviest at the beginning because its purpose is to build the structure that later makes it unnecessary.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* had already located discipline in this register of trained faculties. In its celebrated image the self rides in a chariot: the body is the chariot, the intellect the charioteer, the mind the reins, and the senses the horses (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.3.3 to I.3.9). A charioteer with

² Yoga Sūtra and Vyāsa-bhāṣya follow Āraṇya (1983); Upaniṣads, Olivelle (1998); Kārikā, Larson and Bhattacharya (2008). *Gītā* translations are my own, checked against Zaehner (1969).

unbroken horses fights them at every step; one with well-trained horses scarcely appears to act, the discipline having migrated from his arms into the animals. The training is arduous, but the arduousness belongs to the training, not to the trained state; Patañjali's *abhyāsa* inherits this logic exactly, exertion being the means by which exertion is rendered obsolete.

Yet the paradox now returns to its self-referential form, and it is worth letting it, since a resolution that has not felt the full force of the problem is worth little. Ordinary willing is set in motion by the *kleśas*, the five afflictions of YS II.3: ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and the will to live, with ignorance the field in which the other four grow (YS II.4). If the energy of our striving were wholly a product of egoism and craving, the practitioner would be trapped twice over, the fuel of practice being the affliction practice must burn away. Here the *kliṣṭa* and *akliṣṭa* division does its first work: not all *ṛttis* are afflicted, and practice is precisely the cultivation of the unafflicted kind against the afflicted. Patañjali's *kriyā-yoga*, the yoga of action composed of austerity, self-study, and devotion to the Lord, is prescribed expressly to cultivate absorption and to attenuate the afflictions, *samādhi-bhāvanārthaḥ kleśa-tanū-karaṇārthaś ca* (YS II.1 to II.2). The wording repays attention: the afflictions are not stormed but made *tanu*, thin, worn progressively finer until they lose their grip, while the unafflicted current is fed. Effort that begins entangled with craving is progressively disentangled from it, and the fire that was to fight fire turns out to be a fire that burns away its own fuel.

The Self-Consuming Ladder: The Two Grades of Vairāgya

If YS I.13 and I.14 explain how effort becomes second nature, YS I.15 and I.16 explain how it is finally discarded, and here Patañjali's sequential resolution properly lies. Dispassion is defined at two levels. The lower grade (YS I.15) is *vaśīkāra-saṃjñā*, the consciousness of mastery of one who no longer thirsts for objects seen or heard of. This is an achievement of the will, a mastery consciously held: the yogin is like a man holding a strong dog on a leash, where the controlling is continuous work and he knows himself as the one doing it. Lower

vairāgya is effortful dispassion, still inside the paradox, a *vṛtti* of restraint set against *vṛttis* of craving; and whether or not the mastery-consciousness itself retains a tinge of *asmitā*, the ladder continues past it, for the argument requires only that the practice-*vṛttis* of *abhyāsa* and discernment be of the unafflicted kind, not that this first grade be wholly free of ego.

The higher grade, *para-vairāgya*, is defined in YS I.16 in a single compound: *tat paraṃ puruṣa-khyāter guṇa-vaitṛṣṇyam*, that is the highest, when from the discernment of *puruṣa* there comes thirstlessness toward the *guṇas* themselves. The object of dispassion has changed category: no longer this or that attraction but the entire field of manifestation, including the practice, the mastery, and the hand that holds the leash. Supreme dispassion is dispassion toward one's own dispassion. Crucially, Patañjali does not say it is produced by further effort: it arises from *puruṣa-khyāti*, the discernment of the seer, the fruit of seeing rather than of striving. The sequence from YS I.15 to I.16 is thus a ladder whose final rung is the letting go of the ladder. Effort ascends as far as effort can reach, and the last step is taken by the falling away of the climber's grip.

That this is Patañjali's considered position is confirmed later. YS IV.29 reads: *prasaṅkhyāne 'py akusīdasya sarvathā viveka-khyāter dharma-meghaḥ samādhīḥ*, for one who has no interest even in the highest contemplative illumination, from complete discriminative discernment comes the *samādhī* called the cloud of *dharma*. The word *akusīda* comes from commerce; a *kusīda* is a moneylender, one who expects a return on what he puts out. The final *samādhī* comes only to the one who has stopped lending, who invests effort while renouncing the interest, including the ultimate interest, liberation itself. The desire for *kaivalya* is the last *vṛtti* to go, and it must go, because a mind that wants freedom is still a mind in motion toward an object.

The point is completed by YS I.50 to I.51. The insight born in the highest cognitive *samādhī* deposits a *saṃskāra* that blocks all other

saṃskāras (*tajjaḥ saṃskāro 'nya-saṃskāra-pratibandhī*, YS I.50): the insight that is the fruit of that discipline lays down an impression of cessation that holds the impressions of activity in check. Then the final move: *tasyāpi nirodhe sarva-nirodhān nirbījaḥ samādhiḥ*, when even that is ceased, from the cessation of all there is seedless *samādhi* (YS I.51). The counterforce generated by practice does its work and is then itself extinguished. The traditional image is exact: one extracts a thorn from the foot with another thorn and then throws both thorns away.³ Patañjali adds only that the second thorn, once the first is out, falls away of itself, having been held only for the sake of the extraction.⁴

Seen so, the objection from simultaneity dissolves: there is no moment at which willingness and its cessation coexist. Willed practice builds the conditions under which willing becomes progressively lighter and finally unnecessary, the aspiration that powered it being the last structure dismantled. Effort is scaffolding, and no building contradicts itself because the scaffolding that raised it is absent from the finished facade. Whicher's reading of *nirodha* as the cessation of misidentification rather than the annihilation of the mind points the same way: on his account what ends is not mentation as such but the seer's entanglement in it (Whicher, 1998). Bryant, drawing the traditional exegetes together, likewise treats the two dispassions as differing in kind and not merely in degree, the higher a function of discernment rather than of suppression (Bryant, 2009).

A determined critic will not yet be satisfied, and the objection from efficacy deserves its strongest form. If *para-vairāgya* arises from discernment and not from striving (YS I.16), and the culminating *samādhi* comes precisely to the one who has renounced all interest in the

³ The image is widespread in Indian literature, for instance where the teaching that removes ignorance is itself set aside once ignorance is gone.

⁴ The Buddhist simile of the raft (*Majjhima Nikāya* 22), the dhamma being “for crossing over, not for holding on to,” shows the self-cancelling means recognized across the Indian traditions, not peculiar to Patañjali.

outcome (YS IV.29), what did the years of effort accomplish? Either the prior practice is the cause of the liberating insight, in which case liberation is a manufactured product and the language of effortlessness a pious fiction; or it is not, in which case the practice was unnecessary and the graded path collapses into decoration around an insight that could have come unbidden. On this point the schools of Indian soteriology divided, and Patañjali's system stands or falls on its answer.

The answer lies in the causal vocabulary the school inherits, and Vyāsa states it with a decisive image. Commenting on YS IV.3, where Patañjali says the instrumental cause does not set nature in motion but merely removes the barrier to it, as a farmer does (*nimittam aprayojakaṃ prakṛtīnām varaṇa-bhedas tu tataḥ kṣetrikavat*), Vyāsa explains: a farmer wishing to flood one field from a reservoir already full does not carry the water on his shoulders. He breaks the barrier of the dike, and the water runs down of its own weight. The farmer supplies no motive force; the water's tendency to flow was there all along. He removes an obstacle, and nature does the rest. This is the distinction between an instrumental cause (*nimitta-kāraṇa*) and a material or productive one (*upādāna-kāraṇa*).⁵ Effort in yoga is of the first kind and never of the second. It does not fabricate *kaivalya*, which is not a product but the seer's own nature awaiting disclosure. What effort does is thin the afflictions, wear down the outward *saṃskāras*, and dam the channel of dispersion, until the barriers to a discernment that was always possible are gone. The discernment then arises of itself, as the water floods the field of itself, and calling it the fruit of seeing rather than of striving is exactly right without in the least making the striving pointless.

⁵ Two notes. YS IV.3 concerns in its own context the instrumental cause of embodiment (*jāti, āyus, bhoga*), not liberation directly; the bhāṣya's formulation is general and is applied here to practice as the school's causal vocabulary invites. And *nimitta/upādāna* is used in the general sense of instrumental against material cause, most at home in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika; in strict Sāṃkhya *prakṛti* is both. Nothing in the argument depends on the strict usage.

With this distinction the dilemma dissolves. Practice is necessary, because without the breaking of the dike the field stays dry; yet it is not the productive cause of the result, because it adds no water. Both horns are refused at once: effort is necessary but not generative, and this is exactly the causal shape the paradox requires. It is also why the practitioner cannot skip the labour and wait: the obstacle does not remove itself, and an unbroken dike holds the water back forever. The farmer's arm is real work of a particular kind, liberating a tendency already present rather than importing a result from outside. The redirected river, the trained horses, and the scaffolding all circle this insight, which Vyāsa alone makes fully explicit.

One apparent exception must be faced, since Patañjali himself seems to offer a shortcut: *īśvara-praṇidhānād vā*, or from devotion to the Lord (YS I.23), *samādhi* may come. Does the *vā* not promise exactly the grace that the farmer's image excludes? It does not. Even granting that the *vā* offers *praṇidhāna* as an independent route to *samādhi*, surrender in Patañjali's hands is itself a cultivated discipline and not unbidden grace: it stands among the observances of YS II.32, its perfection is said to yield *samādhi* (YS II.45), and it is one of the three limbs of *kriyā-yoga* (YS II.1). It is effortful letting go that thins the ego as surely as austerity does. This matters for the contrast to come, and in a way that sharpens rather than blurs it. Devotion is present in Patañjali, but as an instrument, itself a *guṇa*-born activity that the final dispassion toward all *guṇas* (YS I.16) must in the end renounce with everything else. In the *Gītā*, as we shall see, surrender is not one technique among others but the terminal state itself (BG XVIII.66). The donation of the will is instrumental in one text and terminal in the other, and that difference is precisely what the two logics of the closing section will turn on.

Acting without the Actor: The *Gītā*'s Structural Resolution

The *Bhagavad Gītā* meets the same paradox in different clothes. Its problem is stated not in terms of mental modification but of action and bondage: *karma* binds the agent to its results and thus to rebirth, and yet

action cannot simply be renounced. Kṛṣṇa closes the escape route in two brisk verses. No one remains even for a moment without acting, for everyone is driven helplessly to act by the *guṇas* born of *prakṛti* (BG III.5); and the one who restrains the organs of action while the mind dwells on sense objects are deluded and a hypocrite (BG III.6). Action binds, and inaction is both impossible and, when simulated, a lie. Arjuna cannot fight his way to freedom, nor sit his way to it.

The resolution is announced in the most quoted of the poem's verses: *karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana*, your entitlement is to the action alone, never to its fruits (BG II.47). This is *niṣkāma karma*, desireless action, and it is worth insisting on what it removes. Not effort: Arjuna is told to stand and fight with full engagement, and the *Gītā* has no patience with quietism. What is removed is the claim, the silent clause 'and this result shall be mine' that rides on ordinary exertion. The logic is sacrificial: action performed as *yajña*, as offering, does not bind, while all other action does (BG III.9). An offering releases its fruit at the moment of performance; the priest pouring ghee into the fire does not expect it back.

The metaphysical ground is supplied in BG III.27, a verse doing the work Sāṃkhya dualism does for Patañjali: all actions are performed by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*, while one deluded by egoism thinks 'I am the doer' (*ahaṅkāra-vimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate*). Agency was never truly ours; the sense of being the doer is a misattribution, and bondage follows it rather than the deed. Hence the formula of the fifth chapter, where the knower of truth, even while seeing, hearing, touching, breathing, and speaking, holds 'I do not do anything at all' (BG V.8). The activity continues; the actor has resigned. The *Gītā*'s final word radicalizes the same movement into theistic surrender: abandon all *dharma*s and take refuge in me alone, upon which, the verse continues, *ahaṃ tvā sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ*, I shall release you from all evils, do not grieve (BG XVIII.66). What Patañjali achieves by the withering of the will, the *Gītā* achieves by its donation.

Nor is the *Gītā*'s point that effort as such is the enemy; the eighteenth chapter supplies the precision. There Kṛṣṇa sorts action, and the agent, by the three *guṇas*. Action done without attachment, by one indifferent to the fruit, is *sāttvika*; action driven by desire and ego, performed with much strain, is *rājasika*; action undertaken in delusion is *tāmasika* (BG XVIII.23 to XVIII.25), and the agent is sorted likewise (BG XVIII.26 to XVIII.27). What binds is never activity in the abstract but *rājasika* activity, the strenuous, fruit-hungry, ego-lit exertion most people mean by effort in the first place. This maps onto Patañjali's *kleśa* analysis: for both, the problem is not that the practitioner acts but that the action is soaked in craving and authorship. The cure is not the cessation of movement but the purification of motive, which is why the *Gītā* can demand ceaseless activity and the end of bondage in one breath. *Niṣkāma karma* is *sāttvika* action carried to its limit.

A rigorous reader will note verses pointing the other way. BG III.3 speaks of two standpoints, the discipline of knowledge for the followers of Sāṃkhya and the discipline of action for the yogins; and BG III.17 to III.18 concedes that for the one who delights in the self alone, satisfied in the self, there is nothing that must be done. Is there an exit from action after all? There is, but the address matters: those verses describe the *ātma-rati*, the one already established, while the poem's instruction is given to Arjuna, who is not. Read so, BG III.17 to III.18 is not a rival teaching but the terminus of the ladder, the *Gītā*'s own summit corresponding to Patañjali's *para-vairāgya*; and BG IV.18, that the wise see inaction in action and action in inaction, describes how the summit looks while the body still moves. BG VI.4 confirms the reading by defining the *yogārūḍha*, the one who has ascended, precisely as one who has renounced all *saṅkalpa*, all self-interested purposing. The stage-relative structure is the *Gītā*'s own.

BG VI.3 compresses this into a single verse: for the sage who desires to ascend to yoga, action is said to be the means; for the same sage who has ascended, serenity is said to be the means (*āruruḥṣor muner yogaṃ*

karma kāraṇam ucyate / yogārūḍhasya tasyaiva śamaḥ kāraṇam ucyate). And the text reassures the anxious beginner: in this path no effort is ever lost, and even a little of this discipline protects one from great fear (BG II.40). The scaffolding argument is thus native to the *Gītā* as well. Yet its characteristic solution remains distinct. Patañjali sequences the paradox away: effort now, effortlessness later. The *Gītā* reframes it away: effort continues indefinitely, and what ceases is the ownership of it. One text describes a ladder that is climbed and then dropped; the other a load still carried but no longer carried as mine.

A Rival Answer: The Advaita Objection That No Effort Can Free

Before drawing the two resolutions together, we must face a tradition that rejects the premise of both. For Advaita Vedānta in the line of Śaṅkara, the project of reaching liberation through practice rests on a confusion. Liberation, Śaṅkara argues, cannot be the effect of any action, for a plain reason: what action produces is thereby finite and impermanent, since what an act brings into being another act or time can take away. But *mokṣa* is not produced; it is *nitya-siddha*, eternally already accomplished, the ever-present nature of the self. Action can produce, reach, purify, or transform; it cannot reveal what was never absent. Liberation therefore falls within the domain of knowledge, *jñāna*, alone, the immediate knowledge that the self was always free, and effort keeps at most a preparatory office. To make practice the cause of *kaivalya* is, for the Advaitin, a category mistake.

The objection is formidable because, on the decisive point, it sharpens the reading defended here rather than contradicting it. The farmer of YS IV.3 has already driven us to deny that effort produces liberation: the efficient cause adds no water, and *kaivalya* is disclosed, not manufactured. To that extent Yoga and Advaita speak with one voice. Śaṅkara himself grants disciplined action the office of *sattva-śuddhi*, purification of the mind, which is functionally close to Yoga's removal of the barrier; the genuine difference lies in how much that

office carries and in what lifts the last obstruction. For Śaṅkara the decisive event is cognitive, the rise of a single liberating knowledge to which all discipline is propaedeutic. For Patañjali insight and the transformation of consciousness are not cleanly separable: the *dharmamegha* is at once the highest discernment and the deepest *samādhī*, and an unpurified mind, however correctly instructed, will not hold the discernment steady. Where Advaita says know and be free, Yoga answers that for almost everyone knowing must itself be made possible and making it possible is the long work of practice.

Pressed at home, the Advaita challenge does not overturn the thesis but locates it. The paradox of effort is a fault line running through Indian soteriology, along which the schools arranged themselves: the Mīmāṃsakas making action the very means to the highest good, the Advaitins making knowledge the sole means and action mere preparation, and Yoga and the *Gītā* occupying the demanding middle in which disciplined action is indispensable yet non-productive. It is in that middle, and not at either extreme, that the paradox of self-transcending effort must be solved at all, which is why these two texts give the problem its most searching treatment.⁶

Two Logics of Self-Transcending Effort

Why do the two texts, facing one problem, produce two solutions? Each is forced by its system's deeper metaphysical commitments.

Pātañjala yoga rests on the Sāṃkhya distinction between *puruṣa*, pure witnessing consciousness, and *prakṛti*, the active matrix to which mind, will, and therefore effort belong. On this map *puruṣa* was never the agent of practice at all. Effort is a movement within *prakṛti*, undertaken, as YS II.18 has it, for the sake of the seer's experience and

⁶ Śaṅkara's own *Gītā-bhāṣya* reads the poem as finally Advaitin, taking BG XVIII.66 as the renunciation of karma-yoga in favour of knowledge. The *Gītā* is placed in the middle here because the machinery the text deploys, the *guṇa* analysis of BG III.27 and XVIII.23 to 27, is structural rather than cognitive.

liberation (*bhogāpavargārtham*); when practice completes its purpose, nature's activity in that direction simply ends, the ending YS IV.34 calls *pratiprasava*, the reverse flow of the *guṇas* into their source. The *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* supplies two classical images of this completion. Nature is like a dancer who, having shown herself to the audience, withdraws from the stage (*Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 59): the performance was for the spectator, and once seen there is nothing further to dance. And the liberated one remains embodied for a while as a potter's wheel keeps turning after the hand has withdrawn, by the momentum already imparted (*Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 67): effort imparts the spin, the hand lifts away, and the turning that continues is no longer anyone's effort.⁷ Within a dualist system, effortlessness is what nature's completed effort looks like from the standpoint of the seer who never acted.

The *Gītā* cannot take this exit, because its ultimate reality is not a passive witness but a person who acts. Kṛṣṇa declares that there is nothing in the three worlds he needs to attain, and yet he remains in action, for if he did not the worlds would perish (BG III.22 to III.24). Effortless inactivity cannot be the final ideal in a text whose God works. The *Gītā* therefore keeps action running, and its surgery is on the joint between act and claimant: agency is first disowned as a misattribution to the *guṇas*, finally handed over to the Lord. The two resolutions are one insight refracted through two lenses. Both agree that what binds is not activity but appropriation; they differ in what remains when appropriation ends. For Patañjali the machinery winds down, having no further purpose; for the *Gītā* it runs on, having a divine one.

One objection remains: that the paradox has merely been postponed to the final moment, the last act of willing, the effort to cease, being one more *vṛtti*, so the chain seems unable to end without a self-defeating final act. Here the three answers interlock into one mechanism. The final

⁷ Kārikā numbering follows the standard editions as reported in Larson and Bhattacharya (2008); the placement of individual verses varies slightly across the commentaries.

cessation is not performed but undergone, the subsiding of the very impression the discipline of stopping had deposited (YS I.50 to I.51), which is why Patañjali writes *tasyāpi nirodhe*, when even that is ceased, without assigning any agent to the ceasing, and why the second thorn falls away of itself. This is where the farmer's logic passes over into the thorns. Every dyke required the farmer's arm, for a barrier does not remove itself; but the last barrier differs from the dyke precisely in that nothing sustains it once its office is complete. The nirodha-saṁskāra is not an external obstruction to be broken but the residue of the practice itself, and its subsiding belongs to that reverse flow of the guṇas into their source which YS IV.34 calls *pratiprasava*: it subsides as the second thorn falls, because the first is already out. The sequential answer, that willing and its cessation never coincide, the qualitative answer, that the cultivated *ṛtti* is of a kind that exhausts itself once its work is done, and the causal answer, that the removal of a barrier is not the production of a result, are therefore not three separate replies but one. This is the precise sense in which the paradox is not a flaw in the architecture of yoga but its architecture.

The *Gītā* faces the regress in its own terms, for surrender too is commanded (BG XVIII.66), and the final letting-go might itself be claimed as my act and so bind afresh. But the *Gītā* closes the loop from the other side. Where Patañjali's last step is undergone, a *saṁskāra* subsiding once its office is done, the *Gītā*'s last step is answered: to the one who lets go, Kṛṣṇa promises *ahaṁ tvā sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi*, I shall release you from all evils. The surrender is completed not by the devotee's exhausting it but by the Lord's receiving it, so that the last trace of ownership is not worn away but taken away, lifted by grace rather than dissolved by attrition. This is the instrumental and terminal contrast reaching the final moment: the machinery that winds down needs no one to stop it, while the load that is set down needs someone to take it. Each tradition secures the end of effort against a self-defeating final act, the one by a subsiding, the other by a gift.

An older image from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* holds the two halves of this insight together. Taking the great weapon of the *Upaniṣads* as the bow, one is to fix upon it the arrow sharpened by meditation, draw it with a mind absorbed in that reality, and pierce the imperishable target, becoming one with it as the arrow with the target (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* II.2.3 to II.2.4).⁸ The drawing of the bow is pure *abhyāsa*: strength, training, the long discipline that makes the draw steady. But the arrow flies only when the fingers open. The release is not one more act of pulling; it is the cessation of pulling, and yet it is not nothing, for everything the effort built is present in the flight. The verse thus encodes, centuries before Patañjali, the exact temporal structure of YS I.13 to I.16: effort, then the fruitful ending of effort, the ending itself made possible only by the effort it ends.

Anyone who has taught yoga has watched students try to relax and watched them trying defeat the relaxing; ‘let go’ cannot be obeyed by an act of obedience. Both resolutions are visible in the teaching room: the teacher who prescribes patient repetition, trusting ease to arrive as a byproduct, applies Patañjali’s solution; the teacher who tells the straining student to practice as an offering applies the *Gītā*’s. That both answers are rediscovered daily by people who have read neither text suggests the two were analyzing the practice itself, not merely each other. Eliade presented yoga to European scholarship as above all a rigorously elaborated technique of liberation (Eliade, 1958); what the teaching room shows, and what the two classical resolutions between them explain, is why a technique of liberation must be built to consume itself.

⁸ A composite of *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* II.2.3 and II.2.4, following Olivelle (1998); *upāsā* in II.2.3, that by which the arrow is sharpened, is rendered as meditation.

Conclusion

The paradox of effort is real, and it generates three distinct objections. To the objection from simultaneity Patañjali answers with time: practice converts will into disposition (YS I.13 to I.14), dispassion ascends from effortful mastery to a thirstlessness that includes the practice itself (YS I.15 to I.16), the aspirant renounces interest even in illumination (YS IV.29), and the impressions of cessation are the last to cease (YS I.50 to I.51). To the objection from self-reference, he answers with kind: the *vr̥ttis* are afflicted and unafflicted, and the unafflicted are cultivated to consume the afflicted before subsiding themselves. To the objection from efficacy, he answers with the farmer: effort breaks the dike and adds no water, necessary but not productive (YS IV.3), and here the Advaita insistence that no act can generate what is eternally accomplished proves a clarification rather than a refutation. The *Gītā* adds the structural answer: action never stops, but the clause of appropriation attached to it is deleted, first by the analysis that hands agency to the *guṇas*, finally by the surrender that hands it to God. This is why yoga is a graded path of eight limbs rather than a single insight, and why the inner limbs of one attainment become the outer limbs of the next (YS III.7 to III.8): a path is graded precisely so that what is effortful at one stage can be effortless at the next. Indian philosophy is sometimes accused of demanding the impossible, an achievement of the will directed against the will; the accusation rests on a failure to read.

The tradition saw the trap early, described it precisely, and mapped the whole field of answers, from the ritualist who makes action everything to the Advaitin who makes it almost nothing, with Yoga and the *Gītā* holding the centre where disciplined action is indispensable yet non-productive. Between the ladder that is dropped and the load that is no longer owned, the practitioner still walks today.

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**The Ontology of Nothingness:
A Philosophical Encounter between
Nagarjuna's Emptiness and Nietzsche's Nihilism**

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Abstract: This study examines the philosophical encounter between Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness and Friedrich Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism, clarifying both their affinities and their decisive differences. Although both thinkers challenge metaphysical notions of stable foundations, permanent identities, and ultimate substances, their projects unfold within distinct conceptual horizons. In Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy, śūnyatā does not signify absolute nothingness or the denial of phenomenal reality, but the absence of intrinsic nature, or svabhāva. Emptiness is inseparable from dependent origination and allows for causality, transformation, ethical responsibility, and liberation. By contrast, Nietzschean nihilism designates primarily a historical and axiological crisis: the devaluation of the highest values after the collapse of transcendent foundations such as God, absolute truth, and metaphysical morality.

The comparison shows that Nāgārjuna's emptiness avoids both eternalism and annihilationism, while Nietzsche's nihilism opens a path from passive resignation toward active transvaluation and life-affirmation. The study argues that their strongest convergence lies in the critique of reification: both expose the human tendency to solidify becoming into fixed concepts. Yet their aims diverge: Madhyamaka seeks liberation from attachment and the cultivation of compassion, whereas Nietzsche seeks the creative overcoming of nihilism through the affirmation of becoming.

Keywords: Nāgārjuna, Nietzsche, emptiness, *śūnyatā*, nihilism, Madhyamaka.

Introduction

The problem of “nothingness” occupies an important place in both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, yet the meanings assigned to it differ profoundly. In Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy, formulated by Nāgārjuna, the notion of *śūnyatā* is often translated as “emptiness” or “voidness,” but it does not designate absolute nothingness. Rather, it refers to the absence of an independent, intrinsic, and immutable nature in phenomena. By contrast, in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, nihilism primarily indicates a historical and axiological crisis of European culture, produced by the devaluation of the highest values and the collapse of the transcendent foundations of meaning.

This study aims to analyze these two concepts comparatively, while avoiding the simplifying identification of Buddhist emptiness with Western nihilism. Although Nāgārjuna and Nietzsche each criticize, in their respective contexts, the metaphysics of stability, substance, and absolute values, the final aims of their projects are different. In Nāgārjuna, emptiness has an ontological, epistemological, and soteriological function, leading to the understanding of dependent origination and liberation from attachment. In Nietzsche, nihilism is the diagnosis of a crisis of meaning, but also the point of departure for the possibility of transvaluation and the creative affirmation of life.

Therefore, the comparison between *śūnyatā* and nihilism does not seek to reduce one tradition to the other, but to highlight a shared problem: the dissolution of fixed foundations of reality, identity, and value. Within this framework, the study examines both the convergences between the two thinkers and the decisive differences that separate the Madhyamaka Middle Way from Nietzsche’s project of overcoming nihilism.

***Śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy and the Madhyamaka Horizon**

Nāgārjuna’s philosophy represents one of the most rigorous expressions of Buddhist reflection on reality, identity, and liberation. Traditionally associated with the foundation of the Madhyamaka School, the “Middle Way,” the Indian thinker formulated, especially in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* – *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* – a systematic critique of the metaphysical tendency to attribute to things an independent, stable, and self-sufficient existence. His project is not to replace metaphysics of substance with another metaphysics grounded in a supreme principle, but rather to question the very presupposition that reality, in order to be real, must possess an intrinsic and immutable foundation (Westerhoff: 2009, 4).

The central concept of this philosophy is *śūnyatā*, commonly translated as “emptiness,” “voidness,” or simply *emptiness* in English-language scholarship. The term is often misinterpreted as designating absolute nothingness, the non-existence of the world, or a form of nihilism. Such an interpretation, however, misses the technical meaning of the notion. Emptiness is not the absence of phenomena, but the absence of their *svabhāva*, that is, of an intrinsic nature independent of causes, conditions, relations, parts, and conceptual designations (Williams: 2009, 68). To say that something is empty does not mean that it does not appear, function, or produce effects; it means that, upon analysis, it cannot be found as an entity existing exclusively by itself.

For Nāgārjuna, an entity would possess *svabhāva* only if it were what it is through its own power, without depending on anything external or constitutive. Such an intrinsic nature would, by definition, have to be unproduced, unconditioned, and invariable. Yet the world of experience offers nothing of this kind. Every phenomenon appears only in relation to other phenomena. A tree depends on seed, soil, water, light, time, biological processes, and climatic conditions; a house depends on materials, labor, design, function, and social conventions; the person

depends on body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Even the identity of things depends on the differential relations by which they are distinguished from other things and on the linguistic practices through which they are designated.

In this sense, emptiness is not a hidden property “behind” the world, nor a metaphysical void from which phenomena emanate. It is precisely the absence of an independent substratum within phenomena. Nāgārjuna does not claim that things conceal a negative essence called “emptiness,” but that they lack any intrinsic essence. If emptiness itself were an autonomous entity, it would possess *svabhāva* and would become exactly what Madhyamaka doctrine contests.

This position is grounded in the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, *pratītyasamutpāda*. In its general form, this doctrine states that things arise in dependence upon conditions and cease when their conditions cease. In early Buddhist tradition, dependent origination primarily explains the constitution of suffering: ignorance conditions karmic formations, these condition consciousness, and the chain continues up to old age, death, and suffering. For Nāgārjuna, the principle has a broader ontological significance: whatever arises dependently cannot exist by itself (Gethin: 1998, 140; Siderits: 2007, 15).

Verse XXIV.18 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* formulates this idea concisely: “Whatever is dependent origination that is explained to be emptiness; this, being a dependent designation, is itself the Middle Way” (Nāgārjuna: 1995, 69). The formula links dependent origination, emptiness, and the conventional character of designation. Phenomena are empty because they depend on causes and conditions; yet their dependence is not merely causal. They also depend on parts, relations, conceptual frameworks, and linguistic conventions. A table, for example, is not identical either with one of its elements, or with the simple material sum of those elements, or with a hidden essence beyond them. Nevertheless, it exists conventionally: it can support objects, be used, moved, or repaired. Its existence is functional and relational, not

substantial. From this follows the meaning of the “Middle Way.” Madhyamaka rejects two metaphysical extremes. The first is eternalism or substantialism, the belief that there are entities, selves, principles, or substances that persist by themselves, independently of becoming. The second is annihilationism, according to which, if things have no intrinsic essence, then they do not exist at all. Both positions begin from the same premise: either something exists absolutely, by itself, or it is pure non-existence. Nāgārjuna refuses this alternative. Phenomena do not exist intrinsically, but they do exist dependently; they are neither immutable substances nor mere nothings (Burton: 2013, 151).

In a famous formulation, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV.14, Nāgārjuna states that “for whom emptiness is possible, everything is possible; for whom emptiness is not possible, nothing is possible” (Nāgārjuna: 1995, 68). This statement is decisive for the rejection of nihilism. If things possessed intrinsic nature, they would be definitively fixed in what they are. A suffering that possessed *svabhāva* could not cease; an absolutely immutable person could not be educated or liberated; an independent cause could not enter into a real relation with an effect. Change, moral action, transformation, and liberation are possible precisely because nothing is enclosed within an autonomous essence.

The method by which Nāgārjuna supports this position is dialectical. He does not develop a positive ontology meant to replace rival doctrines but examines the consequences of concepts when these are interpreted as designating intrinsic realities.

In the chapters of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, birth, cessation, motion, time, causality, self, desire, and nirvāṇa are analyzed. In each case, the argument seeks to show that these notions become contradictory if an intrinsic nature is attributed to them.

In his analysis of causality, for instance, Nāgārjuna discusses in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* I.1 and I.3 four possibilities: an effect arises from itself, from something else, from both, or without a cause. If the effect arises from itself, then it must already exist before being produced,

making production unnecessary. If it arises from something radically different, there is no criterion to explain why precisely that effect should result and not any other. If it arises both from itself and from something else, the difficulties of the first two hypotheses are combined. If it arises without a cause, all regularity in the world collapses. The conclusion is not that fire does not burn, that seeds do not germinate, or that actions have no consequences. The conclusion is that the causal relation cannot be explained through autonomous entities already constituted prior to their relation. A cause is a cause only in relation to an effect, and an effect is an effect only in relation to a cause; both are dependent terms, not independent substances (Westerhoff: 2009, 99).

The critique of the self follows the same logic. Nāgārjuna contests the idea of a permanent self, identical with itself and separate from the psycho-physical constituents of experience. The person cannot simply be identical with the body, sensations, or consciousness, because all these are changing. But neither can the person be completely different from them, because then it could not be located in experience and could not explain the concrete fact of feeling, memory, or action (Nāgārjuna: 1995, 74).

The person is, therefore, a conventional designation for the dynamic continuity of the five aggregates: material form, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. This does not mean that the person is irrelevant or that moral responsibility becomes impossible. Biographical continuity does not require the identity of an immutable substance. A river exists without being the same water at every moment; it exists as a recognizable process, dependent on a course, a terrain, tributaries, and a functional continuity. Analogously, the person exists conventionally as a conditioned flow, even if it cannot be found as a metaphysical core separate from its processes (Siderits: 2007, 153).

The doctrine of the two truths provides the necessary framework for understanding this position. Nāgārjuna distinguishes between conventional truth, *saṃvṛti-satya*, and ultimate truth, *paramārtha-satya*. Conventional truth is the level at which ordinary language, action,

communication, ethics, and causality function. There are persons, objects, illnesses, medicines, promises, decisions, and consequences of actions. We can justifiably say that water quenches thirst, that fire burns, or that violence causes suffering. The conventional is not a mere arbitrary fiction, but the domain of intersubjective experience and practical efficacy (Newland & Tillemans: 2011, 3-22).

Ultimate truth, however, does not designate a second world hidden behind the ordinary one. It is not a transcendent reality deeper than phenomena, but the truth about the way in which these phenomena exist: they do not possess intrinsic existence. A person and the emptiness of the person are not two different objects; emptiness is the absence of an independent self in the person. A table and its emptiness do not belong to distinct worlds; the emptiness of the table is the lack of intrinsic nature in the table. Ultimate truth does not destroy the conventional, but frees it from reification (Newland: 1992, 23).

This distinction allows Madhyamaka to avoid both substantialist realism and arbitrary relativism. If things existed by themselves, our conventions would have to discover already constituted essences. If, on the contrary, nothing existed conventionally, no distinction would be possible between knowledge and error, medicine and poison, compassion and cruelty. Nāgārjuna maintains that conventional reality is robust enough to sustain experience and practice, but not rigid enough to be transformed into a system of essences.

Emptiness thus has a decisive soteriological dimension. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, ignorance does not consist in the absence of theoretical information, but in the tendency to fix experience into solid identities: “I,” “mine,” “object,” “being,” “existence,” “non-existence.” Attachment to these constructions produces suffering, because human beings demand absolute stability from things that are, in reality, transient and dependent. They want their identity to be definitively guaranteed, the objects of desire to remain available, and relationships not to change. Yet precisely

this demand contradicts the mobile and relational character of existence (Williams: 2009, 75).

The realization of emptiness, therefore, does not mean indifference toward the world. It does not lead to the conclusion that the suffering of others is unimportant, because suffering, even though devoid of *svabhāva*, appears and produces effects at the conventional level. In the Mahāyāna tradition, the wisdom of emptiness is inseparable from compassion. Understanding the non-substantial character of the self can diminish egocentrism, possessiveness, and hostility, making possible a more open relation to others (Siderits: 2014, 64).

It is essential in this context that emptiness itself is empty. If *śūnyatā* were transformed into a substance, a negative absolute, or a hidden essence of the world, the doctrine would repeat exactly the error it denounces. Nāgārjuna warns that emptiness is a remedy against attachment to views, not a new absolute view.

In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XIII.8, he states that those who transform emptiness into a standpoint are “incurable.” Emptiness is useful only insofar as it dissolves reification; if it becomes the object of a new reification, it ceases to be liberating.

This perspective also transforms the relation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Nāgārjuna does not conceive them as two ontologically separate domains, one being the impure world of becoming and the other a pure and transcendent realm. Ultimately, both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are empty of intrinsic nature. The difference between them lies in the way one relates to the same conditioned reality: *saṃsāra* is experience dominated by ignorance, attachment, and conceptual proliferation; *nirvāṇa* is the cessation of this reifying relation. Liberation does not presuppose the discovery of a new metaphysical substance, but a profound transformation in the way phenomena are perceived.

Therefore, Nāgārjuna’s “nothing” is not nothingness. Emptiness does not say that things do not exist, but that they are not what the reifying mind assumes them to be: independent, fixed, and self-sufficient entities.

Madhyamaka reality is radically relational. It offers no ultimate foundation understood as essence, but neither does it dissolve into a total lack of meaning, experience, or efficacy. The Middle Way designates precisely the overcoming of the simplistic opposition between existence and non-existence: phenomena exist conventionally because they are empty, and they are empty precisely because they arise dependently.

Nihilism in the Thought of Friedrich Nietzsche

In Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, nihilism does not primarily designate a doctrine that the author adopts in his own name, but the diagnosis of a historical, spiritual, and axiological crisis that traverses European modernity. Nietzsche undoubtedly situates himself within this crisis: he experiences it, describes it, and explores its consequences. Yet his fundamental intention is not to proclaim meaninglessness as the ultimate truth of existence, but to understand the genesis of this meaninglessness and to prepare the possibility of overcoming it. Nihilism is therefore less a conclusion than a limit-situation of Western culture, the moment when the values that historically oriented existence lose their credibility and normative force.

The concentrated formula of this situation appears in the posthumous fragments gathered under the title *The Will to Power*: "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; the answer is lacking to the question 'why?'" (Nietzsche: 1968, 9). This definition indicates precisely what is at stake for Nietzsche. Nihilism does not say, in a simple ontological sense, that the world does not exist; nor can it be reduced to atheism or skepticism. It appears when the supreme purposes, values, and meanings that justified existence cease to convince, leaving behind the feeling that life lacks direction, justification, and meaning.

In the modern age, this crisis is connected to the exhaustion of belief in the transcendent foundations of European culture. The formula "God is dead," spoken by the "madman" in *The Gay Science*, should not be interpreted literally or theologically. Nietzsche does not recount the

death of a divine being but observes the collapse of the cultural efficacy of the idea of God as the ultimate ground of truth, morality, and the meaning of the world (Nietzsche: 2001, 119). “We have killed him,” says the madman, indicating that the development of rationalism, historical criticism, science, and secularization gradually dissolved the conditions of credibility of the Christian-metaphysical universe. Yet modern human beings have not fully understood the magnitude of their act: they often continue to live by moral values, egalitarian ideals, or beliefs in objective truth that preserve, in secularized form, the structure of the old metaphysics.

Nietzsche traces this situation genealogically back to Platonism. In his reading, Plato inaugurates a fundamental division between the sensible, changing, and imperfect world and a “true world” of immutable ideas. Christianity radicalizes this operation through the opposition between the earthly world, marked by sin, corporeality, and death, and a transcendent world of salvation. In both cases, concrete life – becoming, the body, instincts, plurality, and finitude – is evaluated in relation to a criterion external to it. What actually exists becomes inferior to what supposedly ought to exist in a metaphysical or religious beyond (Nietzsche: 2007, 8).

From this perspective, nihilism does not begin only when transcendent values collapse; it is already prepared by those very values. The ascetic ideal, Christian morality and the metaphysics of the true world are nihilistic in a latent sense, because they devalue life in the name of a principle superior to life. Modern nihilism is the internal result of this devaluation. A culture that has placed its ultimate meaning in a transcendent world cannot avoid considering the sensible world worthless once transcendence becomes incredible. Thus, the death of God does not produce nihilism by itself; it makes visible the nihilism hidden in the history of Western values.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche describes this history as “the history of an error”: the true world postulated by metaphysics, through its own

exhaustion, becomes useless, inaccessible, and finally superfluous. Once the true world is abolished, the apparent world is also abolished, since it had been defined only in opposition to the former (Nietzsche: 1998, 20). The philosopher does not, however, propose the simple disappearance of the real. He calls for the liberation of existence from dualism that opposed a supposed beyond of truth to the world of becoming. There is no world “truer” than this one; there is only the world of becoming, the plurality of interpretations, and the conflict of forces.

At this point lies the ambivalent character of nihilism. On the one hand, nihilism is an axiological catastrophe: human beings are left without the orientations through which they had interpreted suffering and existence. On the other hand, this catastrophe can have a liberating function. If the old values are expressions of a negation of life, then their collapse offers the possibility of a new affirmation. The problem is therefore not whether nihilism will appear, but whether it will take the form of passive exhaustion or of a force capable of creating new values.

Nietzsche formulates this distinction through the opposition between passive and active nihilism. Passive nihilism is the symptom of a fatigue of the spirit: traditional values no longer convince, but the individual or culture lacks sufficient strength to produce others. Instead of creation, there appear resignation, the need for anesthesia, refuge in conformity, consumption of distractions, compensatory dogmatism, or the search for quietness that suspends the problem of meaning. Nietzsche sees in this form of nihilism an expression of decadence: the will no longer affirms, selects, or creates; it seeks only the reduction of suffering (Carr: 1990, 85-104).

Active nihilism, by contrast, is the destructive moment of a growing force. It recognizes that the old values are exhausted but does not limit itself to the observation of the void. It destroys them precisely because they can no longer sustain a higher form of life. The activity of nihilism is not yet a new order of values; it is the critical condition for its emergence. In this sense, Nietzsche does not idealize destruction as such.

Negation is necessary only if it prepares higher affirmation. To remain in active nihilism would nevertheless mean transforming the means into an end and missing the transvaluation it makes possible.

For this reason, the real alternative to nihilism does not consist in restoring Christian values, returning to a metaphysics of absolute truth, or simply reconstructing old certainties. For Nietzsche, such solutions would be forms of resentment toward modernity attempts to deny the actual conditions of existence after the “death of God.” Overcoming nihilism requires assuming the consequences of this death, but without falling into despair. It requires the creation of values immanent to life, not the rediscovery of values supposedly existing in a beyond.

This orientation must be connected to the notion of the will to power. The concept is frequently and unjustifiably reduced to the aspiration toward political or social domination. In reality, it designates a broader dynamic of life: the tendency to interpret, organize, form, intensify, and overcome existing forms. The will to power is not necessarily the will to dominate other people; it can take the form of artistic creation, self-discipline, knowledge, the transformation of affects, or the capacity to give style to one’s own existence.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche states that there are no moral phenomena in themselves, but only moral interpretations of phenomena (Nietzsche: 2002, 69). This proposition does not imply that every evaluation is equivalent or that all values are arbitrary. It means that values are not inscribed in the objective structure of the universe and cannot be guaranteed by a transcendent authority. They express certain forms of life, relations of force, and ways of affirming or denying existence. The decisive philosophical question is no longer “Which value is eternally true?” but “What type of life is expressed by this value?” and “Does it increase or diminish the power of affirming life?”

On the Genealogy of Morality has precisely the role of showing that the most respected ideals are not neutral or self-evident. Compassion, humility, equality, sacrifice, and asceticism must be interpreted

according to the psychological and historical conditions of their emergence. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche identifies resentment as the mechanism through which impotence is transformed into moral judgment: the one incapable of acting avenges his impotence by declaring evil to be the essence of the strong and good to be the virtue of the weak, humble, and suffering (Nietzsche: 2007, 20). Not every form of compassion is, for Nietzsche, reducible to resentment; however, a morality that raises impotence to the rank of universal criterion of value represents, in his reading, a strategy for domesticating life.

This explains his opposition to Schopenhauer, Christianity, and, in certain passages, Buddhism. Nietzsche had initially admired Schopenhauer as an educator and as an opponent of the superficial optimism of modern culture. Later, he came to regard Schopenhauerian philosophy as the paradigmatic expression of the ascetic ideal: the will is interpreted as the source of suffering, and salvation is placed in the negation of the will to live. Nietzsche sees in this solution not a higher wisdom, but the symptom of an exhausted will, incapable of transforming suffering into a stimulus for creation (Nietzsche: 2007, 75).

Analogously, he sometimes associates Buddhism with a nihilism of fatigue and withdrawal from existence. Nevertheless, his relation to Buddhism is more nuanced than his polemic against Christianity. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche declares that Buddhism is “a hundred times more realistic than Christianity:” it does not postulate a creator God, does not construct guilt through sin, and does not rely on resentment (Nietzsche: 2005, 23). The Buddha sometimes appears to him as a “physiologist” of suffering, capable of recommending a more sober spiritual hygiene than the Christian promise of salvation. Yet Nietzsche continues to interpret nirvāṇa as a form of negation of the will and therefore as an ideal incompatible with his Dionysian affirmation of life.

This interpretation of Buddhism must be approached critically. Comparative research has shown that Nietzsche depended to a considerable extent on Schopenhauerian readings and on the limited

Orientalist sources of the nineteenth century. Benjamin Elman emphasizes that Nietzsche should not simply be separated from the problem of Buddhism, since it plays a significant role in the development of his concept of nihilism; nevertheless, his image of Buddhism remains selective and marked by his own concerns regarding the destiny of Europe (Elman: 1983, 680). Douglas Berger likewise observes that Nietzsche treats the Buddha as an ambivalent historical type: admirable for his critique of transcendent ideas and for the absence of resentment but rejected because nirvāṇa appears to him as an expression of renunciation of the creative dynamism of life (Berger: 2017, 104). It must be specified that this equivalence between *śūnyatā*, “emptiness,” and nothingness is problematic. In the Buddhist tradition, especially in Nāgārjuna, emptiness does not indicate the non-existence of phenomena, but the absence of their intrinsic nature; it is inseparable from dependent origination and does not annul the efficacy of the conventional world. Moreover, early Buddhism itself rejects both eternalism and annihilationism. Thus, the contrast between Nietzsche and Buddhism is not reducible to the opposition between the affirmation and negation of life; more profoundly, it concerns different understandings of suffering, desire, freedom, and self-transformation (Bodhi: 2005, 75).

Nietzschean nihilism is therefore ambivalent: it is the diagnosis of the disintegration of the highest values, but also the condition for a possible transvaluation. The death of God opens an abyss, but this abyss does not compel resignation. It can lead either to the passive nihilism of fatigue and conformity, or to the active nihilism that destroys decadent values to create new forms of affirmation. Nietzsche does not propose the restoration of a lost absolute, but the lucid assumption of the absence of a transcendent foundation. Instead of a world guaranteed by God, the Good in itself, or metaphysical truth, he imagines an existence capable of giving style to itself, transforming suffering into strength, and saying “yes” to becoming.

In this affirmation, and not in the mere negation of inherited values, lies the ultimate stake of overcoming nihilism.

Comparative Perspective: *Śūnyatā* and Nihilism

The rapprochement between Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness and Friedrich Nietzsche's problem of nihilism can be philosophically fruitful, but it becomes imprecise when transformed into a direct equivalence. At first glance, both thinkers seem to undertake a radical critique of stable foundations: Nāgārjuna contests the existence of an intrinsic nature of phenomena, while Nietzsche unmasks the metaphysical fiction of a "true world" situated beyond becoming. Both oppose, in different ways, the belief that reality is composed of permanent substances, immutable identities, and ultimate principles. Yet this formal convergence must not obscure the decisive difference between the two projects. *Śūnyatā* is not a theory of nothingness, nor an Eastern variant of nihilism; and Nietzschean nihilism is not an ontological doctrine of emptiness, but the historical diagnosis of the devaluation of the highest values of Western culture.

In Nāgārjuna's case, emptiness designates the absence of *svabhāva*, that is, of an intrinsic, independent, self-sufficient, and immutable nature. To say that a phenomenon is empty does not mean that it does not exist in any sense. More precisely, it means that it does not exist by itself, as an autonomous reality separable from the set of conditions that make it possible. An object, a person, an event, or a concept appears only in dependence upon causes, relations, linguistic conventions, social practices, and cognitive conditions. Thus, emptiness does not suppress the world of experience but explains its mode of appearance: precisely because things are not fixed in an intrinsic essence, they can enter into relations, transform, and produce effects (Garfield: 1995, 69-70).

This idea is concentrated in the famous formulation from chapter XXIV of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: "What is dependent origination, we call emptiness. This is a dependent designation, and this itself is the Middle Way" (Nāgārjuna: 1995, 69). In this sentence, emptiness, dependent origination, and conventional designation do not constitute

three independent doctrines, but three aspects of the same philosophical insight. Phenomena are empty because they depend on conditions; they can be designated and known conventionally precisely because they arise relationally; and the recognition of this mode of existence avoids both the affirmation of an eternal substance and the absolute negation of existence.

By contrast, nihilism in Nietzsche designates the situation in which the highest values lose their power to orient existence. He does not claim that phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature, but that the great ideals of European civilization – God, absolute truth, the good in itself, the immortal soul, universal moral order – can no longer function as credible sources of meaning. Nihilism appears when human beings, accustomed to justifying their lives by reference to a transcendent order, discover that this order can no longer be sustained. “The aim is lacking; the answer is lacking to the question ‘why?’” Nietzsche notes (Nietzsche: 1968, 9). Therefore, nihilism is not primarily a thesis about the ontological structure of things, but an axiological and cultural crisis.

The difference can be stated clearly: Nāgārjuna shows that the absence of intrinsic essence makes the conditioned world intelligible; Nietzsche analyzes the drama produced by the collapse of the meanings through which Western human beings had interpreted the world. In Madhyamaka, emptiness is the condition of possibility for relation, change, and efficacy. In Nietzsche’s diagnosis, nihilism is the experience of disorientation that occurs when traditional values can no longer organize existence. The first perspective does not lead to a lack of meaning, but to the dissolution of the claim that meaning must be guaranteed by a substance or an absolute foundation. The second begins precisely with the historical trauma of losing such a guarantee.

From this follows the different relation of the two authors to the opposition between existence and non-existence. Nāgārjuna refuses to transform emptiness into a positive thesis about “nothing.” If things existed absolutely, independently of conditions, they could not arise, cease, or enter into causal relations. But absolute non-existence cannot

be affirmed either, because it would annul experience, suffering, action, and the possibility of liberation. The Middle Way is not a compromise between two metaphysical positions, but a critique of the assumptions that make these positions appear exhaustive. To affirm that a thing exists intrinsically and to affirm that it does not exist intrinsically are, from the Madhyamaka perspective, two symmetrical forms of reification (Nāgārjuna: 1995, 197).

Nietzsche does not practice such a suspension of positions. Although he contests the Platonic opposition between being and becoming, he does not aim to neutralize all evaluative affirmations. On the contrary, his project presupposes the possibility of active, selective, and creative evaluations. He attacks the metaphysics of stability because it has devalued becoming, the body, plurality, and finitude. In place of an immutable world, Nietzsche affirms the dynamic character of life, the play of interpretations, and the conflict of forces (Nietzsche: 1998, 20). If Nāgārjuna does not replace essence with a new metaphysical principle, Nietzsche tends to privilege becoming as the horizon of an anti-metaphysical affirmation of life.

This difference becomes even more visible in the analysis of the notion of self. In Madhyamaka philosophy, the person is not a permanent substance situated beyond body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. The “I” is a conventional designation for a dynamic continuity of processes, not a simple, autonomous center identical with itself. The critique of this substantial self does not aim to annul responsibility or individual experience. People exist conventionally; they suffer, act, learn, and bear the consequences of their actions. What is rejected is the interpretation of the person as possessing an independent, immutable, and self-grounding core (Siderits: 2007, 50).

On the practical level, this critique of the self is inseparable from the reduction of attachment. If individuals treat their identity, possessions, opinions, or emotions as expressions of a solid and permanent “I,” they become vulnerable to fear, aversion, possessiveness, and resentment. The

realization of emptiness does not aim to dissolve the person into impersonal indifference, but to free experience from egocentric fixation. In the Mahāyāna tradition, this liberation is correlated with compassion: if the absolute separation between self and others cannot be ontologically sustained, the suffering of the other can no longer be treated as radically foreign. The wisdom of emptiness and compassion are therefore not two accidental dimensions, but two interdependent aspects of the *bodhisattva* practice.

Nietzsche, in turn, criticizes the traditional image of the subject. He rejects the idea of a simple self, transparent to itself and capable of being the sovereign cause of its own acts. What is called the “subject” is, for him, rather a mobile plurality of impulses, affects, interpretations, and relations of force. Grammar itself contributes to the illusion of a stable agent: from the fact that language requires a subject of the verb, one erroneously infers the existence of an identical substance standing behind action. At this point, there is a real analogy with the Buddhist critique of the self: both philosophies contest the transformation of a dynamic continuity into a simple and autonomous entity.

Yet the meaning of this critique differs profoundly. Nāgārjuna seeks to weaken attachment to the self and thereby to liberate beings from suffering. Nietzsche seeks the constitution of a higher form of individuality, capable of creatively organizing the plurality of its own forces. For him, the valuable individual is not the one who dissolves all personal differences, but the one who succeeds in giving style to inner conflicts, transforming reactive affects, and becoming the author of a hierarchy of his own. The critique of the subject does not lead to the renunciation of affirmation, but to the self-overcoming of the individual.

This opposition continues on the ethical level. In Madhyamaka Buddhism, emptiness has a soteriological aim: it contributes to the removal of the ignorance that sustains the cycle of suffering. Ignorance is not merely the lack of correct information, but the structural tendency to treat phenomena as fixed things, possessions of an ego, or stable sources

of satisfaction. From this error possessive desire, aversion, and the illusion of separation arise. Understanding emptiness does not propose an escape from the world, because the conditioned world is precisely the field in which compassion, responsibility, and liberating practice become possible.

Nietzsche views with suspicion precisely those ethics that make the reduction of suffering the supreme criterion of value. He does not deny the reality of pain but refuses to consider suffering a decisive objection against life. For him, suffering can become the material of creation, discipline, intensification, and self-overcoming. Consequently, the alternative to nihilism is not liberation from becoming, desire, and conflict, but the affirmation of these in a transfiguring form. This affirmation is expressed through the will to power, the creation of values, the figure of the overman, and the test of eternal recurrence (Nietzsche: 2006, 7).

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic simply to oppose a tradition of the “negation of life” to a philosophy of the “affirmation of life.” Nietzsche himself appreciated Buddhism as being, in certain respects, more realistic than Christianity: it does not presuppose a creator God, does not organize existence around the idea of sin, and does not ground morality in resentment. Yet his interpretation remains limited by the polemical framework through which he reads every discipline of desire as a possible expression of vital fatigue. In particular, the identification of nirvāṇa with nothingness or with the simple extinction of life does not reflect the complexity of Buddhist traditions or the Madhyamaka meaning of liberation. Nirvāṇa is not access to a state of non-existence, but the extinction of ignorance, attachment, and the mechanisms that reproduce suffering.

The most important point of convergence between Nāgārjuna and Nietzsche therefore lies in the critique of reification. Both expose the tendency to fix becoming into rigid concepts: self, substance, true world, absolute cause, stable identity, or eternal value. For Nāgārjuna, this

tendency produces the metaphysical error of *svabhāva*; for Nietzsche, it produces the devaluation of life in the name of transcendent fictions. In both cases, thought is called upon to become attentive to the constructed character of certain apparently self-evident oppositions: being and non-being, soul and body, truth and appearance, subject and object, good and evil. Yet the final aim of the critique is radically different. Nāgārjuna does not seek to replace old foundations with a new metaphysics of becoming, force, or creation. He seeks to free the mind from all attachment to reified ontological positions, including attachment to emptiness itself. Nietzsche, by contrast, does not stop at the unmasking of old values; he seeks a new possibility of evaluation. If, for Madhyamaka, wisdom consists in not absolutizing either existence or non-existence, not even the doctrine of emptiness, for Nietzsche the decisive issue is the emergence of a form of life capable of affirming becoming without transcendent guarantees.

In conclusion, *śūnyatā* is not nihilism. Emptiness does not proclaim a void of meaning and does not annul phenomenal reality; rather, it describes the conditioned, relational, and non-substantial character of all things. Nietzschean nihilism, in turn, is not a theory of the non-existence of the world, but the diagnosis of a crisis of European values after the collapse of transcendent foundations. The dialogue between Nāgārjuna and Nietzsche nevertheless remains relevant because it illuminates two major ways of criticizing the metaphysics of stability. One leads toward liberation from attachment and toward compassion; the other toward transvaluation, self-overcoming, and the creative affirmation of life.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness and Nietzsche's nihilism shows that the two perspectives converge in their critique of stable foundations, immutable essences, and absolute values. However, this similarity does not justify identifying *śūnyatā* with nihilism.

For Nāgārjuna, emptiness does not mean non-existence or nothingness, but rather the absence of an independent intrinsic nature in phenomena. Things exist conventionally precisely because they arise dependently, transform, and enter causal relations. Thus, Madhyamaka avoids both eternalism and annihilationism.

For Nietzsche, nihilism designates the crisis of European values after the loss of credibility of transcendent foundations. The “death of God” does not lead only to an axiological void but also opens the possibility of transvaluation and the creative affirmation of life.

The essential difference lies in the final aim of the two projects: Nāgārjuna seeks liberation from attachment and openness to compassion, while Nietzsche seeks to overcome nihilism through the creation of values, self-overcoming, and the affirmation of becoming. The dialogue between the two remains fruitful precisely because it offers two distinct ways of thinking about the world without absolute foundations.

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Vimalā Devī at the Jagannātha Temple of Purī: Śākta Cult and Religious Syncretism in Odisha

Part I

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Abstract: This study offers an initial exploration of the cult dedicated to Goddess Vimalā, whose shrine is located within the sacred precincts of the great Jagannātha Temple Complex in Purī, Odisha, India. For a foreign researcher interested in Indian spiritual practice, Vimalā Devī's historical roots, iconography and worship exemplify the coexistence and interaction of diverse religious traditions within a single sacred space, making this shrine an important locus for examining the dynamics of syncretism in South Asian traditions. The restricted access to the Jagannātha Temple Complex in Purī, which, like the Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar, permits entry only to Hindus and prohibits photography or videography, renders firsthand visual and ritual documentation difficult.

Consequently, this study relies primarily on textual and visual sources, complemented by conversations with devotees and observations of domestic ritual practices, to gain insight into the mythic, ritual, and experiential dimensions that shape contemporary understandings of the Devī. Through this approach, the article highlights patterns of both continuity and transformation in the Śākta traditions associated with the Jagannātha temple site in Purī.

Keywords: Śākta tradition, Jagannātha cult, Vimalā Devī, religious syncretism, historical roots, worship.

Introduction

Situated in the eastern state of Odisha, along the Bay of Bengal, the city of Purī is home to the monumental Jagannātha Temple Complex, one of the four principal sacred sites (*Chār Dhām*) of Indian religious tradition and a major pilgrimage (*tīrtha*) center.¹ The toponym *Purī*, conventionally interpreted as “abode” or “seat,” is embedded within a dense network of sacred designations attested across textual and ritual traditions: *Nīlāchala* (regarded as the most ancient name of the site), *Nīlādrinātha*, *Nīlāchalakṣetra*, *Śrīkṣetra*, *Śaṅkhakṣetra*, *Puruṣottamakṣetra*, *Puruṣottama-Purī* or *Jagannātha-Dhāma*, *Jagannātha-Purī*.² The Jagannātha Temple complex, which attained its architectural and ritual apogee under the Eastern Gaṅga dynasty in the twelfth century c.e., is widely recognized as a paradigmatic site of religious syncretism,³ as its ritual system and sacred topography embody centuries of spiritual, cultural, and artistic interaction within Odisha and across the Indian subcontinent, reflecting the layered integration of Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Tantric, and local traditions. Scholarly interpretations of the Jagannātha cult have long emphasized its composite character, variously understood as the outcome of Sanskritization, religious accommodation, or the historical layering of tribal, Buddhist, Śaiva, Śākta, and Vaiṣṇava traditions, rather as coexistence, negotiation, and ritual interdependence of multiple traditions within the temple complex.

Within the inner precincts of the Jagannātha Temple complex, a shrine dedicated to Goddess Vimalā, *Mā Bimālā Deulā*, occupies a distinctive and structurally significant position: Vimalā is revered as the the ritual *Śakti* of the Jagannātha Temple, being named by devotees the

¹ J. C. Mahanti, *Saga of Jagannātha and Badadeula at Puri (Story of Lord Jagannātha and His Temple)*, New Delhi: Vij Books India, 2014, pp. XXIV-XXVII.

² Idem.

³ Kishore Chandra Mishra, “Religious Syncretism and the Jagannātha Cult in Orissa,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 61 (2000), pp. 144-151.

“Queen of Puri”, the presiding “Goddess of Power.”⁴ Her designations as *Piṭheśvarī* (Mistress of the Sacred Seat) and *Śrīkṣetra-Adhīśvarī* (Sovereign of *Śrīkṣetra*)⁵ show that Her shrine often assumes primacy for Śākta devotees within the Jagannātha Temple complex, while simultaneously fulfilling multiple roles: guardian of the temple precincts, tutelary deity of Puruṣottama-Kṣetra, and symbolic embodiment of the city’s spiritual vitality.⁶ Vimalā not only synthesizes in Her tradition and contemporary devotional practice the roots and evolution of Odishan Sakta⁷ *cultus*, but foundational studies have highlighted the centrality of Śākta and Tantric elements in the early religious landscape of Purī, often arguing for the precedence of the Goddess cult prior to the Vaiṣṇava consolidation of the Jagannātha tradition. In the larger context of Pan-Indian Sati myth traditions, Vimalā Devi’s temple is one of the Ādi Śakta Śakta *pīṭhas* in India, the Purī site being revered as “Sati Pāda

⁴ Pradeep Kumar Choudhury, *Neelabrahma Sri Jagannātha*, translated by Madhusmita Mishra, Bhubaneswar: Gyanajuga Publications, 2016, p. 139.

⁵ Thomas Eugene Donaldson, *The iconography of Vaiṣṇava Images in Orissa*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P.) Ltd., 2001, p. 248.

⁶ Ratnakar Mahapatra, “Vimalā temple at the Jagannātha Temple Complex, Puri,” *Odisha Review*, Government of Odisha e-Magazine, September-October 2005, pp. 9-14.

⁷ The cult of Śakti has long constituted a central and multifaceted dimension of Indian religious and cultural history, see Biswarup Dass and Biswarup Das, “Yogini Cult in Orissa,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 40 (1979), pp. 91-98. Its origins are commonly traced from woman-centered fertility beliefs associated with the Indus Valley civilization at sites such as Mohenjo-Daro, through the Mother-Earth *cultus* of various indigenous traditions, and into the earliest Vedic articulations of the divine feminine, most notably the *Devī Sūktam* of the *R̥gveda*; over time, these heterogeneous strands converged into what would later crystallize as Śāktism (*Śākta*, the doctrine centered on divine energy, power, or the Goddess), which assumed a more systematized form between the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., Jayanti Dora, “Iconography: with special reference to the iconography of ‘Śakta’ Deities of the ‘Vaital’ Temple, Bhubaneswar,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 63, 2002, pp. 1224-1232.

pīṭha.”⁸ The present study seeks to re-center Vimalā by examining her shrine, iconography, and ritual functions as a key to understanding the enduring Śākta substratum of the Jagannātha cult and the specific modalities through which religious syncretism operates within the sacred topography of Purī.

Jagannātha Temple Complex, Religious syncretism and Śakta tradition

The present-day Jagannātha Temple was constructed in the twelfth century c.e under the patronage of King Anantavarman Chodagaṅga Deva of the Eastern Gaṅga dynasty⁹ and was subsequently expanded and ritually consolidated by later rulers of the Gaṅga and Sūryavaṁśī (Gajapati) dynasties.¹⁰ The completion of the main temple structure around 1230 C.E. marks a decisive moment in the religious and political history of eastern India. At this juncture, King Anaṅgabhīma III of the Imperial Gaṅgas formally dedicated his kingdom to Puruṣottama-Jagannātha, ritually proclaiming the deity as the State God of the Gajapati polity and acknowledging himself as the divine servant (*rājā sevaka*) of the Lord;¹¹ this act of royal consecration effectively sacralized political authority and

⁸ The *Bimala Saparyā* manuscript (9th Century C.E.), preserved in the State Museum of Odisha, Bhubaneswar, records Mahāmāyā Vimalā as the presiding deity of the Uḍḍiyāna Tantric *pīṭha*, the site where the left *pāda* of Sati is said to have fallen during Śiva’s *Rudra Tandava*, in Mohan Lal, *op. cit.*, p. 4292; see also Rajendra Kumar Mohanty, “Lord Shree Jagannātha-A Great Assimilator of Tantric Impressions for Human Civilization,” *Orissa Review*, July 2011, pp. 50-65.

⁹ Suryanarayan Das, *Lord Jagannātha Through the Ages*, New Delhi: Sanbun Publishers, 2010, pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ Manmath Nath Das (ed.), *Sidelights on History and Culture of Orissa*, Volume released by Professor Satish Chandra, Chairman, University Grants Commission and President, Indian History Congress on 26 December 1977 on the occasion of *The Bhubaneswar Session of the Indian History Congress*, Cuttack: Vidyapuri, 1977, pp. 516-531.

¹¹ Ruprecht Geib, *Indradymna-Legende: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Jagannātha-Kultes*, Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1975, p. 156.

established Jagannātha as the symbolic sovereign of the realm. Architecturally, the Jagannātha Temple at Puri is constructed in the Kalinga architectural style, in accordance with the Sanskrit architectural treatises collectively known as the *Śilpa Śāstras*¹² and the *Vāstu Śāstra*, which prescribe the principles for the construction, orientation, and consecration of the *Devalaya*, the dwelling of the deities. Conceived as a *Puruṣa Maṇḍala*, the temple's sacred space is understood as a representation of the Universe;¹³ in this conception, the Kalingan temple is designed so that its spatial organization and architectural articulation correspond symbolically to the parts of the human body, thereby enacting the concept of the *Śarīra Yantra* (body diagram), through which cosmic, architectural, and corporeal orders are ritually aligned.¹⁴

Epigraphical evidence indicates that until the early fourteenth century the deity of Puri was predominantly referred to as *Puruṣottama*, while the name *Jagannātha* appears in inscriptions only from the reign of King Bhānudeva II (notably in the *Srikurman* inscription dated to 1309 C.E., EI, V, 35, and the *Simhachalam* inscription of 1319 C.E., SII, VI, no. 714).¹⁵ This shift in nomenclature reflects a broader process of theological and ritual reconfiguration, through which the cult of *Puruṣottama* was increasingly articulated within an explicitly Vaiṣṇava framework, while continuing to accommodate pre-existing Śākta and Śaiva elements within the temple's ritual and spatial organization. The Jagannātha Temple site bears the indelible imprint of multiple religious traditions, reflecting a form of syncretism that extends into the present

¹² Stella Kramrich, *The Hindu Temple*, Vol. I and II, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1946.

¹³ Anurima Banerjee, "Dance and the Distributed Body: Odissi and Mahari performance," in M. Franco (ed.), *The Oxford book of dance and reenactment*, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 425.

¹⁴ Ankita Chand, "Chronicles of Kalinga Temple Architecture," *International Journal of History*, 5(2) (2023), pp. 86-97.

¹⁵ Dinesh Chandra Sircar, "Gaṅga Bhānudeva II and *Puruṣottama*-*Jagannātha*," *JKHRS*, I, 3(1946), pp. 251-253.

and remains a sustained subject of scholarly debate. The cult of Lord Jagannātha, one of the most complex and conceptually challenging phenomena in Indian religious history, has frequently been interpreted as a regional synthesis of Vedic and non-Vedic traditions. Several scholars have observed that the ritual practices and ceremonial structures of the temple display enduring affinities with South Indian, or broadly Dravidian,¹⁶ religious forms. According to a substantial body of research, Jagannātha may have originated as a local tribal deity worshipped by the Sabaras (Savaras),¹⁷ whose cult was gradually incorporated, through processes of Sanskritization and ritual reinterpretation, into Jain, Buddhist, Tantric, and ultimately Vaiṣṇava religious frameworks.¹⁸

¹⁶ Avinash Patra, edited by Maria Joseph (Vishnupriyā Dasi), “Origin & Antiquity of the Cult of Lord Jagannātha,” *University of Oxford Journal*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 10.

¹⁷ In an anthropological view, *Savara/Sabar* is not a specific tribal community, it rather denotes a particular socio-economic level of life in Orissa, Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, Gaya Charan Tripathi (eds.), *The Cult of Jagannātha and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, South Asia Interdisciplinary Regional Research Programme, Orissa Research Project, South Asia Institute, New Delhi Branch, Heidelberg University, South Asian Studies No. VIII, New Delhi: Manohar, 1978, 1986, p. 68; Behera, N. K., & Dash, J., “Lord Jagannātha, the State Deity and the Sabaras: An anthropological enquiry”, in Kanhu Charan Mishra (ed.), *Studies in the cult of Jagannātha*, Bhubaneswar, 1991, pp. 224-237; see also Raphaël Rousseleau (dir.), “Colonial in the Vernacular: the god Jagannath and his ‘tribal’ origins in the State of Odisha (India) through historiography and present ethnography,” *Politika*, politika.io, online since 01/06/2022.

¹⁸ W. W. Hunter, *Orissa or the Vicissitudes of an Indian Province under Native and British Rule. Being the Second and Third Volumes of the Annals of Rural Bengal* (Vol. 1), London: Smith, Elder & Co, 15 Waterloo Press, 1872; W. J. Wilkins, 1882, *Hindu Mythology. Vedic and Purāṇic*, Calcutta and Simla: Thacker, Spink & Co, third impression, 1913; N. K. Sahu (ed.), *A History of Orissa*, Vol. I, Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1956; Padhi, B.M., *Daru Devata (Oriya)*, Cuttack, 1964; Kanhu Charan Mishra, *The Cult of Jagannātha*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1971.

Heinrich von Stietencron has argued that the ritual topography of the Purī site strongly supports the interpretation that it originally functioned as a Śākta sacred landscape; as he observes, the central hill of Purī is encircled by major Śaiva shrines, *Kapālamocana*, *Lokanātha*, *Mārkaṇḍeśvara*, and *Nilakaṇṭha*, reflecting a regional pattern in which the summit of a sacred hill is typically associated with the Goddess, while Śiva temples occupy the surrounding perimeter.¹⁹ This configuration suggests that the hill itself possessed sanctity for the Devī prior to the construction of the Puruṣottama-Jagannātha temple. On this basis, Stietencron proposes that the cult of Vimalā, understood as a manifestation of the primordial Mother Goddess, predates the establishment of the Jagannātha Temple and that Purī originally functioned as a Śākta or Śaiva *pīṭha* before its gradual incorporation into a predominantly Vaiṣṇava religious framework.²⁰

According to O. M. Starza (1993), the Jagannātha Temple was originally a center of worship for the Trimūrti, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, along with their consorts and the three central forms of the Hindu Goddess: Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Pārvatī (identified with Vimalā).²¹ From the eighth to the twelfth century, Śaivism predominated in the region, while simultaneously incorporating elements of Tantra, Śākta traditions, and Tantric Buddhism, and, over time, these popular religious

¹⁹ Heinrich von Stietencron, “The advent of Viṣṇuism in Orissa: An Outline of its History According to Archaeological and Epigraphical Sources From the Gupta Period Up To 1135 A. D.,” in Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, Gaya Charan Tripathi (eds.), *The Cult of Jagannātha and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, South Asia Interdisciplinary Regional Research Programme, Orissa Research Project, South Asia Institute New Delhi Branch, Heidelberg University, South Asian Studies No. VIII, New Delhi: Manohar, 1978, 1986, 2005, 2014, pp. 1-31.

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ O. M. Starza, *The Jagannātha a Temple at Puri. Its architecture, Art and Cult, with a frontispiece, 26 figures and 110 plates*, Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1993, p. 59.

currents were partially assimilated into the Vaiṣṇava creed, notably through the Nārasimha cult.²² By the 10th century, “the idea of joint worship of Viṣṇu and Śiva gained ground [...] the two gods were worshipped side by side, in twin temples of identical shape, placed on a common platform (*vedi*),”²³ as exemplified by the shrines of *Nīlamādhava-Viṣṇu*, *Siddheśvarā-Śiva*, *Viṣṇu-Lokamādhava* and *Śiva-Svayambhūkeśvara*.²⁴ The joint worship of Viṣṇu and Śiva is highly significant in the religious history of Odisha, providing the conceptual foundation for the Jagannātha trinity developed during the Gaṅga period, which comprises Viṣṇu (Jagannātha/Kṛṣṇa), Śiva (Balabhadra / Saṃkarṣaṇa), and a Śakti (Subhadrā/Kātyāyanī).²⁵

O. M. Starza, citing Ghosh (1936), notes that according to *Brahma Purana*, King Indradyumna, the mythical founder of Puri Temple, worshipped Purushottama Visnu with *Pāñcarātra* rites.²⁶ Historical accounts of the Puri temple note that the philosopher Ādi Śaṅkarācārya established the ritual worship of Jagannātha and founded the Govardhanapīṭha, where the Ādyāśakti is represented by the Goddess Vimalā.²⁷ According to the *Mādalā Pāñji* (Chronicle of the Jagannātha Temple), the images of Śaṅkarācārya and his disciple Padmapāda Acharya were worshipped on the *Ratbaśimhasana* (Sacred Throne) of Jagannātha until the reign of Raja Divyasimha Deva (18th century), when they were

²² Heinrich von Stietencron, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-171.

²⁴ *Idem.*

²⁵ *Idem.*

²⁶ J. C. Ghosh, “Ekānamśā and Subhadrā,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Letters)*, 2 (1936), pp. 41-46, *apud* O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*; see also S. C. Mukherjee, *The Cult of Ekānamśā, The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXV, No 3 (1959), Calcutta, The Calcutta Oriental Press Ltd., pp. 189-209.

²⁷ Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, London: Rider and Company, Anchor Press, 1965, 1975, p. 9; K. S. Arjunwadkar, “Panegyrics on Śiva Group Ascribed to Shankara: A Critical Study,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 85, 2004, pp. 67-80.

removed and destroyed by Vaiṣṇava authorities.²⁸ Around the same time, the image of Śiva Bhairava, which had stood alongside Jagannātha on the main altar, was likewise removed and destroyed.²⁹ Observing the temple in the mid nineteenth century, Long noted that “though Jagannātha gives much ascendancy to the Vaiṣṇavas, yet the *Pāṇḍas* at Jagannātha all belong to the Śākta sect of the Śaivites.”³⁰ Gradually, Śrīvidyā and Śiva-centered Śaiva traditions were marginalized, although vestiges of these practices persist to the present day.

Thus, in the broader landscape of Odishan religious practices, a clear distinction can be observed between the Ananta Vāsudeva Temple in Bhubaneswar, an explicitly Vaiṣṇava institution, and the Jagannātha Temple at Puri, where the cult of Hari-Hara, the composite form of Viṣṇu and Śiva, is integrated with the worship of Śrī-Vidyā, a core current of Śākta-Tantric theology.³¹ This distinctive confluence of Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta elements not only highlights Odisha’s longstanding history of doctrinal and ritual blending but also provides the theological and ritual framework within which the worship of Vimalā Devī is practiced nowadays.

In contemporary ritual practice, Vimalā Devi is regarded as the consort (*śakti*) of Puruṣottama Jagannātha, a form of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa (with Kṛṣṇa understood as an avatāra of Viṣṇu). Within this configuration, Jagannātha assumes the role of Bhairava of the Purī *pīṭha*, marking a

²⁸ Suryanarayan Das, *op. cit.*

²⁹ S. K. Mitra, “A document relating to the worship at the Puri Temple,” in *J. N. Banerjee Volume, A collection of articles by his friends and pupils presented on his retirement from Carmichael Professorship of Ancient Indian History and Culture University of Calcutta*, Calcutta: Inland Printing Works, 1960, pp. 285-286; P. Mukherjee, *History of Jagannātha Temple in the 19th Century*, Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 1977, pp. 21-23, 73-74.

³⁰ J. Long, “Notes and Queries Suggested by a Visit to Orissa in January 1859,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XXVIII (3), 1859, pp. 193-194, in O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-64.

³¹ O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

notable departure from the usual association of Bhairava with Śiva. Accordingly, Vimalā, traditionally identified as Śiva's consort, Pārvatī, is also interpreted as Lakṣmī, the śakti of Viṣṇu.³² This polyvalent identification encapsulates the enduring logic of ritual syncretism operative at Purī.

Chaturdāmūrti and Vimalā

The inner sanctum (*garbhagrha*) of the Jagannātha Temple at Purī enshrines the three principal deities: Jagannātha, Balabhadra (the elder brother of Jagannātha-Kṛṣṇa, at times identified with Śiva or Saṃkarṣaṇa),³³ and Subhadrā (the younger sister of Jagannātha and Balabhadra), together with Sudarśana, forming the *Chaturdāmūrti*. This quadripartite configuration constitutes a distinctive theological and ritual synthesis, encoding within a single cultic arrangement multiple strata of Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta symbolism.

Several scholars have suggested that “the inclusion of a female deity between the figures of Balarāma and Jagannātha is derived from the worship of Ekānaṃsā in the company of Baladeva and Kṛṣṇa.”³⁴ Within mythological and Tantric traditions, Vimalā's original consort is Śiva, specifically in his Bhairava aspect; however, as Heinrich von Stietencron has observed, in order to accommodate the increasing prominence of

³² Gaya Charan Tripathi, “On the concept of Puruṣottama in the Āgamas,” in Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, Gaya Charan Tripathi (eds.), *The Cult of Jagannātha and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, South Asia Interdisciplinary Regional Research Programme, Orissa Research Project, South Asia Institute, New Delhi Branch, Heidelberg University, South Asian Studies No. VIII, New Delhi: Manohar. 1978, 1986.

³³ Hermann Kulke, “King Anaṅgabhīma III, the Veritable Founder of the Gajapati Kingship and of the Jagannātha Trinity at Purī,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 113(1) (1981), pp. 26-39.

³⁴ J. N. Banerjea, “The Holy Pāñcavīras of the Vṛṣṇis,” *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, 10, 1942, pp. 65-68, *apud* O. M. Starza, *The Jagannatha Temple at Purī. Its architecture, Art and Cult, with a frontispiece, 26 figures and 110 plates*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, New York, Koln, 1993, p. 63.

Viṣṇu within the Purī sacred landscape, the Goddess underwent a process of nominal and functional transformation: “in order to adjust to the intruding god Viṣṇu she later had to assume another name, Subhadrā, which was not yet subject to prescribed Śākta sacrifices. As Subhadrā she became the sister of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa,”³⁵ this renaming facilitating the ritual integration of a Śākta deity into a predominantly Vaiṣṇava cultic framework.

According to Mishra (1984), classical textual sources identify Kāmpilyabāsīnī Subhadrā with Ekānamśā, regarded as a particular manifestation of Durgā or Śakti. In epic and Purāṇic literature, Ekānamśā occupies a liminal and polyvalent position – in the *Mahābhārata*, she is associated with Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa as the daughter of Aṅgīrasa, while in the *Virāṭa Parva* she appears in connection with Yaśodā and is designated as Yogamāyā or Yoganidrā.³⁶ Varāhamihira’s *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* describes her iconographically as positioned between Baladeva and Kṛṣṇa: *ekānamśā kāryā devī baladeva karṣṇayor madhye / kaṭi samsthita-bāmakarā sarojam itareṇa codvahanī*. Similarly, the *Viṣṇu Dharmottara Purāṇa* situates Ekānamśā between Baladeva and Kṛṣṇa, characterizing her as *tasya śakti-svarūpyām bhāgini strī pravartikām*, explicitly identifying her as the embodied śakti of the divine brothers. She is also mentioned in the *Hayaśīrṣa Pañcarātra* (c. 8th century C.E.), notably in the *Puruṣottama Sthāpana Paṭala*, underscoring her integral role within early Vaiṣṇava ritual theology.³⁷ Ekānamśā is further conceptualized as Ādyā Śakti, the primordial energy underlying divine manifestation. According to the *Śaivāgama* of Bhojarāja, this Māyā-Śakti of Īśvara is responsible for the creation of time (*kāla*).³⁸ As Mishra observes, “Subhadrā is the creator of

³⁵ Heinrich von Stietencron, *op. cit.*, p. 75

³⁶ K. C. Mishra, “Ekānamśā and Subhadrā,” in Daityari Panda, Sarat Chandra Panigrahi (ed.), *The Cult and Culture of Lord Jagannath*, Culttack, Orissa: Rashtrabhasha Samavaya Prakashan, 1984, p. 39.

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 40-41.

kāla, Sudarśana is the *kālacakra*,”³⁹ a formulation that integrates temporal cosmology into the Jagannātha iconographic system. The *Skanda Purāṇa* further identifies Subhadrā with Lakṣmī, the śakti of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, reinforcing her Vaiṣṇava assimilation.⁴⁰

J. C. Ghosh has argued that Śakti in the form of Durgā or Ekānaṃśā necessitates worship according to explicitly Śākta ritual prescriptions; at Purī, however, this was circumvented by altering the Goddess’s name and cultic identity from Durgā or Ekānaṃśā to Subhadrā. Both Ekānaṃśā and Subhadrā are presented in the textual tradition as sisters of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma; Ekānaṃśā is described as the daughter of Yaśodā, the foster mother of Kṛṣṇa, while in the *Harivaṃśa*, particularly in the *Āryāstava*, Ekānaṃśā (also called Nidrā) is invoked as the daughter of Nanda Gopa and the sister of Balarāma. At Purī, the transformation of Ekānaṃśā into Subhadrā resulted in the former’s displacement from primacy within the cultic hierarchy: “the latter now occupies the third position in the triad,” and, as Ghosh concludes, “if our identification is correct, the worship at Purī represents the superimposition of Vaiṣṇavism over Śāktism and not Brahmanism over Buddhism.”⁴¹

Within this interpretive framework, Vimalā and Subhadrā are understood as “the two aspects of Durgā–Ekānaṃśā. When the Śākta deity became Vaiṣṇavized and was identified as Subhadrā, Śāktas began worshipping Vimalā within the temple compound.”⁴² A distinct shrine was subsequently established to preserve Vimalā’s original Śākta-Tantric identity, where ritual practices involving offerings of fish (*matsya*) continue to be performed to this day.⁴³ The Śrīvidyā spiritual

³⁹ K. C. Mishra, 1984, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ Idem.

⁴¹ J. C. Ghosh, *op. cit.* p. 46.

⁴² André Couture and Charlotte Schmid, “The Harivaṃśa, the Goddess Ekānaṃśā, and the Iconography of the Vṛṣṇi Triads,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 121, no. 2, 2001, pp. 173-192.

⁴³ Idem.

community, devoted to the esoteric worship of the Goddess, maintained a significant presence in the region and within the Jagannātha Temple complex until the seventeenth century. During this period, however, the Tantric *pañcamākāra*, comprising fish, meat, liquor, parched grain, and associated rituals, was progressively replaced by vegetarian offerings. Historical records attribute the official cessation of meat and fish offerings to King Narasimhadeva in the 17th century, although elements of the earlier ritual regime were later partially restored.⁴⁴

Within the Jagannātha Temple complex, Vimalā is venerated simultaneously as the śakti of Viṣṇu (Jagannātha) and of Śiva, epitomizing the syncretic convergence of Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta theological currents.⁴⁵ While Lakṣmī functions as the orthodox consort of Jagannātha within Vaiṣṇava doctrine, Vimalā occupies the position of his Tantric and heterodox consort.⁴⁶ Śākta tantrikas conceptualize Vimalā as Bhairavī and Jagannātha as Bhairava: when Vimalā is identified with Bhairavī, Jagannātha assumes her corresponding Bhairava aspect.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Agehananda Bharati, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁵ Shrinibas Tripathy, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*; Ratnakar Mahapatra, *op. cit.*; Shrinibas Tripathy, "Goddess Bimala at Puri," *Odisha Review. Government of Odisha e-Magazine*, September 2009, pp. 66-69.

⁴⁷ John Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus civilization, Being an official account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro carried out by the Government of India between the years 1922 and 1927* Edited by Sir John Marshall, C.I.E., LittD., Ph.D., F.S.A., Hon. A.R.I.B.A., Hon. Fellow of King's College, Cambridge Late Director-General of Archeology in India In three volumes, with plan and map in colours, and 164 plates in collotype Volume I: Text. Chapters I-XIX and Plates I-XIV, London: Arthur Probsthain, 1931, pp. 52ff; Dinesh Chandra Sircar, *op. cit.*; P. Sitapati, *Sri Venkatesvara, The Lord of the Seven Hills*, Bombay: Tirupati, 1972, pp. 27-28; Maydhar Mansingha, "The cult of Lord Jagannātha," in D. Panda & S. C. Panigrahi (Eds.), *The cult and culture of Lord Jagannātha*, Rashtrabhasha Samavaya Prakashan, Cuttack,

Within this ritual-theological schema, Vimalā is primarily conceptualized as *Māyā-Śakti*, the ontological power through which transcendence is rendered manifest while simultaneously remaining veiled, a conception well attested in Śaiva-Śākta Tantric sources, where *Māyā* mediates between absolute divinity and phenomenal multiplicity.⁴⁸ Thus, Vimalā is invoked as *Kriyā-Śakti*, the dynamic power of ritual action and efficacy, in relation to Balabhadra; as *Icchā-Śakti*, the volitional and intentional principle, in relation to Subhadrā; and as *Māyā-Śakti*, the power of manifestation and concealment, in relation to Jagannātha himself,⁴⁹ a triadic articulation that resonates with Śaiva and Śrīvidyā cosmological models.

Māḥ Bimālā Deulā Architectural and Sculptural Programme

The shrine presently dedicated to Vimalā Devi within the Jagannātha Temple complex, known as *Māḥ Bimālā Deulā*, is an east-facing temple situated among a cluster of shrines on the south-west side of the inner precincts,⁵⁰ near the corner of the *Kuruma Beḍhā*, and slightly ahead of the sacred pond associated with Vimalā, *Rohinī Kuṇḍa*,⁵¹ which forms an integral component of her ritual topography. The spatial positioning of the shrine within the inner enclosure underscores Vimalā's significance as the presiding Śakti of the Jagannātha Temple complex and situates her cult at the threshold between Tantric and Vaiṣṇava ritual domains.

Orissa, 1984, pp. 17-37; Jitamindra Prasad Singh Deo, "Some Tantric Esoteric of Orissa," *Orissa Historical Series*, No. 9, 2003, p. VIII.

⁴⁸ André Padoux, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990; Alexis Sanderson, "Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions," *The World's Religions*, edited by Sutherland Stewart, Leslie Houlden, Peter Clarke, and Friedhelm Hardy, London: Routledge, 1988, pp. 660-704.

⁴⁹ K. C. Mishra, *op. cit.*; O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Ratnakar Mahapatra, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*, p. 10; Shrinibas Tripathy, *op. cit.*

On the basis of its architectural features, the present Vimalā Devī Mandir appears to have been constructed in its extant form during the ninth century C.E., most likely under the Eastern Gaṅga dynasty, possibly built over the ruins of an earlier sixth-century temple.⁵² Traditional temple chronicles preserved in the *Māḍalā Pāñjī* attribute the original foundation to Yayāti Keśarī of the Somavaṃśī dynasty of South Kośala, situating the shrine within the political and religious milieu of the Bhauma-Kara period (10th century C.E.).⁵³ Subsequent phases of completion and repair are attested in the nineteenth century, while the most recent conservation work was undertaken in 2015. At present, the shrine is protected and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India, Bhubaneswar Circle.

A detailed architectural and sculptural description of the temple has been provided by Ratnakar Mohapatra – architecturally, the Vimalā temple conforms to the Kalinga (*Deuḷa*) style, and comprises the four canonical components characteristic of mature Odishan temple architecture: the *vimāna*, the *jagamohana* (assembly hall), the *bhoga-maṇḍapa* (hall for food offerings), and the *nāṭa-maṇḍapa*.⁵⁴ This compositional scheme reflects both ritual functionality and cosmological ordering, integrating sacrificial, performative, and devotional spaces into a coherent architectural organism. Further, (1) the *nāṭa-maṇḍapa* (dance hall) is a *piḍhā deuḷa*, with four doorways, one on each cardinal side; its interior walls are embellished with painted panels executed in a traditional Odishan style, *Pattachitra*, depicting sixteen manifestations of the Goddess, including the Mahāvidyās, thereby visually encoding the Śākta theological substratum of the shrine; (2) the *vimāna* (sanctum sanctorum) is a *rekhā deuḷa*, whose exterior elevation is vertically articulated into the standard five-fold division: *pabhāga*, *tala-jāṅghā*,

⁵² Biswarup Das, 1977, pp. 130-137; see also von Stietencron, 1978, 2014, p. 75; Ratnakar Mahapatra, *op. cit.*

⁵³ Biswarup Das, 1977, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-204.

⁵⁴ Ratnakar Mahapatra, *op. cit.*

bandhana, *upara-jaṅghā*, and *barandā*; these architectural registers are richly ornamented with an elaborate sculptural programme comprising khakhara-muṇḍis and piḍhā-muṇḍis, latticework (*jālī*), scrolling vegetal motifs, creepers, amorous couples (*mithunas*), nāgas and nāginīs, simhavidālas, gajavidālas, kīrtimukhas, and narrative reliefs such as śikṣādāna scenes depicting sages instructing their disciples; the iconographic repertoire is further enriched by representations of the eight Dikpālas, guardian deities of the cardinal and intercardinal directions, as well as various goddesses and alasa-kanyās, whose graceful postures embody auspiciousness and aesthetic refinement.⁵⁵

Within the ritual hierarchy of the Jagannātha Temple, it is prescribed that devotees first pay homage to Vimalā before proceeding to the worship of Jagannātha in the main sanctum,⁵⁶ a practice that ritually affirms her status as the presiding Śakti of the entire temple complex. In the ritual economy of Puri, the Vimalā Mandir thus occupies a pivotal position, functioning as the initial locus of consecration for offerings (*bhoga*)⁵⁷ prior to their presentation to Jagannātha. This sequence not only reflects Śākta-Vaiṣṇava syncretism but also encodes a Tantric logic in which ritual efficacy is activated through the Goddess before being transmitted to the principal deity of the cult.

Vimalā Devī: Iconography and Cultic Presence

On the outer walls of the the *vimāna* are installed the images of Pāśvadevatās, attendant deities, in the central niches of the outer wall (*bāḍā*) on three sides of the sanctum; an eight-armed Durgā in her Mahīṣāsuramardinī form appears on the southern façade; on the western side stands the six-armed goddess Cāmuṇḍā, represented standing upon Śiva, an iconographic motif characteristic of Śākta-Tantric visual idioms;

⁵⁵ Idem.

⁵⁶ O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Jakob Rösel, “Landed Endowment and Sacred Food: The Economy of an Indian Temple,” *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes De Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1983), pp. 44-59.

the northern niche is presently empty, probably removed or stolen. The vimāna encloses the garbhagrha (sanctum sanctorum), crowned by a curvilinear pañcaratha-style śikhara, conforming to the canonical Kalinga architectural vocabulary. The doorway of the sanctum, opening toward the jagamohana, has a lintel carved with a Gaja-Lakṣmī motif flanked by apsarās, while the Navagrahas, the deities presiding over the nine classical planets, are represented above the lintel, marking the threshold as a cosmologically charged liminal zone. Two sculpted dvārapālas (guardian figures) flank the entrance, completing the iconographic articulation of protection and auspiciousness.

The innermost sanctum, identified as the sixth-century inner chamber, predating the extant superstructure, remains devoid of wall decoration and plain, an architectural sobriety interpreted as symbolizing the primordial purity⁵⁸ and aniconic potency of the goddess in her most archaic manifestation. In the Śākta tradition, Vimalā's primordial status is also articulated through origin myths associated with the site - one narrative recounts that during *Pralaya*, when the world was submerged in cosmic waters, Devī and her sister Arddhāśinī drank half of the ocean each, thereby restoring the earth by drying the primordial flood.⁵⁹ The principal icon of Vimalā Devī, in lakha (a wax-based material), stands slightly over four feet (approximately 1.2 meters) in height.⁶⁰ She is represented standing upon a siṃhāsana (lion throne) set on a pedestal adorned with lotus motifs, a visual idiom connoting sovereignty, fertility, and transcendence.

Iconographically, Vimalā is depicted as three-eyed, with a crescent moon adorning her forehead, and is richly ornamented. Vimalā is portrayed with four arms (chaturbhuja): the upper left hand holds a matsyakanyā (mermaid), alternatively interpreted as a nāginī or a nāga-

⁵⁸ Shrinibas Tripathy, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ Thomas Eugene Donaldson, *The iconography of Vaiṣṇava Images in Orissa*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P.) Ltd., 2001, p. 249.

⁶⁰ O. M. Starza, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

pāśa (serpent noose), reflecting the fluid symbolism of aquatic, serpentine, and liminal energies in Śākta Tantric traditions. The upper right hand holds a japamālā (rosary), signifying ascetic discipline and mantra-based ritual practice. The lower right hand is extended in varada mudrā, the gesture of boon-bestowal, while the lower left hand carries a pānapātra or amṛta-kalaśa, a vessel symbolically filled with amṛta, the celestial elixir of immortality, an interpretation provided by local ritual specialists and devotees.⁶¹

The sculptural programme of the temple, particularly the Pārśvadevatās and the background slab of the central icon, exhibits stylistic features characteristic of the Somavaṃśī period, suggesting that these elements may be survivals from the earlier temple structure upon whose ruins the present shrine was erected.⁶² Vimalā is flanked by the female attendants Chhāyā and Māyā, fierce in appearance and widely interpreted as vestiges of Yoginī cults,⁶³ which were historically prominent in Odisha and closely associated with Tantric Śāktism. The temple further enshrines the Saptamātṛkās – Brahmī, Māheśvarī, Aindrī, Kaumārī, Vaiṣṇavī, Varāhī, and Cāmuṇḍā – thereby embedding the cult of Vimalā within a broader matrix of mother-goddess worship. Notably, despite her close association with Durgā, Vimalā is not shown bearing weapons such as a lance or disc,⁶⁴ underscoring her distinctive identity as a giver of sustenance, grace, and ritual efficacy rather than a martial deity.

Vimalā's cultic presence extends beyond the confines of her own shrine. She is also venerated within the Nāṭa Maṇḍira (festival hall), also known as the Jagamohana or Mukhaśālā, of the Jagannātha Temple, a pillared structure supported by sixteen pillars.⁶⁵ Moreover, Vimalā is

⁶¹ Shrinibas Tripathy, *op. cit.*

⁶² Ratnakar Mahapatra, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Biswarup Dass and Biswarup Das, "Yogini Cult in Orissa," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 40 (1979), pp. 91-98.

⁶⁴ J. C. Mahanti, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ Pradeep Kumar Choudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

ritually integrated into the yantra of Lord Jagannātha, thereby symbolically inscribing her within the temple's central ritual cosmology,

“Deep influence of tantric rites can be seen in the Yantra of Purusottama. The Yantra consists of an eight petalled lotus with the Vijamantra ‘Klim’ in the centre. The priests of Lord Jagannātha temple first propitiate Lord Purusottama with Goddess Lakshmi and then worship eight Sakties of Vishnu, namely Vimalā, Utkarsini, Yajna, Kriya, Yoga, Prathvi, Satya and Isana. Vimalā is regarded as one of the eight Chandis of Purusottama Kshetra. The other seven Chandis are Ramachandi, Harachandi, Baselichandi, Alamchandi, Dakshinachandi and Jhadesvari.”⁶⁶

Beyond the temple precincts, a small shrine dedicated to the little-known, likely rural deity Kakudī Khāi, literally “the one who eats cucumber,” testifies to the persistence of vernacular devotional forms associated with Vimalā. According to local legend, the goddess manifested as a young girl who requested cucumbers as offerings. Kakudī Khāi is regarded as a potent manifestation of Vimalā and functions as the recipient of sacrificial offerings intended for her (*local accounts, discussions*). This shrine exemplifies the continuity and coexistence of popular and rural religious practices alongside the formal Śākta rituals of the Jagannātha Temple, underscoring Vimalā's presence across both elite and vernacular religious spheres.

Conclusion

Vimalā Devī exemplifies the convergence of Tantric Śaktism and Vaiṣṇavism, constituting a paradigmatic locus for the stratified and pluralistic religious landscape of Puri. For scholars interested in ritual theory, Indology or cross-cultural studies, she manifests a complex nexus of sacred authority (śakti-śāsana) and ritual efficacy (kriyā-śakti), operating simultaneously across multiple registers: local and pan-Indic, orthodox and heterodox, exoteric and esoteric. Her veneration enacts a

⁶⁶ Rajendra Kumar Mohanty, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-65.

performative theology in which Śakti is both mediator and substratum of divinity, articulating the subtle interplay between cosmic potency, temple cosmology, and the ritual economy of the sanctified precinct. The Vimalā Devī Mandir within the Jagannātha Temple complex emerges as an epistemic site for the study of religious syncretism, reflecting the integration of Śākta-Tantric paradigms within what has been conventionally framed as a predominantly Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage locus. Far from a peripheral or marginal cult, her worship articulates a structural and hermeneutic logic of the Jagannātha tradition, in which the goddess's ritual, mythic, and iconographic presence both complements and conditions the central triad of Jagannātha, Balabhadra, and Subhadrā.

The temple complex, thus, provides a compelling vantage point for understanding the intricate dialectic of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, exoteric display and esoteric knowledge, offering enduring testimony to the complex and multilayered character of South Asian religiosity.

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Extraordinary Religious Heritage of Karnataka: A Tribute

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Abstract: Karnataka occupies a unique position in the religious history of the Indian subcontinent. Few regions have nurtured, protected, and disseminated as many diverse religious traditions while simultaneously preserving an atmosphere of philosophical dialogue and cultural coexistence. From the ancient Jain monuments of Śravaṇabelagoḷa to the flourishing Tibetan Buddhist settlements of the present day, from the Advaita Vedāntic center at Śringeri to the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntic haven at Melukote, from the rise of Vīraśaivism under Basavaṇṇa to the Dvaita Vedāntic chief spiritual center at Uḍupi, Karnataka has continuously served as a meeting ground for religious innovation and spiritual scholarship. The state has also been shaped by Sikh, Islamic, and Christian traditions, each contributing distinctive elements to its religious landscape.

This paper examines the remarkable diversity of Karnataka's religious heritage and argues that its greatest legacy lies not merely in the antiquity of its sacred monuments but in its sustained capacity to nurture multiple faith traditions across more than two millennia. The paper is based on the thematic points contained in the supplied document while expanding them into an academic discussion supported by standard historical scholarship.

Keywords: Karnataka, religion, Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Uḍupi, Basavaṇṇa, Jainism, Buddhism, Vajrayāna Buddhism, Śaktaism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity.

Introduction

The Indian state of Karnataka possesses one of the richest religious landscapes in India. Situated between northern and southern India and extending from the Arabian Sea to the Deccan plateau, Karnataka has historically functioned as a crossroads where diverse civilizations, kingdoms, languages, and faiths intersected. Successive dynasties – including the Kadambas, Western Gangas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagara rulers, the Deccan Sultanates of Bidar and Bijapur in particular, the Wodeyars, and later colonial powers – patronized different religious communities while allowing intellectual and artistic traditions to flourish.

Unlike regions identified predominantly with either a single religious tradition, or perhaps two or three, Karnataka represents a remarkable example of pluralistic religious development. Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism in its numerous philosophical schools and sectarian groups, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity have each established enduring institutions within the state. Their monasteries, temples, mosques, churches, inscriptions, literary works, and educational institutions collectively constitute an extraordinary civilizational heritage.

Jainism: Karnataka as the Southern Stronghold

Among all the southern states of India, Karnataka possesses the largest Jain population, reflecting nearly two thousand years of uninterrupted Jain presence. Beginning under the patronage of the Western Ganga dynasty (4th-10th centuries CE), Jain monks, philosophers, poets, and patrons profoundly shaped Karnataka's religious and literary history.

The state's most celebrated Jain monuments are the three colossal monolithic images of Bāhubali (Gommateśvara):

- Śravaṇabelagoḷa – 57 feet (17.4 m), commissioned in 981 CE by the Ganga minister Cāmuṇḍarāya;
- Kārkaḷa – 42 feet (12.8 m), erected in 1432 CE under the patronage of King Vīra Pāṇḍya Bhairā Arasa;

- Veṇūr – 38 feet (11.6 m), commissioned in 1604 CE by the Ajila ruler Timmaṇṇa Ajila.

These monuments rank among the greatest achievements of Indian rock sculpture. Rising from single granite monoliths, they symbolize the Jain ideals of renunciation, self-conquest, and spiritual liberation. The *Mahāmastakābhiṣeka* ceremony, performed once in a dozen years, at Śravaṇabelagoḷa attracts pilgrims from across the world and has become an international symbol of India’s Jain heritage.

Beyond monumental sculpture, Karnataka also produced major Jain literary figures such as Ādikavi Pampa (902-955 CE), Ranna (949-1020 CE), Janna (13th century CE), and Nāgavarmā (950-1015 CE), whose Kannada compositions remain enduring classics of Indian literature.

Buddhist Heritage: From Ancient Centres to Modern Vajrayāna

Although Buddhism gradually declined in peninsular India after the first millennium, Karnataka preserves significant archaeological evidence of its earlier presence. Excavations at sites such as Banavāsi, Sannati, Kanaganahalli, and other locations demonstrate that Buddhism flourished under the Mauryas, Sātavāhanas, and later dynasties.

An entirely new chapter began during the twentieth century following the arrival of Tibetan refugees after 1959. Karnataka became the principal centre of Tibetan Buddhism in India through settlements established at Bailakuppe (Mysūru district) and Muṇḍagoḍu (Uttara Kannaḍa district). These settlements today house training institutions representing all four principal schools of Vajrayāna Buddhism:

- Nyingma
- Kagyu
- Sakya
- Gelug

Their monasteries, universities, libraries, and translation institutes have transformed Karnataka into one of the world’s foremost centers for Tibetan Buddhist scholarship outside Tibet itself. Thousands of monks and nuns receive traditional education there, while international students

travel annually to pursue Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and Tibetan language studies. Thus, Karnataka preserves both the archaeological legacy of ancient Indian Buddhism and the living traditions of contemporary Vajrayāna.

Śāktism: The Sacred Seat of Cāmuṇḍeśvarī

Alongside its Buddhist legacy, Karnataka occupies an equally distinguished place within the Śākta tradition of Hinduism. The celebrated Cāmuṇḍeśvarī Temple atop Cāmuṇḍi Hill overlooking Mysūru is revered in traditional Śākta literature as one of the fifty-one *Śakti Pīṭhas*. According to the Purāṇic narrative, when the god Viṣṇu severed the corpse of Satī (*Dakṣāyaṇī*) with his disc weapon (*Sudarśana Cakra*) to relieve Śiva's inconsolable grief, different parts of the Goddess's body fell upon various places throughout the Indian subcontinent, sanctifying them forever. Tradition identifies Cāmuṇḍi Hill as the sacred site where the hair (*keśa*) of the Great Mother-Goddess fell.

Śṛṅgeri and the Advaita Tradition

Among the four traditional monasteries established by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (788-820 CE), the Śṛṅgeri Śārādā Pīṭha occupies a position of exceptional prestige. Traditional Advaita literature describes it as *caturotkṛṣṭa*, the foremost among the four cardinal monasteries.

Its pre-eminence is traditionally attributed to the fact that its first Jagadguru was Sureśvarācārya, formerly the renowned philosopher of the Kumārila school of Mīmāṃsā, Maṇḍana Miśra. Unlike the founding pontiffs of the other three cardinal monasteries, Sureśvara was personally sought out by Śaṅkara himself before their famous philosophical debate. Following Maṇḍana Miśra's acceptance of Advaita Vedānta and his renunciation of householder life, Śaṅkara appointed him the inaugural pontiff of Śṛṅgeri. This distinguished succession came to be regarded as one of the principal reasons why the Śṛṅgeri Pīṭha acquired the honorific status of *caturotkṛṣṭa*, the senior-most among the four *Amnāya Pīṭhas*.

Located on the banks of the Tuṅgā River, Śṛṅgeri became the principal institutional center for Advaita Vedānta in southern India. Its presiding deity, Goddess Śāradā, symbolizes learning and wisdom, while generations of *Jagadgurus* (pontiffs) have maintained a continuous lineage devoted to Vedic scholarship and philosophical instruction.

The *mahāvākya* associated with Śṛṅgeri is “*Aham Brahmāsmi*” (“I am Brahman”), derived from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (I: 4:10), traditionally regarded as the loftiest of the five great *mahāvākyas* expressing the identity of the individual self (*jīvātman*) with *Brahman* (Absolute).

Rāmānuja and the Rise of Śrīvaiṣṇavism in Karnataka

One of the defining episodes in Karnataka’s religious history concerns the celebrated philosopher Rāmānuja (1017-1137 CE). According to Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, political and religious persecution under a militant Śaiva Chola ruler compelled Rāmānuja to leave Tamilnadu and seek refuge in the Hoysala kingdom of Karnataka. Rāmānuja remained in Karnataka for approximately fifteen years. During this period, he reorganized temple administration, initiated numerous disciples, and transformed Melukoṭe (Tamil: *Tirunārāyaṇapuram*) into one of the principal centres of Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

Today, Melukoṭe ranks as the fourth holiest pilgrimage center within the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition after Śrīraṅgam, Kāñcīpuram, and Tirumala. Its Sanskrit schools, ritual traditions, and annual festivals continue to preserve the theological and liturgical heritage established by Rāmānuja. The Karnataka phase of Rāmānuja’s life also illustrates the state’s long-standing role as a place of refuge where displaced religious communities could flourish under sympathetic royal patronage.

Basavaṇṇa and the Emergence of Vīraśaivism

Another major contribution of Karnataka to Indian religious history is the rise of Vīraśaivism (Līṅgāyatism) in northern Karnataka during the 12th century CE. Its principal architect, Basavaṇṇa (1134-1196 CE), served

in the court of the Kalachūri ruler Bijjaḷa-II (1130-1167 CE) while advocating a spiritually egalitarian movement centered upon devotion to Śiva, ethical conduct, social equality, and direct religious experience.

Perhaps the greatest cultural legacy of this movement lies in the *Vacanas*, short prose-poems composed by Basavaṇṇa and two hundred and fifty or so other historical *vacanakāras*, including Allama Prabhu (12th century CE), Akkamahādevī (d. 1160 CE), and Siddharāma (12th century CE). These compositions revolutionized Kannada religious literature by expressing profound philosophical insights in accessible vernacular language rather than exclusively in Sanskrit. The *Vacana* tradition remains one of India's greatest contributions to devotional literature and continues to influence Kannada culture, ethics, and religious identity to this day.

Madhva, Dvaita Vedānta, and Uḍupi

If Śaṅkara represents Advaita and Rāmānuja Viśiṣṭādvaita, then Madhva (1238-1317 CE) established the third major school of Vedānta, i.e., Dvaita Vedānta in the Tuḷu-speaking region of coastal Karnataka. His philosophical system emphasized the eternal distinction between God, souls, and matter while affirming Viṣṇu as the supreme independent reality. Madhva established the celebrated Śrī Kṛṣṇa Temple at Uḍupi in 1278 CE. Subsequently, in 1298 CE, he founded the famous Eight Monasteries (*Aṣṭa Maṭhas*) to administer the temple through a rotational system (*paryāya*) in which each monastery originally performed the worship of the Kṛṣṇa image and administered the temple for a period of two months.

In 1532 CE, the twentieth pontiff of Sode Maṭha, Vādirāja Tīrtha (1480-1600 CE), introduced the present system under which each monastery performs the worship of the Kṛṣṇa image and administers the temple for two years instead of two months.

Karnataka also became the cradle of the celebrated Madhvite *Haridāsa* movement, whose fifty-four great Haridāsas enriched Vaiṣṇava devotional culture through thousands of Kannada hymns that remain

central to the religious life of the region. Their compositions profoundly shaped Kannada devotional literature as well as liturgical and congregational worship, while simultaneously laying the foundations of South Indian classical music (*aka* Carnatic music).

Foremost among them was Purandaradāsa (1484-1564 CE), universally honored as the “Father of Carnatic Music.” By systematizing graded musical instruction, pedagogical exercises, scales, and compositional forms, he established the educational framework upon which the later tradition of classical Carnatic music was built. His devotional *kīrtanas* (songs) continue to be sung throughout South India and remain an integral part of both religious worship and classical concert performance.

Today, Uḍupi stands as the spiritual center of Madhva Vaiṣṇavism, attracting pilgrims, scholars, and students from India and abroad. The Dvaita tradition originating in Karnataka subsequently spread into Goa, Maharashtra, and other regions of western and southern India.

Christianity in Karnataka

Christianity (of the Roman Catholic branch) reached Karnataka primarily through Portuguese maritime expansion during the sixteenth century. Portuguese missionaries established churches, educational institutions, seminaries, and charitable organizations along the western Malabar Coast, particularly around Mangaluru and Karwar, thereby laying the foundations of a vibrant Catholic community.

During the colonial period, Karnataka also witnessed the establishment of major Protestant traditions. Methodist Protestantism spread through missionary educational and medical institutions, while Swiss Reformed Protestantism (Basel Mission), tracing its theological heritage to Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531 CE), likewise established enduring congregations and educational missions within the state. One of the remarkable aspects in this context came in the person of Rev. Ferdinand Kittel (1832-1903 CE), a Lutheran pastor who lived in Mangaluru, Madikeri and Dharwad. He mastered the Kannada language

and wrote a work on its grammar comprising all three of its dialects. He published a Kannada-English dictionary in 1894.

Over subsequent centuries, Christian communities have made notable contributions to Karnataka's educational, medical, charitable, and social-service sectors. Thus, Christianity constitutes another important dimension of Karnataka's rich and enduring religious diversity.

Sikh Heritage

Although Sikhism is principally associated with Punjab, Karnataka occupies an honored place in Sikh history. One of the original *Pañj Piāre* (five beloved ones), Bhāī Sāhib Singh (1663-1705 CE), hailed from Bidar in present-day Karnataka. This heritage illustrates the broad geographical reach of Sikhism during its formative centuries and demonstrates Karnataka's participation in the religious history of this Punjab-based religious tradition of northern India.

Islamic Contributions

Islam became firmly established in Karnataka through successive political developments beginning with the Bahmani Sultanate and its successor five Deccan Sultanates, many of which followed Shī'a traditions. These kingdoms encouraged the construction of mosques, madrasas, mausoleums, forts, and urban centers that transformed northern Karnataka into an important region of Indo-Islamic culture.

In the 18th century, the rule of Hyder Ali (reign: 1761-1782 CE) and Tipu Sultan (reign: 1782-1799 CE) further strengthened Muslim communities in southern Karnataka through military expansion, urbanization, and state patronage.

Today Karnataka's Islamic architectural heritage includes Bidar, Gulbarga (Kalaburagi), Bijapur (Vijayapura), and Srirangapatna, whose monuments collectively represent one of India's richest concentrations of Deccan Islamic art.

Conclusion

Karnataka's religious heritage cannot be reduced to the history of any single faith. Rather, it represents a remarkable civilizational tapestry woven from multiple religious traditions that have flourished over more than two thousand years.

The state gave Jainism some of its greatest artistic monuments, preserved both ancient and modern Buddhist traditions, became the foremost seat of Advaita scholarship, sheltered Rāmānuja during a critical period of Śrīvaiṣṇava history, witnessed the birth of Vīraśaivism, produced Madhva's Dvaita Vedānta, contributed to Sikh history through Bidar, nurtured significant Islamic cultural traditions under the Deccan sultanates, and received Christianity through Portuguese maritime networks as well as through Protestant missions.

This extraordinary plurality distinguishes Karnataka from nearly every other region of South Asia. Its temples, monasteries, mosques, churches, inscriptions, philosophical schools, vernacular literature, and living traditions collectively embody a unique legacy of spiritual creativity and cultural resilience. The preservation and continued study of this heritage remain essential not only for Karnataka but also for understanding the broader religious history of the Indian subcontinent.

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**Displaced, Nomadic Identities
in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***

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Abstract: Being essentially the fictional, projective metaphor of several autobiographical traumas, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) focuses on the nomadic identity issues experienced by two generations of Bengali Indians moved to the United States in search for a better life and for academic recognition. While the parents are still split between the father's cosmopolitan will to integrate and succeed and the mother's inner turmoil generated by the nostalgia for their left behind Bengali traditional identity and culture, a more complex, traumatic self-acceptance will be reserved to the child, a boy, who has no fixed, social name at birth, because, according to the Bengali customs, the name is provided by an esteemed elder member of the family, and his grandmother's letter communicating the name is lost for ever while travelling by post to the US.

Several classic migration topics skilfully penetrate the exquisitely written tissue of the novel: the two types of 'homeland,' the first one is organically acquired by birth, while the second is forcibly constructed by the more or less artificial impulse to live and adapt to a alien socio-cultural milieu, the nomadic displacement complex theorised by Deleuze and Guattari, or Homi Bhabha's migrant, borderline identity formation process, specific to the unrooted in search for a transnational, trans-civilizational and transcultural fluidity. A migration novel, *The Namesake* is also the multicultural Bildungsroman of several borderline heroes who live the realities and traumas of a hybrid spiritual

territoriality, in which space itself seems to be redefined, by shifting from the existential axis provided by the feeling of ‘being home’ and living in a ‘homeland’ to the more dynamic but self-consuming sentiment of fatal estrangement.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, migrant identities, exile literatures, nomadic attitudes, borderline identities, de-territorialization.

In an interview for *The Guardian* published on May 29th, 2024, Jhumpa Lahiri says that our global “obsession” with what is original or authentic is “very problematic” as there are “so many variables” to how we live on this planet. She understands that her “mission” is – both as a creative writing and a literary translation professor at Princeton University, and as a writer – to lead people to question “what the idea of being authentic means and why we think this is so important.”¹ The position belongs to a Pulitzer prize-winning author who was born in London to Indian parents, moved to the US at the age of three and later chose Rome, where she lives since 2012. She made ironical comments about the political paradox of her move (“I prepared to leave Trump’s America to spend my sabbatical year in Salvini’s Italy”²), but finally decided to write in Italian too, by completing her puzzled, elusive identity complex, characterised like that: “I don’t have that specific set of coordinates that mark me as who I am. I have many pieces to myself.”³

¹ Lucy Knight, “Our Obsession with Origin is a Global Danger, Says Jhumpa Lahiri,” *The Guardian*, 29 May 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/may/29/our-obsession-with-origin-is-a-global-danger-says-jhumpa-lahiri-hay-festival>, last accessed 19 June 2025.

² Jhumpa Lahiri, *Afterword. A Matter of Spaces, The Namesake*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 297.

³ Lucy Knight, *op. cit.*

Even though Jhumpa Lahiri considers that the desire to owe a feeling of fixed identity within a defined place “is understandable,” she nevertheless believes that it “is a potentially very dangerous way of thinking of ourselves and our world, because identity is not fixed, and rootedness should not be tied to things like language and place.”⁴ Moreover, she believes that by having a strong attachment to one’s place of origin and by constantly wanting to identify people with where they are from can lead to a feeling of xenophobia: “It boils down to two pronouns: *us* versus *them*.”⁵ The alternative way of life is the constantly assume the consequences triggered by the nomadic and/or migrant displacement because “so much of history is built on states of exile,”⁶ on “physical movement” and on the creation of new *homelands*. She also adds that the emotional attachment someone places into the feeling of belonging to a place of origin can “pervert our knowledge of what is actually the case.”⁷

Two decades after publishing her debut novel, *The Namesake* (2003) she added an epilogue, entitled *A Matter of Spaces*, to its 2019 edition, written in Rome in October 2018, in which she comments playfully regarding her own name, Jhumpa Nilanjana Sudeshma Lahiri, which is fully listed in her British passport, but appears abbreviated in the corresponding document issued by the Americans, and points consequently to the complexity of her “various national identities,”⁸ by summarizing the autobiographical element of her fictions like this:

“The battle with myself, my origins, my place in the world, goes on. New identities, languages and settings have been incorporated, former habits and passions have made space for others. Were I to stop fully

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Idem.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Jhumpa Lahiri, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

wagging this battle, I would cease to know myself, and my guess is that I would stop writing.”⁹

The Namesake as a novel is all about identity. Precisely it deals with the dynamic version of it, with “wanting to be something other than oneself.”¹⁰ It is also about rootedness and tradition, about change and belonging, about adapting and assimilating. The novel focuses on the nomadic identity issues experienced by two generations of Bengali Indians which move across the Ocean, to the United States, in search for a better life and for academic recognition.

Let’s introduce the analysis by drawing a few theoretical, preliminary assumptions. If we take into consideration Shmuel Eisenstadt’s definition of migration, “as a physical transition of an individual or group from one society or another,”¹¹ that is as somebody’s *willing decision* to move from one social setting to another, *The Namesake* appears to be, indisputably, a novel about migration and a story about *choice*, which is a very important term in the author’s existential economy. There are of course various discussions related to what the literature of migration should be, the usual frame implying the feeling of belonging to an original geo-social milieu, but there are also scholars who offer alternative interpretations. Carine Mardorossian, for instance, is in search of an aesthetic platform which repudiates the “opposition between the modern and the traditional, the country of destination and the country of origin”¹² of the authors engaged in moving people across geographies and cultures by privileging those who articulate a “cosmopolitan, transnational and hybrid vision of social life”

⁹ Ibidem, p. 298.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ A. Didar Singh, S. Irudaya Rajan, *Politics of Migration. Indian Emigration in a Globalised World*, New Delhi-London-New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 2

¹² Apud Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Immigrant Fictions. Contemporary Literature in an Age of Globalization*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Winter 2006, Volume 47, No. 4, p. 534.

within their work, while in their seminal *Nomadology*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari admit that the terms *nomad* and *migrant* might occasionally refer to the same reality, so it becomes imperious to mark the differences:

“The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity.”¹³

If we take into consideration the specific morphosyntax of the migration experienced by people at the end of the 20th century and the threshold of the 21st, it becomes possible to identify a few structural characteristics which are also prone to changes and combinations. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari assert that

“whereas the migrant leaves behind a milieu that has become amorphous or hostile, the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advances,”¹⁴

and stipulate that the term *de-territorialize* should be allocated to nomadism, while *reterritorialization*, which is an outcome of it, is reserved to the migrant. Certainly, many migrant profiles found in fiction tend to combine the traits of the migrants and of the nomads, which results in a pattern of double identity.

A polymorphic scholar like Edward Said, who was accustomed to analyse multiple, coexistent identities, engaged in a dynamic process of mutual influence, defined exile as the “life led outside someone’s habitual order [...], nomadic, de-centred, contrapuntal.”¹⁵ In his opinion

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, Seattle: Wormwood Distribution, 2010, p. 44.

¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 44-45.

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, *Reflexions on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 186.

there is no society without an *Other*, because, from the modernity onwards, all cultures and societies are intermixed, non-homogenous, populated by immigrants seen as internal “Others,”¹⁶ which means that each society is, essentially speaking, a *hybrid* one. As a consequence, the world¹⁷ can be defined as a place where multiple identities interact in a harmonious or conflictual manner. Said¹⁸ deployed a series of profound arguments in order to undermine any idea of fixed identity and sustained, by referring to Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, that each cultural identity is a contested and a dynamic one, especially because every identity involves fantasy making, manipulation, invention and a process of incessant self-construction.

On his turn Homi Bhabha proposes the idea of the migrant, borderline identity formation process, as being specific to the unrooted in their search for a transnational, trans-civilizational and transcultural fluidity. For him, identity (singular or communal) takes always shape in *in-between spaces*,¹⁹ within a process of disseminating cultural differences. Bhabha also speaks about how complex the formation of social differentiation will become if we scrutinize it from the perspective of the minoritarian or the migrant, as it is indebted to deep, perpetual negotiations directed towards the cultural hybridization. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that

“the very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities – as the grounds of cultural comparativism – are in a profound process of redefinition.”²⁰

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 396.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 403.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 581-582.

¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 1.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 5.

Consequently, we must perceive the global world of writing as a transnational network, leaping across multiple geographies.

Rebecca Walkowitz²¹ talks about *immigrant fiction*, about the *migration of writers* and about a *migrant literary culture*. In her opinion the migrant writer is a

“writer who has belonged or who continues to belong to more than one nation, region or state, and who now participates in a literary system that is different from the system in which he was born, educated or first published.”²²

By taking all these into consideration, it becomes obvious that Jhumpa Lahiri can be defined as a *migrant writer* of Bengali origins, interested in writing about the migration of people born in India, a country which has emerged lately as a leading region for international emigration and transit, while the Indian diaspora has become one of the most cosmopolitan and ready to adapt communities around the globe.

By combining research and policy experience, in their *Politics of Migration. Indian Emigration in a Globalised World* (2016), A. Didar Singh and S. Irudaya Rajan²³ start from the assumption, after quoting Jagdish Natwarlal Bhagwati, a famous economist working for Columbia University in New York, that, subsequent to the worldwide circulation of goods in the 19th century and the circulation of capital in the 20th century, the dominant global development of the 21st century has become the migration of the people across the national borders. The authors challenge the previous theories of migration, which say that migration is primarily an economically motivated one, and insist on the motivational diversity of it and on the multidirectional urge of the complex human movements nowadays. The book deconstructs²⁴ several generally

²¹ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 529.

²² Ibidem, p. 533.

²³ A. Didar Singh, S. Irudaya Rajan, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 4-6.

accepted myths and stereotypes related to migration, one of them being rooted in the belief that the major cause for migration consists in economic compulsion. On the contrary, the authors prove statistically that the great majority of international migrants do not belong to the poorest countries and to the most dispossessed social strata, but to the intermediate social level populated by people enjoying a dynamic, accelerated progression:

“People generally do not leave their countries of origin because of a lack of economic development. Rather, they often emigrate owing to the onset of development itself.”²⁵

A further, also deconstructed prejudice refers to the idea that the migrants do not fully and immediately integrate into their host societies.²⁶ A. Didar Singh and S. Irudaya Rajan demonstrate that nowadays immigrant integration lasts a generation or even two, being usually connected to schooling and language training. The books of fiction, like *The Namesake*, clearly show that you need two generations to harmoniously integrate. Equally important is the preconception that migrants are caught in a time-warp generated by their connection with their home countries. The authors admit that

“in the old days, the principal connection of migrated communities with their country of origin and their culture was through language, rituals, cooking recipes and occasional letters or visits”²⁷

(these traits are confirmed by the novel), but they also notice that globalization, together with the widespread presence of communication tools, has extended how people from one country can remain actively involved in another country’s cultural, economic and political life. They are able, simultaneously, to maintain good relations with their countries

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 5.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 14.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 14-15.

of origin and to affirm their ethnic identity within the country they chose to settle in, a flexibility which leads to a process of dual reconstruction of their identities.

A short break is probably necessary for the moment. Jawaharlal Nehru was a strong promoter of the national secularism, whose effects can be easily detected in Salman Rushdie's or Vikram Seth's writings. These are the two particular cases analysed by Neel Srivastava in a book which asserts that "the novels produced by Indian writers in the 1980s and 1990s share a strikingly common aspiration to represent a pan-Indian reality."²⁸ Nehru had actively encouraged the Indian diaspora to integrate into their host societies, to join the mainstream of the country of their adoption and to completely identify themselves with the local aspirations.²⁹ It was a conscientious politics of human dissemination that fully dominated India following its Independence declared in 1947. Nehru's main reason consisted in the desire that the Indian communities abroad should ceased to be considered as an *unwanted import*.³⁰ The post-colonial emigration from India followed two streams or patterns: the emigration of the established professionals into countries like United States, England or Canada, usually described as a *brain drain*,³¹ which reached its spike in the 1960s and 1970s (this is *The Namesake* is exactly about), and the emigration of the skilled or less skilled labourers to the countries of West Asia.

The Namesake tells the story of two generations of Bengali immigrants moved to the United States because of professional reasons. The first one is represented by Ashoke, a doctoral candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and his wife Ashima, as the incipit of the novel is dedicated to the birth of their first child on the

²⁸ Neel Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel. National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*, London, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 4.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 25.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 26.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 21.

American soil, a boy, in 1968. The protagonist of the second wave is precisely this male offspring, provisionally named Gogol, whose identity crises are preconfigured by those of his namesake, the famous Russian prose writer Nikolai Gogol. The novel is earmarked with a motto extracted from *The Overcoat* ("The Reader should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of the question,"³²) whose role is highly symbolical for both the narrative and the destiny of the characters, and it also opens the gate towards further intertextual speculations.

Originally, the Russian writer is invested within the family with the sacred role of the Saviour, because back in 1961 the young Ashoke Ganguli was saved from the fatal consequences of a frightening train accident by an edition of one of Gogol's books, gifted to him by his grandfather, a professor of European literatures at the University of Calcutta. Following the crash, Ashoke was inadvertently left lying amongst the dead, but the wind flipped the pages of his book, and the rescue team came only to notice that he was still alive. So "instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol."³³ During the journey, before the accident Ashoke got acquainted in the compartment to a gentleman named Gosh, who encouraged him to travel effectively and not only change places by reading books. The train crash was Ashoke's rebirth, and he soon realized that his destiny was to be "born twice in India, and the third time in America."³⁴ After his recovery he applied for a scholarship granted by the MIT.

Ashoke's willingness to go elsewhere is thus rooted in the nomadic utopia borrowed from his fellow traveller Gosh and it ends in a migrant reality entirely dominated by academic awareness and responsibility. It is significant to note that the protagonist's change of attitude is also accompanied by a modification of his attitude referring to the world of

³² Jhumpa Lahiri, *op. cit.*

³³ Ibidem, p. 21.

³⁴ Idem.

books. Except for those written by Gogol, of course, he stops reading novels, that is travelling without moving, because he feels that these novels might depict countries he has never seen, deepening his feeling of frustration. Instead, he opted to read science books, which transformed him into the best candidate ever imagined to fully compete and win the adaptation-assimilation game.

In America his Indian identity is preserved through his integration into the small Bengali community living in Cambridge, composed by professional husbands (researchers, professors, doctors, engineers etc.), whose partners were, customarily, homesick and more or less confused housewives, who had made to America the very first travel of their lives, generally speaking as components of some pre-arranged marriages. The members of the community read and recite Rabindranath Tagore's poems, go to Indian movies, discuss especially Indian politics, without neglecting the American public life, even though "none of them is eligible to vote."³⁵ They observe ancient rituals, like *Anaprasan*, the ceremony of rice, which is the Bengali analogue for baptism, being celebrated at the age when the child begins to eat solid food and is asked to select symbolically his future professional destiny by choosing one specific object from a tray. The second child of the family, Sonia, performs well in this ceremony by grasping the dollar bill, which entitles her to be declared a "true American."³⁶ The community acts as a surrogate spiritual hearth, as each decision is taken only after it is previously presented to them. The writer describes it as "some makeshift extended Bengali family,"³⁷ the wise deposit of all knowledge.

The writer Gogol's symbolic relevance backlashes as a preordered destiny when Ashima and Ashoke are asked to name their baby to complete his official birth certificate at the hospital registry. According to the Bengali customs, a newborn child gets a provisional *pet name*

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 38.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 63.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 204.

(*daknam*), used by the family members and by their intimate circles, followed later by a *good name* (*bhalonam*), to be used in the outside world, which gets into the official papers, diplomas, passports etc. In the spirit of the same tradition, the *good name* (*bhalonam*) is provided by the most respected and oldest member of the family, but the grandmother's letter containing the name, sent by post, never reaches America. Still expecting it to arrive, Ashoke names the child *Gogol* and by doing so he crosses some disputable borderlines. First of all, he estranges himself from the Bengali custom of parenthood and from his identity, and he leaps over in time by anticipating the allocation of a universally known, *good name*, because back in India this name is provided only when the child reaches the schooling age, without any pressure on behalf of the authorities. Further, Ashoke leaps over the customary limits by turning a *pet name* into a *good name*, and finally, he fails to respect the tradition because the name he chooses for his child bears a restricted, personal, subjective significance, and does not suggest a collectively praised and accepted aura, like *Ashoke*, the name of an emperor, which means "he who transcends grief,"³⁸ or *Ashima*, meaning "she who is limitless, without borders."³⁹ As it happens Ashoke's decision is a wide concession towards the substitution of a cultural identity with a borderline identity. As for *Ashima*, the reversed compromise will become evident in the final section of the novel, when she decides to divide her life by spending half of the year in Calcutta and the other half in America.

Regarding the name used in the novel, the very first identity issue is provided by the surname practice of British colonialism, as *Ganguli*, Ashoke's family name, is the anglicized shortening of *Gangopadhyay*.⁴⁰ Obviously, the two parents have also pet names, *Monu* and *Mithu*. We are also told that the Western habit of saving your name by transmitting it to your child is unacceptable in India, because "individual names are

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 26.

³⁹ Idem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 67.

sacred, inviolable.”⁴¹ Gogol’s *good name* is concocted when he joins the kindergarten, and it is *Nikhil*, resembling to *Nikolai*, meaning “he who is entire, encompassing all.”⁴² But the child “is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know. Who doesn’t know him,”⁴³ and chooses to continue as Gogol because, being a member of a second generation of immigrants, it “sounds just like Americans.”⁴⁴ But later on, when, around the age of eleven, his name begins to sound strange to him, and when he discovers that names are also mortal, similar to the humans, he ends up by reacting reluctantly to it, because it does not mean anything, neither American nor Indian, but something which “has nothing to do with who he is.”⁴⁵ Gogol also fails to resonate to the migratory component of his name when his father tells him that the Russian writer “spent most of his life outside his homeland. Like me.”⁴⁶

A lecture in literature, delivered by one of the teachers, does nothing but deepens Gogol’s identity crisis, especially because he feels that a potential comparison with the writer could depersonalize him. So, he comes back to *Nikhil*, by saying that nicknaming is in the spirit of the European immigrants reaching Ellis Island, of the slaves and of the artists, like Bob Dylan, Molière and even... Gogol, whose initial name was Gogol-Yanovsky. But changing his name doesn’t mean that the boy aims automatically to complete an organic identity, throwing the protagonist into a new, but discrete, turmoil, because “he doesn’t feel like Nikhil.”⁴⁷

A further development of the mutations applied by his actual identity complex to his original Bengali identity occurs when *Gogol/Nikhil* joins an

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 28.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 56.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 57.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 65.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 76.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 77.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 105.

academic panel “about Indian novels written in English,”⁴⁸ and when full boredom takes over him completely especially because the discourse constantly refers “to something called ‘marginality’ as if it were some sort of medical condition.”⁴⁹ A similar ‘*medical condition*’ appears to be the label *ABCD*, heard from the first time by him now, which is an acronym for *American-Born Confused Deshi*, *deshi* being the generic denomination for the Indian countrymen, while *Confused* stands for ‘conflicted’. It describes the exact ‘*medical condition*’ Gogol is suffering now because of his broken affair with Maxine, an American girl, who introduces him to her family, making him feel like a traitor of his own folks. Gogol also perceives that Maxine accepts her identity without any shadowy, collateral remorse, leading him to new depths of his identity crisis.

By becoming a ‘*vagabond*’ in Ashima’s terms, a person who, like the most of the Americans, relies on existential nomadism by continuously changing locations and addresses because of his jobs and his studies, or because of his changing love engagements, Gogol experiments a further fragile identity regression when he marries Moushumi, a Bengali PhD candidate in French literature, who, at her turn, converts her cultural option for a third language in some sort of refuge:

“she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favour of one that had no claim whatsoever.”⁵⁰

The marriage does not last for long because the wife proves unfaithful. So, endogamy does not resolve Gogol’s identity crisis, but the collapse of his marriage with Moushumi generates a structural dissymmetry: while Moushumi lives her life by reinventing herself

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 118.

⁴⁹ Idem.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 214.

incessantly, Gogol remains unmoved, maintaining the same distance both from his origins and his culture of adoption.

Ashoke's wife Ashima provides the best explanation for the migrant process conceived as a back-and-forth movement, where home is nowhere and the growing frustration generates a feeling that there always remains something residual behind, that something keeps always missing. Ashima's identity equations include gestures and decisions borrowed from her ancestral origins. She wears, stubbornly, a *sari*, while her husband gradually shifts to the American fashion; she keeps herself to formulas like "it's not the type of things Bengali wives do"⁵¹ or "this is not how they are"⁵² when speaking of her marital love, which in Bengal is more restraint in expression than the sensorial lust heralded by the Americans. Moreover, during her very first encounters with her new world, when the States and Cambridge still seem completely alien to her, when "nothing feels normal,"⁵³ since normality is not yet part of the psychological profile of an immigrant, she practices a certain mental regression by use of which she recreates the familiar atmosphere of her dear Calcutta, or playfully mimics the simulacrum of browsing an old issue of the Indian magazine *Desh*, which also features her own father's illustrations.

By contrast, Ashoke becomes the reader of the *Boston Globe*. The wife's crisis deepens with the depression caused by the birth of her son, when she declares that she wants to return home. Despite all this, her evolution also shows that the gradual assimilation of the alien behavioural patterns and of some routines irreversibly indicates a process of adaptation and of acquiring a series of continuous, subtle identity mutations. A new type of threat enters her life when her husband decides to move to the outskirts and to perform the habitual "migration to the suburbs"⁵⁴ ritual of the everyday, middle rich Americans, which she feels

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 2.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 3.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 49.

even more frightening than the former move from Calcutta to Cambridge, because it brings about a radically human, geographical and economic feeling of becoming an *other*. She consents to the move, adapts to its requirements, but refuses to accept it, and feels that she is completely estranged:

“For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parentheses in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.”⁵⁵

The way the writer describes intimacy, or depicts intimate spaces, is the best indicator of the new alterity game. In India being alone is never an option, because the overcrowded family is always at hand, its presence provides a necessarily organic, protective collective identity, while in the States intimacy and intimate space tend to be something directly associated to the idea of solitude.

In *The Namesake* we can find the so-called *pull factors* of migration (opposed to *push factors*, wars, oppression, poverty), which are

“factors in the target country that encourage people to move; these include peace and safety, a chance of a better job, better education, social security, a better standard of living in general as well as political and religious freedom.”⁵⁶

In the back-and-forth oscillation between tradition and modernity, invoked by Homi Bhabha, Ashoke proves to be a liminal figure, situated in between/at the crossroads of his plural identities, but his case also illustrates further integrating features which are specific to the perfect

⁵⁵ Ibidem, pp. 49-50.

⁵⁶ A. Didar Singh, S. Irudaya Rajan, *op. cit.*, p. XVI.

example of a *brain drain* intellectual arrived to MIT as a doctoral candidate reaching later the status of a professor in electrical engineering. Consequently, he appears to be infinitely more oriented and integrated than Ashima, who, brutally extracted from her Indian socio-cultural ecosystem, remains reduced to the humble role of a housewife.

In Ashoke's case the connection with his original home milieu also verifies the economical aspect of the migration, because

“in spite of his meagre graduate student wages he sets aside money to send every few months to his father to help put an extension on his parents' house.”⁵⁷

When he gets the dream job he has always wanted, his sense of belonging to an institution, to a faculty adds further dimensions to his integrated identity, associated to a sense of accomplishment which also includes the pride caused by his financial stability, as the writer seems obliged to mention that he earns 16.000 USD per year as a professor in a small university located in the outskirts of Boston.

When he decides to buy his own a house in the suburbs, his feeling of pride is also associated to a surmounted identity complex, as he keeps saying that “all the houses belong to Americans.”⁵⁸ Another aspect of it is the increasing feeling of prosperity as compared to the moment when they reached the shores of the States, as the rule is that the migrants who “come to America with one single suitcase, a few weeks worth of clothes”⁵⁹ must work hard in order to overcome initial poverty. The sense of fulfilment comes, in terms of identity, with a feeling of non-differentiation:

“And yet for a casual observer, the Gangulis, apart from the name on their mailbox, apart from the issue of India Abroad and Sangbad

⁵⁷ Jhumpa Lahiri, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 51.

⁵⁹ Idem.

Bichitra that are delivered there, appear no different from their neighbours.”⁶⁰

No longer a sign of crisis, which, as a phenomenon, belongs exclusively to the industrial period, as stated in *Politics of Migration*,⁶¹ migration reverses to a positive, dynamic and normal phenomenon. That’s why we come across a different type of crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri’s book, the individual, inner, intellectualized turmoil, which is projected onto the canvas of a quasi-ritualized re-birth scenario, even if the protagonist, Ashoke, lacks any religious feelings.

When the family decides to spend their eight-month sabbatical leave in no other place than India, further identity complexes emerge. By visiting Agra and Taj Mahal, they behave like tourists, similar to any Western tourist strolling around, and decide to speak English instead of the half-forgotten Hindi. The alienation is even more radical when it comes to their children, who get immediately sick by concluding that they are “not made to survive in a poor country.”⁶²

When bringing books of a great public success onto the transnational literary market, Jhumpa Lahiri, in a similar way to Salman Rushdie, fights against the custom of wrapping Bengalis, and generally immigrants, in cultural prejudices and stereotypes. As a migration novel, *The Namesake* is the multicultural *Bildungsroman* of several borderline heroes who live the realities and traumas of a hybrid spiritual territoriality, in which space itself seems to be redefined, by shifting from the existential axis provided by the feeling of ‘being home’ and living in a ‘homeland’ to the more dynamic but self-consuming sentiment of a fatal estrangement.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 64.

⁶¹ A. Didar Singh, S. Irudaya Rajan, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁶² Jhumpa Lahiri, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

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The Poetics of Feminine Solidarity in Indian Recent Cinema

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Abstract: This article's main topic is female solidarity in recent Indian films which were internationally recognized. The presence of women's interconnections in three films from 2024, *Girls will be girls*, *Santosh* and *All we imagine as light*, indicate a high interest for this theme and the three directors developed specific poetics which enhance it in their movies. This is an analysis these poetics of female friendship and its role in recent Indian cinema, as a mirror of social evolving phenomena.

Keywords: Female solidarity, nostalgia aesthetics, social evolving phenomena, women's rights, cinematic poetics of friendship.

In the contemporary Indian cinema, we encounter more portraits of women, no matter their social condition. They are usually interconnected, whether they appear in the same movies or belong to several ranges of traits which display them into a rich kaleidoscope regarding the image of Indian women on cinematic ground. Recent productions like *Girls will be girls*, *Santosh* and *All we imagine as light*, the three of them from 2024, show us a colourful puzzle of feminine characters, all connected by friendship and solidarity.

In our study we aim to investigate the ways in which the approach of this human phenomenon modulates the aesthetics of these movies, affecting the image by poetic infusions and what is the result of its

impact at a structural level. The feminine figures' ensembles have been evolving in Indian cinema, deriving undoubtedly from the main big ranges of characters, roughly shaped as good or bad towards more sophisticated complex portraits. These protagonists are main or secondary characters in Indian movies, but they belong to the everyday life of their country, which is undergoing important changes, as we can notice even in the kind of plot stories approached by the new directors. One of the great figures which were recurrent in this cinema was the overwhelming *Bharat Mata*, meaning "Mother India" in Hindi, symbolising the personification of India as a mother goddess. It reflects the nation as a nurturing and protective mother figure, embodying the land, culture, and people of India. The concept includes togetherness and deep respect for the country, stressing on the profound emotional and cultural connection between Indians and their homeland.

Bharat Mata is substantially a personification of India as a mother goddess. She is commonly represented dressed in a red or saffron-coloured sari and in more recent occurrences, holding a national flag, sometimes standing on a lotus and accompanied by a lion. All these are powerful symbols of India, synthetised in one feminine figure which governates the country at cultural and emotional levels. There are surely lots of temples in India which are dedicated to this *Bharat Mata*. The first one was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi in Varanasi, in 1936. *Bharat Mata* was painted as a four-armed goddess by Rabindranath Tagore in 1904, in the style associated with the Bengal School of Art, in a form derived from typical representations of Hindu goddesses. This painting belongs now to the Victoria Memorial Museum in Kolkata.

The word *Bharat Mata* can be tracked in the late 19th Bengali modern literature. She was popularised by the Bengali language-novel *Anandamath* (1882), where she was inseparable from the Hindu goddesses Durga and Kali. But the other literary masterpieces which depict the feminine avatars in the Bengali area, quite far from the classic sense. In Mircea Eliade's *Bengal Nights* (1933), the sensitive

protagonist, Maitreyi, is cast away from her family after having a romance with the writer, even if she was under the protection of Rabindranath Tagore. Indian tradition, in this case, appears to be overwhelming and profoundly aggressive towards the two young people emotional connection. In her article, “Maitreyi Devi. The divine feminine – from character to reality,” Desirée Halaseh describes this little Bengali goddess as it follows:

“Maitreyi is a precocious adolescent, a wonder child, as her father would call her; she writes poems, holds public conferences about the essence of the beautiful and she has as mentor nobody else but Rabindranath Tagore, whose verses she sings, for the delight of her family. She has a personal mythology, which arises from The East’s innocence, capable of loving everything with the same passion with which she loves her chosen one.”¹

The incarnation of the feminine deity was here featured as a delicate soul which had to endure the consequences of rebelling from the patriarchal social system but fought for a dream and stood strong in it.

After the division of Bengal province in 1905, she was highlighted during the boycott of British-made goods. In numerous protest meetings, she was invoked in the rallying cry “Vande Mataram,” meaning “I bow to the mother.” It is interesting to acknowledge how this powerful idea embodied by a feminine figure evolved visually and socially in nowadays India. In their article “Mothers of the South: power, suffering and identity in maternal narratives of South Indian cinema,” Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K Suresh state that:

“The representation of motherhood in Indian cinema is often based on conventional gender norms, its ideology and performance aligning with

¹ Halaseh, Desirée, “Maitreyi Devi. Divinul feminin – de la personaj la realitate”, in Mihaela Gligor (ed.), *Fiice ale Indiei*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022, p. 48 (my translation).

the traditional patrifocal social structures where women are marginalised and oppressed.”²

It is of big importance to take into consideration this solid cultural avatar of the mother before beginning our own analysis of the feminine solidarity in Indian cinema. Departing from the overall motherly figure of *Bharat Mata*, a variety of other mothers, sister, wives or daughters emerged, and it is still creating new kinds of “smaller mothers.” Even if the little figures are far from the crushing monolith of the big mother, they conserve parts from it, continuing her role in the evolving society. Durga and Kali are disseminated in Indian culture, as they may appear and rise in the most unexpected situations and stories, as we will demonstrate in our present article about the recent Indian cinema which represents the gaze that we can have on the Indian contemporary realities. By the plural word “realities,” we introduce the idea of the labyrinth of paths that are possible to take for women in this space at the present time. For this purpose, I chose three movies that conquered not only the Indian juries, but also the worlds.

As I mentioned them before, *Girls will be girls*, *Santosh* and *All we imagine as light* are all presenting stories of women caught in the complicated quotidian existence, at the core of the Indian state, which is both evolving in a rapid manner towards the future and sticking to the past in astonishing steadfast ways. By watching these three movies, we can have the experience of past-present-future all together, without having the impression of distancing ourselves from actuality by being too far in ancient stories or, on the other hand, facing some odd projection of what may come. All of them received many important international awards and one of the actresses, Kani Kusruti, is acting in two of them as a main character, in completely different stories but

² Raj, S. J., & Suresh, A. K. (2025), “Mothers of the South: power, suffering, and identity in maternal narratives of South Indian cinema,” *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 21(1), 97-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2025.2471519>.

linking them by her unique presence and art of interpretation. World Cinema Dramatic (Audience) and World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Acting - Preeti Panigrahi (Mira) at 2024 Sundance Film Festival, NETPAC award at MAMI Mumbai Film Festival 2024, Young Critics Choice Award at MAMI Mumbai Film Festival 2024, Breakthrough Director nomination at NETPAC award at MAMI Mumbai Film Festival 2024, Independent Spirit John Cassavetes Award and Trophy at the Transylvania International Film Festival, the same year.

Directed by Shuchi Talati, a young Indian female director, the movie is an interesting construction based on a coming-of-age story, which portrays Mira, played by Preety Panigrahi, a teenager and her mother, caught in the evolving process of their own relationship and the one to the others around them. Mira meets a fascinating boy in her college (a boarding school set on the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains). Srinivas is a new student from Hong Kong, different in his own way from the other colleagues. Her mother, Anila, interpreted by Kani Kusruti, is a housewife and being always at home, she finds herself always in between the two. The intervention in this love story is connected to her own youth and lack of freedom, so it reflects the past and the present at the same time, in a patriarchal type of social background.

The connection between the two protagonists varies from love to hate, especially when the young boy is involved, but they succeed in keeping their mother-daughter relationship on a good level, never crossing the line. The mother underlines the importance of Mira's academic pursuit on the reason that she wishes her daughter not to repeat her own life story, by just getting married according to the Indian society rules and become a housewife, especially when she could really have another future. The plot leads to conflicts between the two, emphasizing the growing tension as the relationship between Mira and the boy grows. All three of them find themselves in embarrassing

situations, like sharing a bed or being always all together in the same room, even if the young couple needs some privacy.



Mira and Anila, her mother in an image that is definitory for the relationship between them, in *Girls will be girls* (2024)³

The mother's figure is dominant, and Mira often must create secret spaces between them, just to have enough time to explore her own sexual growing awareness without being questioned or without having to give any explanation to any kind of authority. Privacy seems a luxury in this movie, as the lovers try desperately to find a place only for themselves but the whole worlds is constantly watching them, beginning with Mira's mother attentive eye always fixed on them and ending by the collective character in the school, similar to a scarry hydra with many heads, from whom it is almost impossible to hide something intimate and fragile.

In his review of the movie, Martin Kudlač states that:

“A pivotal aspect of the film is its portrayal of the inter-generational dynamic between Mira and her mum, framed by the patriarchal society. The mother's involvement in Mira's romantic life is not portrayed as malicious, but rather as a reflection of her own repressed youth. Mira's burgeoning romance thus becomes a conduit for her mother's arrested

³ <https://www.lifestyleasia.com/ind/entertainment/movies/girls-will-be-girls-ending-explained-kani-kusruti>, last accessed 19.08.2026.

coming of age. This parallel plotline turns into a reflection on the unfulfilled desires, societal constraints and gender norms faced by the preceding generations.”⁴

In my opinion, this aspect belongs more to the background of the protagonist’s own story of taking the first steps on the way of self-discovery and rebellion. I therefore advance the hypothesis that the new generation of women is totally capable of disrupting the conservative ways by its own means, without the interfering of older layers of the family or making the retrospection of traditional values. From this perspective, Shuchi Talati stresses more on the unstoppable force of growing desires in her movie, not on the unfulfilled desires, on new forms of freedom, not on the painful constraints and endurance of the previous generations. There is another aspect of the patriarchal structures present in this movie set even in the atmosphere of the 1990’s. In their review entitled “*Girls Will Be Girls: Through the Lens of a Psychiatrist*,” Sreya Maryiam Salim and Edwin Peter draw attention upon a secondary feminine character, Mira’s teacher, Mrs. Bansal, who preserve traditional traps in order to get the rebellious young girls to fall into them and moralize on it afterwards:

“While the film celebrates the joys and complexities of female adolescence, it also critiques the ways in which some women internalize and perpetuate patriarchal values. Mrs. Bansal’s victim-blaming and moral policing of Mira and other girls, as well as Priya’s support of the boys in her class despite being Mira’s best friend, illustrate this dynamic. These actions, possibly driven by a desire for social acceptance within a patriarchal structure, demonstrate how easily women can become complicit in suppressing one another.”⁵

⁴ Kudlač, Martin, Review: “*Girls will be Girls*”, <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/455345/>, last accessed 13.03.2026.

⁵ Salim SM, Peter E., “*Girls Will Be Girls: Through the Lens of a Psychiatrist*,” *Journal of Indian Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 2025; 21(3): 289-291. Doi:10.1177/09731342251359821.

We don't know with exactitude what triggers Mrs. Bansal to act in this way, but it is certain that in the movie she has several interventions during which she acts like a stone wall in the way of the young girl to achieve self-awareness and self-confidence. In this context, Anila, her mother, appears more like the perfect ally for the girl's fight for freedom. This contradictory nature of the mother gives the plot and the image great finesse and holds the audience in a great form of refined suspense. She is the beholder of the great power of the helper, of the one who can become solidary with the insurgent. This confers on her great aura, as she manages to save the situation for her daughter many times and keeps being in control, in the middle of everybody's mixed feelings. As a reward, Mira gives up Sri to protect her mother from further complications her relationship with him could bring in the future. It is true that between the two women there are many mirroring effects, both visual and metaphorical. In her review of the film, "*Girls will be Girls – Power in Reflection*," Carley Matsumura shows that these effects can be found even in the scenography level:

"Preferring her father's traits over her mother's, Mira rejects Anila's attention. She wants to distance herself, but her mother won't allow that to happen. For better or worse, Mira and Anila act as reflections of each other. Symbolically, the theme is demonstrated through the mirrors used to shoot reflections and intimate framing within the film."⁶

The presence of the reflected images in the scenes filmed inside the house zooms in fragments of behaviours and small actions, the most of them depicting Mira's exploration of her own body and her mother's attentive eye and ears which can feel almost everything in the silent house. Matsumura considers that the mirroring effect also concerns the relationship between mother and daughter, as they act as reflections of

⁶ Matsumura, Carley, "*Girls will be Girls – Power in Reflection*", <https://hiff.org/girls-will-be-girls-power-in-reflection/>, last accessed 18.03.2026.

each other. But in our opinion, the two characters are much more self-standing, while the mirror structures point mainly to their lives and actions seen from the other's perspective as independent points of observation, not as reflections of each other. The solidarity between the two characters is built by playing with the mirrored images which form a kaleidoscopic structure of their intimacies. The director Shuchi Talati adds to this the golden reflections at the chromatic level of the cinematic structure, making all look familiar like in a gaze on some golden memories. The format of the frame, 4:3, is also part of the same aesthetic choice. Matsumura's observation on this aspect is similar:

“The 4:3 aspect ratio makes the close-ups feel even tighter, but allows full screen room for shots that can show detail inside the house. Purposeful staging causes the eye to track the actor's movement during long takes. Emphasis is put on the hands and their placement. The film portrays intimacy with physicality. All style choices emphasize closeness: the actors are physically near, the shot is framed in, noise is heightened. We are aware as viewers.”⁷

The solidarity between the two feminine protagonists is shown by envisaging closeness. The mother being by the side of the daughter and the other way around is a phenomenon which belongs to intimacy's imagery. The warm colours, the details filmed in gros plans, the golden touch of the images, the distinctive small sounds of the house's universe, they all convey the aesthetics of a close existing but also developing feminine solidarity. The choice of means to show closeness is very inspired and emphasises the safe place where both Mira and Anila evolve into a better version of themselves, learning from each other and trying to overcome their differences to understand better the phases they are going through. Side by side, they assist each other to grow and widen their vision of familial universe and the external world, choosing to act if it is needed or to wait for things to evolve without interfering. The mother tries not to be

⁷ Ibidem.

too overwhelming, and the daughter tries to keep close to her mother despite her independence crisis, not to go too far in her exploration about herself and the surrounding milieu. Solidarity, in this case, reunites the feminine aspects of the goddesses: the fighting and the caring, the innocent and the wise.

This paradigm can be found in the other two movies mentioned above. In *Santosh*, the feminine protagonist (who has the same name), interpreted by Shahana Goswami, is the widow of a policeman, who has to bury the sorrow of losing her husband and even take his role in the story. This transition offers to the public many insights of this innocent and yet fierce woman, who closes her wounded heart to become emotionally almost untouchable. The director Sandhya Suri, who had formerly directed documentaries, reveals us the dark side of the social system in North rural India, starting with the cast-based order and sexism, and finishing by exposing the corruption of the police structures, which can determine real disasters and serious abuse. That is the reason for its late release in India, even if previously it had been submitted on UK's behalf to the international Oscar category.

The film was intended to be a documentary on sexual abuse in India (after the documentary *I for India* from 2005), but the director decided to create a fiction film after seeing an image of female demonstrators and a female constable in a protest on the 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder. A peculiarity of the Indian Government's system makes that Santosh can inherit her dead husband's job as a police officer. This saves her from her father and in-laws, who argue about deciding her future destiny, now that she is a widow. As she is very diligent and respectful, she adapts rapidly to it, even though, as a woman, she must face many discriminating scenes. Soon she meets Geeta Sharma (interpreted by Sunita Rajwar), a celebrity cop known for her work on cases involving violence against women. The veteran female cop, who involves her into a complicated rape and murder case in a village. A Dalit girl, Devika, had been the victim in this uncanny story, and Geeta must find who did

it. Santosh is aware that it is a strange job she is asked to do, but she accepts and starts the investigation by Geeta's side. Even if the old woman's ruthlessness and brutal behaviour is respected among the other policemen, it is obvious that she is duplicitous and corrupted herself. Santosh gets closer to her as the movie's storyline progresses towards the end. At the beginning, she puts all her intelligence and intuition into Geeta's service and manages to track a Muslim boy whom the murdered girl had been exchanging messages with. She proves herself to be fierce and fearless in doing this detective job, which leads her from remote villages full of dysfunctional bureaucracy to Mumbai and back, tracking Saleem, a young boy who is suspected of being responsible for the atrocities after a politician, Beniwal, visits the commissioner. She succeeds in bringing back from Mumbai the young man but then she realises that she had offered him as a victim to an extremely violent interrogatory, from which he cannot escape, whether he says the truth or not. After torturing and beating him, the boy is finally killed by Santosh, whom, we as Geeta suggests, might be found guilty of murdering after the autopsy. Later, when Santosh visits his village, she understands that he was not responsible for what happened, but a group of the upper cast, who had planned his incrimination as well. Santosh is a sensible woman, but in the hell of the police and abuse stories, she loses herself and becomes a brute for a while.

The director shows in her movie how the circumstances can deeply influence individual fate and sense of morality. In her review about the movie for *The Guardian*, Wendy Ide's opinion is that: "Through the quiet intelligence of Goswami's impressive performance, we grasp, as she does, that a case closed doesn't necessarily mean that justice has been done."⁸

⁸ Ide, Wendy, "*Santosh* review: gripping the police procedural about the murky side of modern India", <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/mar/22/santosh-review-gripping-police-procedural-about-the-murky-side-of-modern-india-sandhya-suri>, last accessed 26.03.2026.

Even if the end is problematic, the movie depicts though some moments where feminine solidarity might make the difference. After Santosh begins to wear the police uniform, she discovers how men often leave the hard work for women and prefer to lose their time with futile things rather than doing their job. That is how she is forced to carry herself the dead body of the young girl, Devika, but by doing that, she demonstrates humanity towards this poor girl and her family, who is unable to interfere and truly make justice for their lost dear one. Santosh resonates with the harm done to the young girl and she voluntarily wants to help them. This first occurrence of solidarity brings the hope of some eloquent actions in the development of the story, but unfortunately the corruption and the discrimination of women are too strong for such a scenario to develop. Even if *Santosh* stands for justice inside the police institution and all around points out at the abusive system, she slowly realises that it is too strong to be defeated.



Scene from *Santosh* (2024)⁹

⁹ <https://www.sheinspiremagazine.com/blog/indias-film-santosh-shortlisted-for-best-international-feature-film>, last accessed 29.08.2026.

The second fake ray of light is brought by the complex character of Geeta, the veteran woman cop in charge of the case. After meeting Santosh, she shows, for moments, a certain empathy and feminine solidarity, which grows into a strange feeling of closeness to the young widow. She shows herself understanding and even concerned about Santosh's fate, up to the point when she shows her other hideous face, the merciless woman who can step on dead bodies to bring solutions for the corrupts. It is interesting how the movie doesn't give us all the image of this character as we are forced to wait for the events to unfold and discover bit by bit the great illusion behind the initial human side of her behaviour. She is ready to protect Santosh but only if she can stay around her and have certain benefits, while if Santosh decides to leave all and go, she threatens with a possible dark end for her. Always between a manly and a motherly attitude, Geeta shocks the public with her cruelty and lack of empathy; even it is easy to guess that she didn't have a smooth life either.

Anjali Singh Chahuan and Gunjan Chaturvedi, mention the direct Sandhya Suri's image of sisterhood between the two female characters, in their article "Rising Sisterhood in Cinematic Narrative: 'Evolving through the Lens of Laapataa Ladies, *Santosh* and *All We Imagine As Light*'":

"Suri can be credited with taking her sisterhood seriously. Though she began with the portrayal of the 'power and the powerlessness', she has unknowingly put the spotlight on the sisterhood of the two cops as well as the dynamics between the two females fighting the case involving the third one, the youngest of them. In making a film about the rape victim and the perceptions of the female police officers, she has brought to light the plight of her sisters. With a global reach, it is bound to generate more awareness about the banding of women to support the sisterhood."¹⁰

¹⁰ Singh, Chauhan Anjali and Chaturvedi, Gunjan, "Rising Sisterhood in Cinematic Narrative: "Evolving through the Lens of Laapataa Ladies, *Santosh*

It is consistent to affirm the existence of a triangle between the two policewomen fighting to solve the case of the third one, the young Devika, as a mirroring structure of feminine forces supporting each other. But I prefer to keep the spotlight on solidarity rather than on sisterhood, which, in my opinion, implies deeper kinds of connection between the subjects. The poetics of feminine solidarity in *Santosh* relies on the physical and visual contact between the women involved in the action. When their eyes meet, they try to decrypt the other one's way of seeing and feeling. Santosh has even physical contact with the dead body of Devika, which everybody else avoids, as the transport conditions are not proper at all. Later, when she meets the grieving mother of Saleem, the young boy murdered in the police interrogatory, she looks at her with pity and kindness, for she begins to understand the irreparable loss. The takes are dramatic, shot in movement, which brings the spectators closer to the feeling of the chained tragedies.

At the same time, this kind of filming imprints the movie with a heavy sensation of suffocation, quite difficult to bear. Living in the middle of abusive situations takes our breath several times, as *Santosh's* story is hard to take. The solidarity appears by glimpses of human moments, here and there, like a thin structure enveloping the horrific stories in a delicate structure of female gazes and feelings, taking us to the hidden softness of the characters. Even Geeta has a vulnerability disguised by many years of rough practice at the service of the male dominated police system. The women get close in a very rapid and intense way, establishing bonds that transgress the dirty side of reality, which many times seem to be even surreal. Solidarity, in the end, makes also possible to let go. As Santosh, after a hard internal process, breaks free by taking another path in life, the connections begin to dissolve, by losing contact of any kind. Geeta is left behind, like a caricature portrait

and *All We Imagine as Light*" in *Creative Saplings*, Vol. 3, No. 11, Nov. 2024, p. 46.

of the police who use the feminine to get dirty jobs and close suspect cases, protecting the real aggressors and the hidden beneficiaries of abuse. As the train takes Santosh away in the end, a certain feeling of liberation is installed in the diegesis. Even Geeta seems to be bit by some kind of regrets, as she feels the power Santosh must get herself out of a story that was not necessarily her story, but she let her become that way for a while. As the process of non-identification with the situation unfolds, the horrors of the facts that the police tried to cover are left behind like after a bad dream. The illusion, maya, had brought Santosh in a living hell, full of suffering, where even if she wanted, she could not help the real victims, but cause even more harm to them, being misled by the deceitful Geeta and all the system that she represents.

The movie shows different life options for the protagonist who engages with the one which seems easier to follow in the beginning but proves itself to be the most dangerous one. Santosh's character is threatened by the pressure around to become weak and determine the heroine to start serving the corrupted side. But her strength survives the tremendous happenings in which she becomes involved without her own will and follows her heart's craving for freedom. The good intentions that she had from the moment she had joined the police dressed in the uniform of her dead husband make her forgive herself and take another chance in life, far from the abusive officialities. The force that bound Santosh as a widow to her husband glitters at various moments of the movie. Even if he is absent all the time, his presence reflects his wife's actions and way of seeing things. In all the three movies that are being discussed in my article, the bond between women as protagonists and their men are strong and visible.

In *All we imagine as light*, the heroine even has a metaphysic encounter with her husband, through the intermediary of a fisherman who almost drowned. Like in a dream, the woman meets the man who is away from her in real life and she forgives him, while the fisherman is brought back to life again. When she gets the special pot from her real

husband who is long gone to work away, she develops mixed feelings about it, but she is constantly thinking of him. The bond is strong and we can also observe that in her attitude towards the doctor who wants to court her, but she remains faithful to her absent man.

In *Girls will be girls*, the mother has moments of nostalgia and reflection about her own life when she observes the development of her daughter's relationship and that is why she wants to help her access another kind of lifestyle. When her husband rarely comes home, she seems to be close to him, but she always keeps an inner distance as she is looking at everything which is happening and processing emotions and thoughts all the time. But even if these moments of deep nostalgia come to the surface now and then, the women in these movies are strongly engaged in an existentialist dimension, fighting for their own beliefs and choosing themselves the direction of their life. Even if the mother from *Girls will be girls* is financially depending on her husband, she plays a great role in the coming-of-age story of her daughter and faces society to defend the little one not only once.

Santosh is also caught in a materialistic dependence as the movie starts, but she overcomes the situation by escaping the monstrous role in a corrupt world she was given as legacy by her dead husband. The absent husband is a reality around which the plots of all the three movies develop. The sadness that automatically appears is a constant trigger for the protagonists, whether they are in daily or extreme situations. It can take various shapes, from despair to resignation and oblivion, but it underlines the dramatic moments and deepens the internal scissure of the characters. Santosh and Prabha both have broken hearts, while Mira's mother from *Girls will be girls*, Anila, seems to have buried the story of her own marriage and only follows the evolution of her daughter's romance. When Prabha receives the rice cooker from Germany, the bond with the far away working husband is brought back into her attention, even if the director of the movie builds a mystery ambiance around it and we are never sure who the sender behind the pot was.

All we imagine as light presents three strong feminine characters that fight back reality and they deepen the connection between them by lovely acts of solidarity. Malayalis Prabha and Anu are nurses living together in Mumbai. Prabha is straitlaced and reserved, and yearns for her husband, who lives in Germany and visited India only once for a short, arranged marriage, but has not contacted her in over a year. Anu is more outgoing and is having a secret affair with a Muslim young man named Shiaz. Prabha tries to help Parvaty, the cook of the hospital where they work, as a building company has the intention of demolishing her little hut to build a sky scraper. The tension surrounding this subject is constantly growing, because nothing can be solved and Parvaty doesn't even have property documents for her living space. Prabha is her close friend and always tries to sustain her, by her words but also by actions, as for example the scene in which they through stones at the advertising billboard of the real estate company which wants to evacuate the poor people living near the hospital without property papers. They fail to rescue Parvaty's home, and she must pack her things and clear the place and then leave to her village, accompanied by the other two women, in an extraordinary act of solidarity.

Rescuing other people becomes a refrain which is to be noticed all through the film. As Parvaty allows her friends to help her and to share her sorrow, another rescuing action takes place on the village's beach, where Prabha saves a fisherman from dying by performing CPR. As everybody is waiting for a doctor to come, Prabha uses her long experience as a nurse to clean him and to care for him. The connection is so strong that she begins to look at him as to her husband and through a complex process of substitution, she comes to forgive him. By helping others, by giving a hand, by caring for someone, as Prabha tries to protect and guide the young Anu, the main figure of the film finds peace and redemption.



Parvathy and Prabha looking at the billboard of the construction company that wants to take Parvathy's house in *All we imagine as light* (2024)¹¹

They are functional parts of the system but at the same time they are anarchists and fight it back if it's needed. Their trip together to the seaside village is also an act of solidarity and rebellion against an abusive reality. In her review of the film, "*All We Imagine as light* as Existentialist Feminist Art," Ritwik Agrawal points at the lack of need for male help in all the three protagonists' cases:

"At its core, *All We Imagine as Light* is a film about agency, as all three central characters are engaged in an ongoing existentialist struggle to take charge of their lives, despite a raft of significant challenges. What makes the film distinctively feminist is their non-reliance upon male crutches (whether real or hoped-for) as they struggle to exercise a measure of control over their lives."¹²

The connection between the three women is the key to understand the poetics of the film. As Agrawal observes, they try to take control over their lives, even if they may not gain it. Parvathy loses her house in

¹¹ <https://www.janusfilms.com/films/2236>, last accessed 29.08.2026.

¹² Agrawal, Ritwik, "*All We Imagine as Light* as Existentialist Feminist Art," <https://philarchive.org/archive/AGRAWI>, last accessed 29.08.2026.

the end, but they all go to accompany her to move in her village by the seaside, near Ratnagiri, and make the best out of it. *All we imagine as light* talks about the dreams of many people like Parvaty, who came to the metropole of Mumbai and hoped to have a better life than back home, even if luck is not on their side. In their review of the film, Ajeet Singh Badhoria and Suresh Kumar Sharma point at the drama of such people and open an interesting perspective on what they call the Indian “systems of othering:”

“Payal Kapadia’s *All We Imagine as Light* is about the dreams of millions of invisible migrants who come to Mumbai with the hope of improving their lives. Yet, struggle to belong to a place that refuses to fully embrace them. It’s about people who have become used to the loneliness and alienation of moving from a small town to a big city, such that they have retreated within themselves. It explores how systems of othering – rooted in language, gender, religion, caste and class differences – manifest in India.”¹³

The inner retreat, the tendency of such people to isolate them, is seen by the Indian authors because of migration within the country. The film explores the brutal reality for large masses of migrants and builds aesthetics of loneliness and longing. Beautifully staged in between the rainy days and nights of monsoon time Mumbai, the evolution of the three characters seems to stop sometimes, as there are moments that we can see as spectators which are suspended in time and visibly detached from the regular flow of things. These moments which stand apart from others are like poems which tell each sorrow of the protagonists, without using words. We can identify such moments as the night encounter that Prabha has her dream about, the lit beach shack where all meet in the end and have a good time together and the nights in Mumbai where, after

¹³ Poojashree, Bhadoria, A. S., & Sharma, S. K. (2025). “A Movie Review of Payal Kapadia’s ‘All We Imagine as Light’”, *Journal of Medical Evidence*, 6(1), 111-112. https://doi.org/10.4103/JME.JME_33_25.

work, the exhausted women take time and courage to look inside themselves.

In a different manner from the golden light suspended moments in *Girls will be girls*, *All we imagine as light* is built on a network of night scenes of loneliness. In *Santosh*, the female solidarity shows itself more in the daylight, while the night is the background for the horrific happenings that wipe away the line between humans and animals. The poetics of connection between women rely on close ups and fugitive landscapes which cross the character's minds now and then. The emotional layer of the three movies is brought into the spotlight as a reality and as a metaphor of a secret world inside the world, as the memory of an ancestral mother who knows and feels everything.

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All we imagine as Light (2024), directed by Payal Kapadia.

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Abhay K.'s *Nalanda: How It Changed the World* is an ambitious attempt to recover Nalanda not merely as an archaeological site or a lost Buddhist institution, but as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon whose influence travelled far beyond the geographical limits of ancient India. Published by Vintage Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House India, in 2025, the book brings together history, philosophy, literature, religion, art, architecture and political history to reconstruct the world of Nalanda and, equally importantly, to examine what happened to that world after the institution itself disappeared.

The background of the author is significant to the way this book is conceived. Abhay K. is a poet, translator, editor and diplomat whose literary work has consistently engaged with questions of culture, geography, language and the movement of ideas across borders. His poetry collections include *Celestial*, *Stray Poems*, *Monsoon*, *The Magic of Madagascar*, *The Alphabets of Africa* and *The Alphabets of Latin America*. He has also edited works such as *The Book of Bihari Literature*, *The Bloomsbury Book of Great Indian Love Poems* and *Capitals*. His translations of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* and *Ṛtusaṃhāra* further demonstrate his engagement with classical Indian literature and

the problem of carrying texts across languages and historical periods. This literary and translational background is particularly relevant to *Nalanda: How It Changed the World*, since the history of Nalanda is itself inseparable from translation, textual transmission and the movement of knowledge between India and other parts of Asia. Abhay K.'s approach to Nalanda consequently moves naturally between historical evidence and literary memory.

One of the strengths of the book is its refusal to reduce Nalanda to the familiar image of an ancient university. Abhay K. presents it as a complex intellectual ecosystem in which philosophical debate existed alongside the study of grammar, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, law and literature. This breadth is important because it challenges the tendency to understand Nalanda exclusively through the history of Buddhism. The Mahavihara emerges instead as a place where different forms of knowledge could coexist and where intellectual inquiry was understood as part of a larger ethical and spiritual pursuit.

The intellectual culture of Nalanda is perhaps most compelling in the book's accounts of debate and disputation. Admission itself was associated with intellectual testing, and the Dvara Panditas functioned as gatekeepers who questioned prospective students. The image of scholars spending their days in sustained argument gives the institution a distinctly different character from the modern university, even while making it recognisable as a centre of higher learning. Abhay K. quotes the observation that "the day is not sufficient for asking and answering profound questions." The line captures something essential about Nalanda's intellectual ethos: knowledge was not a finished possession but an activity, sustained through questioning, argument and examination.

This emphasis on debate also complicates the assumption that a religious institution must necessarily be intellectually closed. Nalanda was rooted in Buddhist scholasticism, but its intellectual life included competing Buddhist schools and engagement with non-Buddhist traditions. Madhyamaka, Yogacara and later Vajrayana developments

formed part of an evolving philosophical environment. The importance of figures such as Nagarjuna, Aryadeva and Asanga lies not only in their contribution to Buddhist philosophy but in the fact that their works generated traditions of interpretation and debate that continued far beyond Nalanda itself.

Nagarjuna is particularly important to the book's philosophical argument. His formulation of *śūnyatā* and his account of the two truths are presented as central developments within Mahayana thought. What is valuable here is the book's attention to the conceptual relationship between *śūnyatā*, anatman and pratityasamutpada. Emptiness is not simply presented as nothingness; it concerns the absence of independent or inherent existence and is connected to the dependent arising of phenomena. This philosophical tradition also illustrates the argumentative character of Nalanda's intellectual culture, where doctrines were not merely inherited but subjected to sustained analysis.

The story becomes even more significant when these intellectual traditions are followed beyond India. One of the book's central contributions is its emphasis on the circulation of knowledge across Asia. Nalanda was not an isolated centre whose influence remained within the geographical boundaries of Magadha. Scholars travelled to it from China, Tibet, Korea and other parts of Asia, while Indian teachers and texts travelled in the opposite direction.

The accounts of foreign travellers make this movement particularly vivid. Faxian, Xuanzang, Yijing, Hyecho and Dharmasvāmi provide different perspectives on the Buddhist world of India and on the institutions through which knowledge circulated. Faxian's journey reflects the importance of Buddhist texts and monastic regulations to the Chinese Buddhist community. Xuanzang travelled to India in search of authoritative teachings and became closely associated with Nalanda, where his intellectual relationship with Śīlabhadra became particularly important. Yijing, who spent several years in India and studied at Nalanda, provides another valuable account of monastic practices,

education and the daily life of Buddhist communities. His writings are especially significant for understanding how Buddhist learning was organised and transmitted between India and East Asia. Dharmasvāmi, who visited Nalanda in the thirteenth century, represents a later stage in the institution's history. His account is particularly valuable because it preserves a memory of Nalanda during a period when the Mahavihara had already entered a very different historical phase. Taken together, these travellers allow Nalanda to be viewed not from a single historical perspective but through a succession of encounters across centuries.

These journeys are also important from the perspective of literary studies. The travel accounts of Faxian, Xuanzang, Yijing, Hyecho and Dharmasvāmi cannot be treated simply as repositories of historical information. They contain descriptions of landscapes, monasteries, rituals, customs and encounters with people from different cultures. They consequently occupy a space between pilgrimage narrative, travel literature, ethnographic observation and historiography. Their accounts also contributed to the formation of an image of India within East Asian and wider Buddhist literary and religious imagination. Their differences are equally important: each traveller arrived with particular purposes, expectations and intellectual concerns, and therefore each produced a somewhat different India through the act of writing about his journey.

Hyecho's fragmentary memoir is particularly suggestive in this regard. The loss of the beginning and end of his account reminds us that literary and historical memory is necessarily incomplete. Much of what survives from the intellectual world of Nalanda has survived because a manuscript was copied, translated, preserved or rediscovered. What has disappeared is often equally significant. The historian of Nalanda must therefore work not only with evidence but also with absences.

Translation is central to this history of preservation. Indian Buddhist texts entered Chinese and Tibetan intellectual cultures through generations of translators, teachers and travelling monks. Some works of Indian Buddhist philosophy are now accessible primarily through

Tibetan or Chinese versions. Translation in this context is not simply a technical act of transferring words from one language to another. It is also an act of intellectual mediation. Concepts must be interpreted, philosophical terminology must be established, and texts must become meaningful within a new linguistic and cultural environment.

The story of Thonmi Sambhota brings this process into especially sharp focus. His study of Sanskrit and Indian scripts and his role in the development of Tibetan writing represent a significant moment in the history of literary transmission. The creation of a writing system is also the creation of new possibilities for literary memory. Once knowledge can be recorded in a stable written form, a culture acquires new means of preserving its philosophical, religious and literary inheritance. Through Thonmi, therefore, the book allows us to see Nalanda's influence not only in terms of religious ideas but also in terms of language and literary culture.

Padmasambhava presents another dimension of transmission. His association with Nalanda and his subsequent role in Tibet demonstrate how intellectual traditions can change as they move across cultural boundaries. The historical figure is inseparable, in later memory, from the legends and religious narratives that surround him. This movement from history into hagiography is itself worth examining. It demonstrates how literary traditions participate in the construction of spiritual authority and how historical figures acquire new meanings in cultures beyond their original context.

The relationship between literature and history becomes increasingly important when Abhay K. discusses the rediscovery of Nalanda. Archaeology provides material evidence, but the reconstruction of the institution also depends on inscriptions, travel accounts, chronicles and textual traditions. The absence of the physical remains of the legendary library Dharmaganja, for instance, creates a productive tension between literary memory and archaeological evidence. Rather than simply resolving such tensions, the book draws attention to the difficulties

involved in reconstructing an intellectual institution whose physical and textual worlds have been only partially preserved.

The same tension appears in the discussion of Nalanda's decline. The book is strongest when it treats the decline as a historical process rather than reducing it to a single event. The weakening of royal patronage, political instability, internal divisions within Buddhism and the decline of the wider network of Buddhist monasteries all contributed to the institution's vulnerability. The invasions and destruction associated with the Turkish expansion form an important part of this history, but they are situated within a longer process of institutional weakening. This approach is particularly relevant to the book's discussion of Bakhtiyar Khalji. The destruction of Buddhist monasteries in Bihar has become deeply embedded in modern historical memory, but the evidence surrounding Nalanda's final destruction is more complicated than a simple narrative of one decisive attack. Archaeological evidence points to repeated episodes of burning, while textual sources provide different accounts of destruction. The book consequently raises a larger historiographical question: how should literary chronicles, archaeological evidence and later historical interpretations be read alongside one another?

This is also where the political dimension of historical writing becomes unavoidable. Narratives of Nalanda's destruction have been interpreted differently by medieval chroniclers, colonial historians and modern writers. The historical event and its later representation are not always identical. Abhay K.'s attention to this distinction is useful because it encourages the reader to consider not only what happened to Nalanda but also how subsequent generations have narrated what happened.

The book's treatment of architecture similarly expands the meaning of Nalanda beyond textual history. The Great Stupa of Sariputra, the monasteries, chaityas and spatial organisation of the Mahavihara reveal an institution that developed and changed over several centuries.

Architecture here functions almost as a historical document. Its successive transformations record shifts in religious practice, patronage and institutional life. The physical site can therefore be read alongside the philosophical and literary traditions associated with it.

There is a particularly interesting relationship between the book's historical argument and its literary mode. Abhay K.'s identity as a poet becomes visible in the way he approaches Nalanda's ruins and its lost library. The opening invocation, in which Nalanda itself speaks, immediately establishes a relationship between historical reconstruction and imaginative memory. The striking image that "even my bricks bleed" turns the archaeological site into a witness to its own history.

This choice is significant because the book is ultimately concerned with memory. Nalanda is not simply something that existed and disappeared. It continues to exist through texts, translations, philosophical traditions, archaeological remains and cultural imagination. The book's poetic passages are most effective when they illuminate this relationship between material loss and intellectual survival.

The modern revival of Nalanda consequently becomes more than an institutional project. The establishment of Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, the creation of the modern Nalanda University and the involvement of figures such as A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and Amartya Sen demonstrate the continuing symbolic power of the Mahavihara. The modern institution cannot simply reproduce the ancient one, nor should historical continuity be assumed too easily. What can be recovered more meaningfully are certain intellectual principles: interdisciplinary inquiry, debate, international exchange and the movement of knowledge across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The book's broader account of Nalanda's global footprint extends this argument. The persistence of Nalanda-inspired institutions in different parts of the world suggests that the Mahavihara has become more than a historical location. It has become a name associated with a

particular ideal of learning, one in which intellectual inquiry, ethical reflection and contemplative practice can coexist.

There are moments when the book's enthusiasm for Nalanda leads it towards large civilisational claims that invite further scholarly examination. Claims concerning the relationship between Buddhist philosophical reasoning and the modern scientific method, or between śūnyatā and the mathematical concept of zero, are intellectually provocative but require careful distinction between historical influence and conceptual resemblance. Such questions are valuable precisely because they open areas for further research, but they should not always be treated as straightforward lines of historical causation.

This is, perhaps, one of the productive tensions within *Nalanda: How It Changed the World*. It is simultaneously a work of historical recovery and a work of cultural remembrance. Its purpose is not only to reconstruct what can be known about Nalanda but also to restore the institution to a larger history of Asian intellectual exchange. Its accessible style allows a wide readership to enter that history, while its range of sources and subjects gives scholars several points from which to pursue further questions.

Ultimately, the book is most compelling when it brings together the scholar and the traveller, the manuscript and the ruin, the philosophical text and the literary narrative. Nalanda emerges neither simply as a lost “university” nor merely as a Buddhist monastery, but as a complex intellectual world sustained by teachers, students, patrons, translators, travellers and texts.

The title's claim that Nalanda “changed the world” is therefore best understood through circulation rather than conquest. Ideas moved because people moved. Texts survived because they were copied, translated and carried across borders. Philosophical traditions developed because they entered into dialogue with other traditions. Even after the physical institution declined, its intellectual inheritance continued to travel.

In this sense, Abhay K.'s book makes a useful contribution to the continuing study of Nalanda. Its most enduring question is not simply what Nalanda once was, but what happens to knowledge when institutions disappear. The ruins record an ending, but the texts, translations and intellectual traditions record another kind of history: one in which the life of an institution can continue long after its buildings have fallen silent.

About the Author: Pema Droma is a Guest Faculty member at the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies (CIHCS), Dahung. Her academic engagement is situated primarily within the fields of literature, literary criticism and cultural studies, with particular interest in Indian and Himalayan literary and intellectual traditions. Her teaching and scholarly interests also extend to the relationship between literature, cultural memory, history and the transmission of knowledge across linguistic and geographical boundaries.

Her engagement with *Nalanda: How It Changed the World* reflects these interests, particularly in the book's treatment of travel narratives, translation, textual transmission, language, Buddhist intellectual traditions and the cultural connections between India and the wider Himalayan and Asian world.

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Sam Dalrymple, *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia*, William Collins, 2026, ISBN 978-0-00-846685-5, 520 p.

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What's in a name? To be more precise what is in an official name? What is in a name, especially one on a 1928 passport where it proudly says Indian Empire? What were the princely states, the British protectorates and how those functioned together under one foreign crown? What did the Indian Empire really mean in 1928 and how was it possible that in the space of only two decades this empire started unravelling from one entity to twelve distinct nation states? Sam Dalrymple boldly and confidently provides us with a well-documented answer in his much-acclaimed debut book, *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia*: "This book tells, for the first time, one of the great epics of the twentieth century: the extraordinary story of how Five Partitions transformed Britain's Indian Empire into twelve nation states." (5) And "This book, for the first time, presents the whole story of how the Indian Empire was unmade." (8)

In 1928 a large part of Asia from the Red Sea to the jungles of the Southeast Asia, or from Aden, the Red Sea port to Rangoon, covering what today is India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal, Yemen, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait were parts of what officially was known as the Indian Empire, or the Raj.¹ Under this name almost a quarter

¹ Today we could look at this name revisiting a history lesson left by another empire. Right after the death of last king of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (534-509 B.C.), the Romans feared greatly to have a king again that would decide to elect every year two consuls at the helm of the Senate just to balance the power. However, despite resisting the idea of a king, they too eventually built an empire, with Dictator Julius Caesar, paving the way to the first emperor, Augustus (Gaius Octavius).

of the world population lived together despite identifying themselves as Hindu, Muslims, Buddhist, Jaina, Christians, Sikhs, Jews, or Zoroastrian. In short, or to keep it simple, this vast swathe of Asia was commonly known as India or British India. However, for diplomatic reasons, the British maintained a cunning orchestrated ambiguity when it came to officially acknowledging the protectorate status² for the Himalayan border princely states, or over Arab states bordering the Ottoman Empire. Thus, when maps were drawn, those were secretly published, or when made available, the Arab states were left out on purpose.

However, the general perception not only of the British administration, but also of the tradesmen and for almost everyone living within these boundaries, was they were part of the whole. Not that this whole always represented those people's choices.³ The anti-colonialism and independence rhetoric was always present in the background, but right after the Great War, it started unfolding with a renewed strength, and it gained even more shape and depth with the Nazi rise to power in Europe and the upheaval of the nationalistic ideologies supported by a large part of the elites and masses. The political situation of the British Empire was extraordinarily complex as it implied not only administering vast territories but also balancing the rippling effects of conflictual and violent events happening throughout the empire. For instance, Dalrymple shows how Burma, who was the first to be dislodged from the empire and let to forge its independence in ways that looked more changing masters was, in fact dealing with "double

² Technically, those were protectorates under the Interpretation Act of 1889 which defined India as "any territories of any Native Prince or Chief under the suzerainty of His Majesty, exercised through the Governor General of India or through any Governor or other officer subordinate to the Governor General of India."

³ The strong grip of the soft gloved British administration was spreading positive messages, for example, the text displayed in Aden to welcome the Prince of Wales and Lord Mountbatten in their visit to the Gulf princely states. It read with all naivety "Tell daddy we are all happy under the British rule"!

colonialism” from both the British and India and hence double the trouble arising from this situation.

As usually happens with empires, if the grip of the colonial power was not strong enough over the state borders, the control of those territories tended to thin and wear till breaking apart. From within India, strong voices lead by Gandhi were calling for an independent India that had to fit into the mythical geography of the ancient Hindu holy land Bharat, as depicted in the great epic of the Mahabharata. This mythical glorification of the past gave rise to the *Hindutva* ideology which continues to fuel right now the nationalist agenda of the present ruling political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Everyone one else and everything else is second to all things Hindu.

Dalrymple summarizes with great skills the five stages dissolution process of the Indian Empire. The first partition which begun in 1937, a forgotten or recontextualised one, was the separation of Burma from India. This was followed by the Partition of the Arabian Peninsula from India⁴ which also begun in about the same year and it was completed a decade later in April 1947 with the transfer of the Persian Gulf states. The third and the most painful one in terms of loss of human lives, and unprecedented violence and forced migration was the Great Partition. As a result, two independent states were created, India with a Hindu majority and Pakistan⁵ (East and West Pakistan together) for the Muslim majority population. In the same year, the 565 princely states from the north-east to the central-west that were ruled by their own maharaja who had full

⁴ Thanks to long historical relations, the Sultans of Qu’aiti were vassals of the Nizamuddin of Hyderabad, which technically made them a part of India.

⁵ Ironically, Pakistan as an independent state was in many ways an invention right from its name coined by the Cambridge student Rahmat Ali Choudhary who devised it from an acronym (P for Punjab, A for Afghania or the North-Western frontier, K for Kashmir, S for Sindh, and TAN for Baluchistan) where an ‘I’ was inserted for an easier pronunciation. Initially, Jinnah dismissed the idea, but later, he fully embraced it. The translation as the “The Land of the Pure” was much serving propagandistic purposes for a country only for the Muslim.

governance except for defence and foreign policy were also given the choice to be a part of one of newly created states. A sizeable number of the princely states such as Bhutan and Sikkim clearly voiced their wish to remain independent. However, the decision was eventually religion based, and even that proved to be exceedingly difficult. For instance, a Hindu Maharaja ruled the Muslim-majority Kashmir, whilst the Hindu-majority fate of Hyderabad had to be decided by the Muslim Nizam. That was the fourth partition. It was followed by decades of hostility and coercive measures to include the princely estates in the Indian Union following, somehow, neocolonial patterns. The Fifth Partition took place in 1971. It separated and forced the East Pakistan into predominantly Muslim Bangladesh, but in fact it completed the partition set up in 1947 between India and Pakistan. The same year, the British abolished their protectorates over the Gulf state. With this, the last of India's princely states gained independence. Each and every one of these partitions where borders were drawn not once completely irrationally, cutting arbitrary lines between the same tribes, such as the Naga people divided between Burma and India's Assam, triggered famines, catastrophic migration crisis (*The Long March*) and opened the door for countless civil wars "leaving a series of suppurating wounds that continue to bleed into the present." (8) The Kashmir Indo-Pakistan conflict has raged now for long troubled decades. Wars between ethnic armed organisations and the present military regime are still unwaveringly fought these days in former Burma, present Myanmar. The genocide of the Rohingya people forced to flee the war from Myanmar and seek refuge to Bangladesh over a decade ago happened too soon to be forgotten.

Sam Dalrymple's analysis goes into minute details when following closely the main actors of the Independence movement and India partition across the Indian Empire from Mahatma Ottama, Ba Maw, U Saw and Aung San in Burma to the polished aristocrat nothing short of a 'glamour boy' Lord Mountbatten, the Viceroy of India appointed to supervise the emerging states, and hand over the British power into the hands of the

Congress Party Leaders and the Muslim League. Under his lenses we see Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Menon, Patel and many more as they were much before the 1947's Independence and the Great Partition disaster with all their human flaws, errors, and liability, and not how the official purist propaganda has chosen to depict these fathers of Mother India carefully manicured from all the British empire's ideas, habits and attires. Sam Dalrymple's records of the maharajas of the princely states are a luxurious excursion back into the past of British India where all of the Indian princess and Mughal aristocrats would have had English nannies, had been to English schools and universities and would have toured in style Britain, Paris and Cannes, and other fashionable tourist attractions. Equally, Dalrymple focuses on how the maharajas of the princely states, when independence was no longer an option, had to make their choices, sometimes wisely sometimes simply fortuitously to accede either India or Pakistan. The consequence of partitions is observed across so many layers from politics to clothing and food. For example, the very popular *rava idli* dish is the result of less to no rice supplied by Burma and its replacement with semolina.

Sam Dalrymple follows in his father's steps, the well-known historian William Dalrymple, by way of research area, great narrative skills, brisk and clear-cut analysis, although he also brings his own approach and methodology, complementing the narrative with devastating personal experience of people or families split or caught in the partitions and forced migration. Dalrymple was able to interview those people in their own languages with the help of his network friends. The book is the next stage of his *Daastan Project*, a peacebuilding initiative that reconnects refugees displaced by the 1947 Partition of India. The interviews also helped to document his debut film, *Child of the Empire*, an animated virtual reality (VR) documentary drama production that was premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2022 also receiving the inaugural XR History Award from the Körber-Stiftung Foundation.

Shattered Lands is a book that strongly relates to our present. Today's ongoing conflicts, wars and regional crisis in South Asia and South-East Asia are the result of the either painfully prolonged partitions (between India and Burma) or hastened, abrupt and violent 1947 India Pakistan Partition's borders that were forcefully or haphazardly drawn, - such was the medieval city of Gaur in Bengal -, from velvety cushioned cabinets. Divided, broken and fractured identities gave way to immense atrocities, suffering and still bleeding conflicts in the area. Graciously but confidently presented by the young but certainly rising historian Sam Dalrymple, *Shattered Lands* is a must read for a fresh insight into understanding the making of modern India with these complex processes, as well as a prompt to again raise more awareness on the fragility of peace and understanding between people.

The still troubled world that has emerged because of the making and the unmaking of the Indian Empire is reflected so well into the terse yet so profound Kabir's verse: *Of you and me who chose to stay and who goes free?* This raises puzzling questions for each of us, particularly when discussing the independence and sovereignty of a country.

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Lucian Maidanuc, *Templul de aramă. Biografia lui Padmasambhava, întemeietorul buddhismului tibetan* [*The Copper Temple. A Biography of Padmasambhava, the Founder of Tibetan Buddhism*], Bucharest: Herald Publishers, 2024, ISBN: 978-630-336-061-4, 534 p.

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Before being about Padmasambhava, Lucian Maidanuc's book is about human nature – about the persistent need for a concrete model, for an embodiment, even when we consider the most elevated aspects of life, such as spirituality. In the late 19th century, the Christian theologian Albert Schweitzer undertook a meticulous evaluation of the historical research regarding the life of Jesus; ultimately, he concluded that the “Christ of faith” held greater theological interest than the “Jesus of history.” Further east than Albert Schweitzer and discussing a figure who lived even further east and several centuries later than Jesus, Lucian Maidanuc, a Buddhist not allowed to discard Buddhism either by his own self – illusory as he preaches it to be – either by the Universe – itself void – attempts to uncover the historical Padmasambhava. Nevertheless, he ends up discussing, across several hundred pages, the archetypes lurking behind the figure of Padmasambhava. The discussion becomes rather about what Padmasambhava embodies for the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. And one might say that he embodies all the “religious” or “spiritual” aspirations of human nature, the fulfillment of the thirst for the infinite felt by a human being terrified of the finite – even if by a finite intrinsically void.

The method Lucian Maidanuc employs is the hermeneutics of several major biographical passages; more precisely, he analyzes the defining moments of Padmasambhava's life as they appear in his earliest classical

biography, the *Zangs gling ma*. The entire work is grounded in this seminal source of Tibetan hagiography. Occasional references are made to other biographical sources, but these serve merely illustrative purposes.

The hermeneutics of these narrative episodes reveal Padmasambhava as both master and disciple, as the heroic ascetic, as the one who rules over nature and overcomes its forces, as the master of all humanity who possesses total knowledge. Padmasambhava embodies everything a human being might aspire to be; moreover, he can bestow everything a human being might wish to receive. He transcends natural order and possesses highly coveted knowledge. Endowed with profound compassion, he becomes “the Master,” sharing his knowledge with those who long for understanding and refuse to accept a life devoid of understanding. In a Buddhist context, where knowledge holds significant soteriological value, his act of bestowing knowledge is redemptive.

Padmasambhava’s appearance in the Universe has a Christic nature. He infuses light into the Cosmos, transforming human aimless groping into a path toward liberation. Within the world, Padmasambhava represents the enlightened one – an archetype discussed, perhaps too briefly, between pages 434 and 448. His providential presence transmutes the world from a place of ceaseless karmic frustration into a stage for liberation. This theme involves several religious motifs that transcend Buddhism. The dread of carnality and sexuality, the claim of an immaculate conception, also appear in the biography of Padmasambhava; as his name implies, he was born (*sambhava*) from a lotus flower (*padma*) – a motif frequently encountered in Indian hagiographies. He bypassed the demeaning stage of childhood and appeared instead in an already mature and enlightened condition.

Like Jesus, he is “begotten, not made.” Padmasambhava did not emerge through some extrinsic causes but rather through self-generation. His physical body serves merely as an instrument through which he intervenes in the Universe with a salvific purpose. Insofar as one can speak of parents in his case, classical biographies identify them as the

most significant hypostases the Buddha assumes in Mahāyāna Buddhism: Amitābha (“Infinite Light”) and Avalokiteśvara (“The Lord Who Looks Down”). He descends from the absolute realm, coming down to incarnate in the world and serve as a light unto it.

Buddhism’s overt disdain for the human condition – intrinsically linked to suffering ever since the First Noble Truth proclaimed by the Buddha – is fully embraced by Padmasambhava. Among the archetypes he embodies, the first discussed in Lucian Maitanuc’s book is that of the “mad ascetic” (151-202). Somehow, this archetype provides the foundation for all other spiritual “functions.” Padmasambhava defies worldly norms by standing above them, from a higher level; he dances, performs religious rites in charnel grounds, and receives spiritual aid from various wrathful deities. He anticipates – or even establishes – the ideal of the mad ascetic (*smyon pa*) that would only achieve prominence in Tibetan culture centuries later. In fact, the issue of a lineage connecting Padmasambhava to the mad ascetic tradition is explicitly addressed by Lucian Maitanuc on pages 196-201.

Padmasambhava does not merely defy the worldly realm but triumph over it. In this regard, he embodies the hero (233-266) – an archetype frequently encountered in the history of religions. He is invincible, surviving every attempt to annihilate him; the failed attempts to burn him at the stake, along with his consort, are particularly significant in this context. Chapters 7 and 10 address one of the most important aspects of traditional religions: the transmission of knowledge. Padmasambhava’s compassion is infinite; he exemplarily assumes not only the role of master (discussed on pages 336-391) but also, unexpectedly, that of disciple (203-232). By archetypally embodying both poles of religious transmission, Padmasambhava becomes the path itself. Furthermore, in a Christic manner, he submits himself to a process akin to Christian *kenosis*. Although he appears in the universe fully enlightened, his human condition serving merely as an instrument, as a “transformation body” (*nirmāṇakāya*) through which he leads others to liberation,

Padmasambhava goes through the entire spiritual path to serve as an example. Descending to the level of the beings entrapped in worldly bondage, the liberated Padmasambhava sets out in search of a master, finds one, receives initiation, and ascends all the stages leading to the enlightenment he already possesses. He becomes the perfect and archetypal master precisely because he also exemplified the role of the flawless disciple.

Of particular interest are the recurring encounters, along the spiritual path, with female deities and masters, who guide Padmasambhava toward perfection. This feature is characteristic of Tantric currents, which fully value the feminine and the natural within the spiritual context. While early Buddhism was rather reluctant to admit women into the religious community – with the Buddha even lamenting that such a compromise would shorten the lifespan of his religious group by 500 years – Tibetan Tantrism appears rather fascinated by the religious potential of the feminine, of corporeality, of the natural. Moreover, Padmasambhava is accompanied in his religious mission by a spiritual consort, Princess Mandāravā (235 et seq.).

Padmasambhava is best known in the role of the master; he is frequently named “Guru Rinpoche” (“the Precious Master”). Although Lucian Maitanuc dedicated a full chapter to discussing this role, the theme of the perfect master is to be found everywhere in the book and in the entire corpus of Tibetan literature dealing with Padmasambhava. He exemplifies the role of the master in every respect: he grants initiations and teachings, performs rituals, guides spiritual practices, and even translates Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. This aspect is particularly significant for Tantric Buddhism, given that the two vast collections of Tibetan Buddhist translations and texts, the *bka' 'gyur* and the *bstan 'gyur*, hold canonical status. *Zangs gling ma* is meticulous regarding this aspect of Padmasambhava’s work; comprising detailed and rigorous lists of the texts he translated (351-357).

Padmasambhava also exercises his role as a master by constantly safeguarding the doctrinal and behavioral integrity of his disciples; he offers reprimands and sanctions, provides clarifications, and adapts the doctrine to suit the level and capacity of each individual disciple.

The transmission of knowledge is a central theme in many religious traditions, and it holds no less importance in Tibetan Buddhism. Padmasambhava rigorously established a lineage of transmission by imparting eight teachings to eight disciples, just as he himself had previously received eight doctrines from eight masters. Thus, a lineage and a typology of transmission are settled, ensuring legitimacy to the preached doctrine (372-375). Padmasambhava's approach to religious knowledge is perennialist rather than revelatory and innovative. He makes no claim to being an innovator, nor does he ever claim to be the founder of a novel spiritual movement. He seeks only to transmit - with the utmost rigor and fidelity - perennial teachings that didn't even originate in Tibet but were imported from India. Padmasambhava does not aim either for originality or for a "Tibetan" identity; he aspires solely to faithfulness in conveying a primordial tradition that reaches him from abroad. The archetype of the consummate master is closely linked to that of the all-knowing being – an ideal embodied equally by Padmasambhava (and discussed in Lucian Maitland's work on pages 392-433).

In Buddhism, knowledge holds significant soteriological value. Through knowledge, Padmasambhava tames demons (267-335) – a claim that should be interpreted psychologically rather than mythologically. The purifying function of knowledge is boundless; it reaches the most subtle forms of existence, on both the cosmological and psychological levels. It tames both demonic entities and man's inner demons, purifying both the Cosmos and the individual. Padmasambhava is the tamer of human demons, the one who facilitates the sacralization of humans. After imparting knowledge, he oversees the process of making it effective.

Lucian Maidanuc's book discusses several Christic motifs set within a Tibetan context. Early Buddhism strove to avoid the divinization of Gautama Buddha; on the contrary, Tibetan Buddhism is tenacious in its endeavor to establish a perfect human being that embodies spiritual realization and proves that human accomplishment is possible.

From the standpoint of literary and academic craft, the work is admirably written. It is thoroughly researched, clearly structured, and written in a language and style that make for easy reading. Going through the 500 pages of the volume does not feel like a burden, as the text flows smoothly, at a captivating and brisk pace. Lucian Maidanuc successfully integrates precise Tibetan and Sanskrit philosophical jargon into his Romanian narrative, making the specialized terms feel as though they have been fully adopted into the language. The work abounds with explanations of Tibetan terms and justifications for the translation choices the author made. He also frequently draws parallels between Tibetan terminology and its Sanskrit equivalents, which are more familiar to the Western reader. However, the aim of making the work accessible is compromised in one notable instance: out of an almost cultic commitment to etymological fidelity, Lucian Maidanuc spells the words "budism" and "budist" (these forms being those approved by the *Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language*) with a double "d" ("buddhism," "buddhist"). This respects their Sanskrit origins while defying any "vulgar" attempt to adapt them to Romanian usage. He is, nevertheless, aware of this "excess" of rigor, which he attempts to justify on pages 34-36.

A book spanning over 500 pages can hardly be written by a neutral author, devoid of a personal interest in the subject matter. Lucian Maidanuc wrote this work primarily out of a "prophetic" spirit; subsequently, it was turned into a doctoral thesis. He believes in what he says and seeks to persuade his readers as well. On the other hand, the author is a lawyer; this professional background and the age in which he lives do not allow him to take his faith as a starting point. Precisely for this reason, the work opens – with great clarity and precision – with a

philosophical justification of the undertaking, in a chapter that outlines the doctrinal foundations of Tibetan Buddhism. Lucian Maidanuc also addresses the controversial topic of the relationship between Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism, arguing for the hypothesis of a strong continuity between the two systems. Continuing in the same rational and critical spirit, the book offers an extensive analysis of the textual sources used in the discussion to follow. The author's intellectual honesty – even when tinged with the fervent zeal of a devotee – is evident at the end of the work; the fifth and concluding part examines the interplay between the mythological and the factual aspects of the preceding discussion. By engaging with this skeptical challenge, Lucian Maidanuc makes the work relevant not only for people sympathetic to Buddhism but also for atheists or agnostics interested in the mindset of Tibetan Tantrism.

Through its precision, clarity, and erudition, Lucian Maidanuc's book sheds light on a realm – the world of Tibetan Buddhism – that is famous precisely for its impenetrable mystery. The book deals with the transcendent, with magic, with the bypassing of natural constraints; yet everything is framed within a twenty-first-century context. The contemporary reader can grasp the mindset of a Buddhist and can even recognize his own archetypes – perhaps described in Christian or psychoanalytic terms – within a world that now reveals itself with a reasonable degree of intelligibility. One might say that, through his admirable clarity and erudition, Lucian Maidanuc somewhat “disenchants” Tibetan spirituality by shedding light upon it. Not entirely, of course.

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Romila Thapar and Namit Arora, *Speaking of History: Conversations about India's Past and Present*, Gurugram: Penguin Random House India, 2025, ISBN: 9780143476931, 304 p.

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In January 2026, on my last day in the capital city of India, I walked around Connaught Place, one of the top heritage structures in New Delhi, looking at buildings and observing people. Initially named after Prince Arthur, the first Duke of Connaught (1850-1942), the third son of Queen Victoria, Connaught Place – renamed Rajiv Chowk, in 2013, in honor of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi – still carries the glory of the Empire. But now, the elegant buildings hide other stories: they host lavishing hotels or modest hostels, excellent restaurants or pubs, auto dealers, cafés or other shops. Among them, the famous Oxford Bookstore, which was almost empty at 10 a.m. when I arrived. Bookstores in India are simply amazing! One can find a variety of books, in multiple languages, and all kinds of other things. On the Top 10 shelf, I saw exactly what I was looking for: Namit Arora's conversations with the well-known historian Romila Thapar.

In the last ten years I read much about Indian history and culture, so I know well that when it comes to the history of India, nothing is quite what it seems. Or, more precisely, nothing can be interpreted in just one way. There are so many successive and parallel histories – all shaping the very life of the Indian subcontinent – that it is difficult to fully capture India's contribution to the development of universal civilization.

Speaking of History: Conversations about India's Past and Present between Romila Thapar, the distinguished historian and Namit Arora, an amazing writer, brings India's past into present, through a sharp focus.

Speaking of history is always challenging. Speaking of India's history could be tricky, as some political transformations are understood differently by academia and the general public. In this regard, "these conversations are an attempt to explain how historical research evolved and how it has affected the reading of Indian history." (ix)

The history of India spans over thousand of years of human habitation, evolving from ancient urban societies into a diverse mosaic of major empires, cultural transformations, and modern nation-building. It is a difficult task, but this book offers some important insights on caste, class, gender, and patriarchy in Indian history, religion, myth or nationalism, mythology, pluralism, identity, nationalism, and public history, and the result is both erudite and refreshingly accessible: a book that challenges distortion, while celebrating history as an act of curiosity and critical inquiry. "These conversations also explore history's evolution as a discipline in colonial and independent India." (xiv)

The volume shed light on the importance of interdisciplinary history. The changes and the values they provide are as important as the historical writing itself. "Relevant date is no longer limited to historical sources but also includes patterns of analysis and models that come from disciplines with proximity to history, such as archaeology, linguistics, genetics, sociology, economic history, ecology and the history of religion." (50) History – as understood today, all over the world – has the role to inform on the developments and to share knowledge. The story of a civilization has multiple layers, and the historical approach is only one of them. It must be completed by interdisciplinary approaches, and many socio-economic and cultural changes should be considered when trying to explain the history of a country or a region.

In their volume, Arora and Thapar refer to "caste studies, women's studies, religious studies and postcolonial studies" (53) – all in connection with migration and climate changes – as equally important when describing the history of India. "Women's studies [...] moved beyond viewing women as a single, uniform category defined solely by

gender. Instead, it emphasized the diverse experiences of women shaped by caste, class, religion, region and other social factors.” (53-54) More than that, historians – regardless of their particular interest – began to be interested in understanding the complex changes of Indian society, focusing on their emergences and developments.

In today’s India, where competing visions of the past are rampantly weaponised to drive political agendas, the book’s relevance can hardly be stated. It deals with the complicated historic rivalry between Hindus and Muslims in explaining some unfortunate events, on one side; and the lacuna of Indian scientists and their lack of interest “in the social and intellectual context of science and technology,” (81) which can be relevant for understanding of the complex Indian society – both ancient and modern – on the other side.

An important chapter is dedicated to migrations and the lineages of cultural ideas. India’s culture was always at the crossroads of ideas, religions and cultures. In fact, one cannot speak about an Indian culture, but of Indian cultures. As Thapar sees it, “the term ‘culture’ [...] is no longer confined to its earlier usage. [...] Efforts were made to extend these descriptions. [...] It now encompasses a wider collation of objects and practices – including customs, beliefs and knowledge – that together shape the pattern of life in a society.” (110)

In every page of this volume, Thapar and Arora explore how history is written, remembered, and fought over. “What is a nation state? It is defined as a territory whose people get together and say, we have much in common, we have the same aspirations.” (228) During its long history, the people of India did so, and “religion, ethnicity, language or suchlike” were not considered elements of identity, but fragments that can configure a stronger identity of people having the same ideals. A nation, as Thapar defines it, is “a given territory, and a variety of people [who] come together.” India, past and present, is exactly like that, and perhaps this is the secret of the country’s resistance. India is “a nation

state that is democratic and secular and gives everyone citizenship rights.” (229)

The history of India is not only a story about successive rulers, religious battles or examples of people fighting together for an ideal. It is also the story of literary and artistic representations of the most important moments that transformed the subcontinent – and the world, to a greater extent. The Ashokan inscriptions “are really quite remarkable.” (238) This is not a singular example; the entire volume is an engaging journey that provokes interdisciplinary questions. Beautiful pictures of frescoes, paintings and other works from different museums of India complete the writing and give a different approach to a discipline that is much more than it used to be.

Speaking of History is an incredible vivid journey through India’s diverse histories, identities and cultural changes. I recommend it to all those who have questions and want to learn about India. After all, as Romila Thapar concludes, “all existing knowledge has to be questioned if we want to gain further knowledge.” (244)

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Among her recent volumes: Mihaela Gligor and Elisabetta Marino (Eds.), *Tagore beyond Borders: Essays on His Influence and Cultural Legacy* (London, New York, New Delhi: Routledge, 2023); Mihaela Gligor, *The Song of the Banyan* (Kolkata: Penprints Publication, 2025), and Mihaela Gligor (Ed.), *The Many Lives of a Woman. Portraits of Remarkable Women in Search of Identity* (Frankfurt: CEEOL Press, 2026).

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Debika Banerji and Debjani Ganguly, Editors, *Mosaics of a Locale. The Stories of Bhowanipur*, Delhi: Upanayan Publications, 2021, ISBN: 978-93-91467-14-2, 148 p.

There are places that steal into your soul long before you actually get to know them. And when you finally arrive, you feel right at home. I was just a naive girl when I first read Mircea Eliade's novel *Maitreyi / Bengal Nights*. Yet, even back then, I dreamed of one day visiting Calcutta, the city where the story unfolds. And when – after many years and much effort – I finally arrived, it felt like coming home. Calcutta had found its way into my heart and mind during my high school years, and over time, it became a second home.

Calcutta is a vast metropolis, but for me, Calcutta meant, first and foremost, Bhowanipore – the neighborhood where the young Mircea Eliade fell in love with the beautiful Maitreyi Devi, the daughter of his professor, Surendranath Dasgupta. It took me two visits to Calcutta before I could see the neighborhood and the house where the professor lived during the time Eliade was his student. That address became a sacred geography for me. The entire Bhowanipore was a place filled with so many mysteries as it carried the steps of Maitreyi, knew her secrets and maybe witnessed her sorrow. So, when Debika gave me their book, it was a very emotional moment, as among the stories of Bhowanipore that of Maitreyi was and still is my favourite (even if not included in the present volume). But, to my surprise, I noticed that the volume came out with the support of the Cossimbazar Royal family (among others). This is the same family that, in 1928, awarded Mircea Eliade his scholarship. Due to the help of the Maharaja, Eliade was able to study Indian philosophy with Surendranath Dasgupta, at the University of Calcutta.

Mosaics of a Locale is a wonderful collection of stories that transformed the neighborhood into one of most cultural of the entire city. People, stories, objects or places of memory – all come together in this

excellent collection documenting Bhowanipore or Bhawanipur, as it is known by its residents.

Personal memories have an important place in the volume economy. “Everyday memories of the locality survive in the residents’ minds,” (26) Debika Banerji writes, and she is absolutely right. “Memory making is not a linear process [...]. The act of remembrance can never be complete and is often coloured making history sometimes blurred. But it is the human touch which makes the act of remembrance an interesting project.” (27)

Behind each magnificent architecture of Bhawanipur area is a story. Most of the majestic houses have their own stories. The authors of the pieces included in the volume tell those stories through people, past or actual owners of the buildings, focusing on the fact that Bhawanipur is “a locality of great transitions. In its evolution from a small sleepy village to a bustling hub of metropolitan Kolkata, the only constant has been ‘change’. [...] Bhawanipur is like a playground for the multiple dimensions of time.” (34) Successive stories of educated Bengalis or poor street vendors came to meet on the narrow lanes of Bhawanipur, and the charm of the area grew because of these encounters.

The volume contains not only vivid descriptions of places, palaces, and histories of families, but also interviews and researched chapters that recompose the mosaic of the Bhawanipur and give it a special aura. “The city of joy, Kolkata has numerous lanes which are filled with many untold stories.” (71) Satyajit Ray used some of them in his movies, like the famous *Sonar Kella (The Golden Fortress)*, as we find while reading Prerona Munshi’s chapter. (73) The interview offers a wonderful image of the area: “Bengalis, Sikhs, Gujaratis, and other people from different communities live in harmony in Bhawanipur making it a cultural melting point.” (74)

“Does a lost house speak like a lost soul, having grown and lived its life, now a shadow of its former glory?” (77), asks Debika Banerji. The answer is ‘Yes.’ Each part of Bhawanipur speaks for itself. All the persons interviewed for this volume shared the same opinion: “Bhawanipur made

our family the way it is today. [...] We saw Bhawanipur transform, and it transformed us too.” (87)

Bhawanipur is not only the home of the living and their stories, but also the place where “the war cemetery and unique graves” are situated. (94) “Today the war grave section contains ninety-five graves from First World War and six hundred and seventeen graves from Second World War.” (97) They are kept in good condition, as the people of Bhawanipur honor the heroes.

In Bhawanipur there are also Jain places of worship and centres of community. “An urban area like Bhawanipur in a megalopolis like Kolkata greatly reaps benefits out of the community building and camaraderie perpetuated by institutions and places of worship for a linguistic and religious minority population.” (102)

Bhawanipur is also where the famous Calcutta Club is. A heritage building, The Calcutta Club “is one of the most premier and elite social clubs of Calcutta.” (103) The club has hosted “innumerable eminent members: from lawyers, to businessmen, from Aristocrats to Maharajas.” (104) Even today, the club is a space of a great importance for the Bengalis and the events organized there keep something from the aura of old times, when Maharajas and Princesses gathered for small cultural talks around a cup of tea. The members of the Brahmo Samaj used to meet at the Bengal Club, and even a Sunday school was established in the premises of the club. A prayer hall “has been graced by a number of eminent personalities including Rabindranath Tagore, Maharani Sunita Devi and many more.” (113)

The last part of the volume reunites some portraits of the famous inhabitants of Bhawanipur: “Uttam Kumar Chattopadhyay was a Bengali actor from Calcutta” (117); “1/1 Bishop Lefroy Road in South Kolkata. This is the address of the renowned film director [...] Satyajit Ray” (122); “so inextricably entangled are the twin premises of 38/2 Elgin Road and 1, Woodburn Park” (129), connected with the history of Bose family that gave Subhas Chandra Bose to India and to the world.

Places, people, stories of Bhawanipur – they complete each other and offer a wonderful portrait of one of present-day Kolkata most formidable area. The work of the editors is remarkable: Debika Banerji and Debjani Ganguly managed to recreate the glory of the Bhawanipur while offering a few examples of brilliant cultural and human interdependences. There are many more stories of Bhawanipur, but these selected here offer a wonderful portrait of the neighborhood and carry on the importance of dialogue between the people, as only together they can create history.

Mosaics of a Locale is an amazing collection of real stories and a source of inspiration for students and for all those who love the city of joy, as Kolkata is called.

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Anti-Plagiarism Policy

The *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies*'s anti-plagiarism policy and procedure on preventing plagiarism in the studies published by the Journal:

The current document, in accordance with the Decision No. 82/4.01.2022 of the Administrative Council, the Decision No. 119/23.09.2021 of Babeş-Bolyai University's Senate and the Decision No. 15823/14.11.2022 of the Administration Council, describes the procedure of the anti-plagiarism analysis of manuscripts received for publication and the use of plagiarism detection software within the editorial office of *the Romanian Journal of Indian Studies*.

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(https://indian.centre.ubbcluj.ro/?page_id=217)

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The editorial office of *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* will enter the text of the manuscript proposed for publication into the plagiarism detection software made available by BBU, within 30 days of receiving the manuscript. The report generated by the plagiarism detection software will then be analyzed by the editor-in-chief, and the invited editors of the issue. Based on these evaluations, an anti-plagiarism report will be created that will contain a list of documents identified as possible sources for certain fragments of the text and one or more similarity coefficient(s). Regardless of the alert threshold signaled by the plagiarism detection software, a qualitative analysis of the results of the automatic plagiarism detection will be performed, in accordance with the standards and specificities of the field. The manuscript will not be accepted for publication if the anti-plagiarism report shows that: (a) the unauthorised fragment(s) that were found in the manuscript are not justified and bear signs of plagiarism; or (b) the work contains

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Each contributor to *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* will complete and sign a *Declaration of originality*, stating that "The article has not been published and is not being submitted or considered for publication elsewhere. The text, illustrations, or any other materials included in the article contain no violation of any existing copyright and does not infringe any rights of third parties."

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- Law no. 206 of May 27, 2004, updated version (<http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/52457>).
- *Avoiding Plagiarism*, published by Harvard University (<https://usingources.fas.harvard.edu/what-constitutes-plagiarism>).
- *Plagiarism: Decision making & dealing with grey zones across academic fields* (<https://researcheracademy.elsevier.com/publication-process/ethics/plagiarism-decision-making-dealing-grey-zones-across-academic-fields>) and *Plagiarism* (<https://researcheracademy.elsevier.com/publication-process/ethics/plagiarism>) published by Elsevier.
- *The Strategy for Preventing and Combating the Phenomenon of Plagiarism at Babeş-Bolyai University* (<https://doctorat.ubbcluj.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Strategie-Anti-plagiat-UBB-3.pdf>) and the *Ethical Committee's Guide for Students on Academic Honesty and Ethics* (<https://www.ubbcluj.ro/ro/despre/organizare/files/Comisia-de-etica-Etica-si-onestitate-academica-ghid-pentru-studenti.pdf>).
- *COPE Recommendations on Publication Ethics* (<https://publicationethics.org/>).
- *Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing* (<https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines/principles-transparency-and-best-practice-scholarly-publishing>).

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Call for papers

The *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* invites researchers and academics to contribute to the eleventh issue (2027).

Contributions are welcomed in the form of studies (up to 15 pages, A4, Times New Roman, 12, 1.5, including footnotes and references) or book reviews (up to 5 pages, A4). The materials will be accompanied by an *Abstract* (10 lines) – except for the book reviews – a list of up to ten *Keywords*, and by the author's bio-note. The language in which materials will be published is English. The deadline for the submission of the papers is 1 September 2027.

Materials, as well as general inquiries, can be sent via e-mail at mihaela.gligor@ubbcluj.ro.

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