Book Review I

Giovanni Verardi, *Hardships & Downfall of Buddhism in India*. Manohar publication New Delhi, 2011.

Reviewed by Geoffrey Bamford

Introduction

The enigma of Buddhism in India

What passes for general knowledge in India is not always what historians of India agree upon in international conferences. But public and academics alike suppose that Indian Buddhism simply failed. It lost its market.

A whole, rich Buddhist society had long exhibited immense vitality — and then, at a certain point, it just disappeared. A great indigenous tradition was lost, and India cut itself off from the rest of Asia, where Buddhism remained.

The Muslim influx is often mentioned in this connection, and it clearly played a role. But, while Buddhist India was utterly destroyed, Brahmanical India was relatively unscathed. The Jains came through, but not the Buddhists.

There are more such puzzles. Aśoka's philosophy and programme of government retained a certain influence across Asia, but there is little sign of this in India. The same applies to Buddhist social thinking. Buddhists suggest that it is unwise to project expectations onto people according to how they are labelled; but that we often do so, and it messes us up; and hence that caste ideology damages everyone. From two-and-a-half millennia back, that view was widely and strongly held in India. The great Indian public, always interested in caste, might be expected to know and appreciate that fact. Only, what if one enquires of the great Indian public? Buddhist social thinking seems to have sunk almost without trace.

So the story of Indian Buddhism is perplexing. That goes for Indian history as a whole.

Brahmanic literature, which encourages sophisticated thought and inculcates peacefulness, also stresses the need to use physical violence against untouchable *cāṇḍālas* and the like, (up to and including the mass of the population, the *śūdras*). This material, motivated by a certain animus, evidently reflects an important tension in society — and, since Indian media still report assaults on Dalits, that history would seem of interest. Social scientists of all sorts would surely be happy to learn of the factors that have historically been associated with such tensions, and of how they emerged at the political level. But there is not much to go on.

Then, at the time when that social-control literature started to be composed, just as Buddhism was coming to prominence, theistic cults emerged, laying claim to Brahmanical orthodoxy. Across India, there arose Vaiṣṇava groups (Bhāgavatas) and Śaiva groups (Pāśupatas). This phenomenon, 'neo-Brahmanism', is commonly explained in theological or spiritual terms. But consider the size of the temples that the theists went on to build. These were clearly major social movements, which affected whole population-groups and their livelihoods. So one looks for socio-economic descriptions of neo-Brahmanism. In what political contexts did it develop — and how did it relate to Buddhism? Yes, the theistic cults offered bhakti-appeal to compete with the Buddhists, but which social groups identified with which ideologies? Alas, there is little on this.

Again, the iconography of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sites is sometimes gory, and bloody conflict is an insistent theme in their Purāṇa texts. Likewise, their literature is often hysterical about how society has degenerated in the current era, the Kaliyuga ; and at times during the first millennium CE grisly myths and rituals seem to have preoccupied many Indians. These features of pre-Muslim India are striking, but one searches in vain for plausible social explanations.

The advent of the Muslims is also perplexing. To say that converts were coerced, or sought material advantage, does not explain everything. When a whole population group changes religious affiliation, that is a strategic decision, calculated in terms of the group's position relative to others. What, one wonders, was that calculation like — and how is it that many Indian Muslim groups have long been disadvantaged?

Thus, Indian history is perplexing, and much of the perplexity has to do with Buddhism. Moreover, Indian thinking about Buddhism remains hard to fathom.

'Liberals' may express approval with little sense of what they are talking about. 'Conservatives' may have read extracts of Buddhist texts and yet assume it to be a (rather odd) variant of Hinduism.

Buddhists are classed as *nāstikas*. That meant that they denied the authority of the Veda, and then, later, that they saw no place for a creator god. But others in the same class include, prominently, the materialists (Lokāyatas or Cārvākas), who feature in Buddhist texts from the beginning. They said that one disappears forever on death, so the Buddhists called them *ucchedavādin* — 'annihilationists' (ontologically) and 'nihilists' (morally). The Buddhists sought to steer a path between such views and those of the 'eternalists' (*sassatavādin*), who held the *ātman* to be eternal, i.e. they claimed a half-way position between Brahmanical orthodoxy and nihilism. That is doubtless why neo-Brahmanical controversialists hastened to exclude any such possibility — those who did not recognise orthodox authority, they suggested, must be moral nihilists. Among the orthodox, opprobrium still attaches to *nāstika* status.

Yet at the same time the Buddha is supposed to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu. This tale was a late confection. As Verardi points out, it never caught on at the time. But good Hindus still mention it. It is supposed to strengthen the case that Buddhism is a form of Hinduism. So the godhead is manifested as a *nāstika*! At one moment, the Buddhists are beyond the pale, at the next they are included in the fold. Either way, they are not what they think they are:

- they think they can be moral without accepting caste, but they cannot — since they reject caste, they are immoral; and/or,

- they think they can be moral while holding themselves apart from the consensus, but they cannot — since they are moral, they accept the consensus.

The two characterisations are incompatible, but the conclusion is the same in both cases. Buddhists, traduced, are excluded from the universe of valid interlocutors.

Exploring the contradictions

In sum, there seem to be grey areas in Indian history, particularly around Indian Buddhism — and somehow this seems connected with a difficulty that non-Buddhist Indians have had in coming to terms with Buddhism. It is hard to disregard all this. Equally, it is hard to know what to do with it.

Giovanni Verardi sympathises. He was stuck there, too — but he managed to break out, and wishes to report progress. To that end, he wrote "Hardships & Downfall of Buddhism in India", published in India in 2011.

It has not taken the world by storm. But it would be good if the message got across. Hence this review.

Section 1 tells of how Verardi approaches his topic. It starts with his archaeological angle and explains how he broadened out from there. Then it looks at his sources, particularly those which may be unfamiliar. Finally it reviews some methodological stances that he adopts.

Section 2 gives a flavour of his work. It focuses on sites he discusses — in Gayā, Kāñcī and Bhubaneswar — and shows how his arguments weave back and forth between archaeology and literature, art and epigraphy.

Section 3 summarises his revisionist history of Indian Buddhism. What tensions drive the story forward? How did this great social movement struggle to survive and progress? How did the struggle develop, and how did it turn out?

Section 4 looks at some implications of this vision. What do we want to be thinking about, now?

This is a difficult book. Intensely individualistic, it does not ease its readers' way. Nor does it seem to have had an editor. But it has something important to say.

So this review focuses on what seems of value in the work. It deserves to be taken seriously, for it addresses questions too long skated over, and answers them in ways that are plausible, well evidenced and well argued.

I. Digging Around

Harigaon

In 1992 the archaeologist Giovanni Verardi investigated a site at Harigaon in the Kathmandu valley. He found that a big *stūpa* had been dismantled some time after AD 749, and a Vaiṣṇava temple had then been erected in its place.

In front the Vaiṣṇavas had put up a pillar with an inscription praising Dvaipāyana (Kṛṣṇa). It says he cures the evils of the Kali era, and tells us what they are.

Men take to atheism, opposing the Veda. 'Leaning only upon their foolishness constantly, the false logicians [suppress] the truth.' Then, for the avoidance of

doubt, the inscription adds that 'these disciples of the Sugata[1] [were] crooked distorters of this world'. Dvaipāyana, it says, will destroy 'all this network of illusion as the Sun destroys darkness'.

Sites of like antiquity across India speak similarly of neo-Brahmanical heroes dispelling darkness. Sometimes, as in the Vaikuṇṭha Perumāḷ in Kāñcī (see on), this trope is again explicitly associated with anti-Buddhist activism. Verardi was intrigued.

He first investigated what had happened in the Kathmandu valley. He found that Vaiṣṇavas had worked with Śaivas to suppress Buddhism. Wiesner showed how votive *stūpas* had been turned into *liṅgas*.

Wiesner also pointed to Buddhist lineage (*vaṃśāvalī*) texts, which said that many Buddhists had fled or been put to death. Their books had been searched out and destroyed. They had been forcibly converted, converts being immediately required to pay for an animal sacrifice. Celibate monks had had to disrobe, and practitioners who lived as householders had been subjected to severe controls.

These Buddhist chronicles claimed that Śaṅkarācārya had come to Nepal to organise the temple of Paśupatinātha and had directed the pogrom. As with similar tales of his visitations elsewhere, there was no obvious way to verify the story, even though Nampūtiri brāhmaṇas have long controlled the cult of Paśupatinātha. Still, it pointed to a pan-Indian wave of religious conflict.

By itself this *vaṃśāvalī* material evoked some scepticism. But Verardi started to look at it in the light of epigraphic and archaeological data, and to compare it with temple art and with coeval Hindu texts. The more he did so the more plausible it appeared. What, then, if this were to constitute a valid historical record?

A field of research

He began to investigate further. This may not have been a formal Research Project in terms of Grant Applications, but, gradually and assiduously, he amassed material and developed analyses. Then he got a Japanese grant to write it up, and found an Indian publisher.

He cuts a refreshingly old-fashioned, European figure. Not for him the specialisation enforced upon those who wish to make a career in the Anglosphere.

He evidently started with a classical education before moving into art and archaeology. This latter discipline he then pursued across a wide range of

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[1] Sugata is the Buddha

Buddhist sites in India and also China. Some he examined; in some he undertook well-regarded excavations.

He found quite a few sites like Harigaon, and worked hard to clarify the historical context. He read all the secondary sources that bore upon his concerns, understanding this category in an unusually broad way.

Most academics focus on recent scholarly work: predecessors from decades or even centuries past are of interest mainly in terms of their cultural prejudices. Verardi takes a more practical view. To make sense of a site, you have to look at the testimony of those who originally excavated it and of all who have since dug further or looked again — physical reports and analyses.

So he takes seriously the work of the nineteenth-century British. Initially, at least, they had little reason to favour one interpretation of the distant past over another — indeed, they mainly confined themselves to reporting what they saw and were told. Moreover, the sites were then pristine, and these early Western scholars normally kept reasonable records. Finally, crucially, they were able to collect orally transmitted learning from before mass media and the consequent emergence of a normative Indian discourse.

Above all, Verardi refers to modern Indian scholarship in a way that similarly throws light upon its virtues. From Rajendralal Mitra to Krishna Chandra Panigrahi, these scholars have often been clear-sighted and deeply immersed in their material. Their interpretative frameworks may not be those of a contemporary Western reader, but if you want to understand what happened in history to leave us with these challenging sites, then they can be a good guide.

Scholars like RC Hazra, KC Panigrahi and C Minaksi, who have carefully read many abstruse *purāṇas*, may in small-circulation publications be unguarded. Or again, Brahmanical loyalists like Jayaswal may be revealing in their eagerness to highlight their side's victories (as reported e.g. in the last chapter of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*), or to denounce the sins of Buddhists like the Kuṣāṇas, who

> … made the population practically Brahmin-less *(prajāś ch-ā-brahma-bhūyishṭhāḥ)* … depressed the high-class Hindus and raised low-caste men and foreigners to high positions. …abolished the Kshatriyas and created a new ruling caste

> [...]

> [In] a policy of social tyranny, and religious fanaticism — both actuated by political motives … [they] created a new ruling or official class out of the *Kaivartas* (a low caste of aboriginal agriculturists, now called *Kewaṭ*) and out of the *Pañchakas*, i.e. castes lower than the *Sūdras* — the untouchables.

Thus, irrespective of explicit intentions, interesting implications may emerge.

On this basis, Verardi has written a revisionist history. His story is ostensibly about the end of Buddhism, but in running that fox to ground he retells also the history of India as a whole.

He suggests that he is writing for an Indian audience. He has certainly read many Indian scholars, drawn out their implications and synthesised them. Then he has tried to spell out directly the story they tell (in a way they are too 'reticent' to do).

These secondary sources have taken him to an immense body of primary material — *Purāṇas* and Tamil Hymns, temple inscriptions and images, and Buddhist texts from the Pali Canon to the *Divyāvadāna*, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Guhyasamājatantra*. All this is combined with knowledge of: the classical world (and its trade with India); methods of iconography originally developed in relation to the Italian renaissance; and all sorts of contemporary Euro-American and Japanese scholarship in potentially relevant areas.

Making up the Information Deficit

Verardi also offers methodological innovation. Old school, he does not lay it out too explicitly. Instead, he illustrates his method and explains it as he goes along.

Yes, he agrees, there are gaps in the Indian historical record; even the archaeological data are sometimes limited or confused. Still, on reflection there are data aplenty — texts, epigraphy, archaeology and art. The point is to make use of them. Scholars working on India have, for instance, put philology to good use in the service of history. We need more such interdisciplinary thinking.

Yes, the pre-Muslim history of India remains puzzling. Of course, we must look for new data which have not been available or have not been properly taken into consideration. But first we can make better use of what we do know — can combine and connect information of different types, and can look for constructs to bring the data into sharper focus.

That is his project. He assembles a diverse body of information and argues for culturally appropriate ways of interpreting it. With care, he suggests, we can

derive a much clearer and fuller picture than is often supposed. We can uncover the socio-political history of first-millennium India.

He seems to have two starting points:

1. ***The Warburg Method***

   Warburg and Panofsky aimed to set art in context. In a long-term perspective, the history of art is an element in the wider history of ideas.

   Everything we know about a society must help to explain everything else, so it is helpful to consider artistic production in relation to e.g. political and economic data. It all feeds in to the collective thought process.

   Verardi suggests that the Warburg method has as yet hardly been applied in the study of Indian art. Also, just as we can understand art in terms of its social context, so, equally, can we understand the social context in terms of the art.

2. ***Sandhābhāṣā***[2]

   There are masses of textual material for historians of pre-modern India to refer to. Dating it may be tricky, but philology and a generally interdisciplinary approach can help. Then comes the problem that the authors tended to write in a polyvalent, allusive language (sometimes called *sandhābhāṣā*), freighted with layers of symbolism and designed to be understood only by applying certain interpretative keys. So though this literature is full of stories, there is little that purports to be an unambiguous recital of facts, and less that seems immediately credible.

   Still, there are ways to penetrate the sandhābhāṣā. The scholars who have developed these techniques have normally been interested in symbolic and metaphysical aspects of the texts — but once we have a convention for how to read messages

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[2] Verardi actually uses the form *sandhyābhāṣā*, but this form, while well-established, represents in truth a misreading of Old Newar script. It ought to be *sandhābhāṣā*, which is a Prakritism in Sanskrit — *sandhā* is the truncated form for the absolutive *sandhāya* "collocating". Thus the term actually means "allusive language" — it is not a metaphor ('twilight'). I am indebted to Richard Gombrich for clarifying this.

about metaphysics and symbolism, then we can apply it to other messages too, about history for instance.

Accordingly, Verardi proceeds as follows:

- He starts with the archaeological data. On sites where a theistic-Brahmanic temple rose upon the ruins of a Buddhist structure that had been destroyed, he examines the art commissioned for those temple walls and reads the *purāṇas* composed for the temple schools.

- Cross-referring in this way, he shows that the diverse body of information available to the historian is richer than is often recognised.

    - The *purāṇa* authors expressed themselves obliquely. If, as is quite likely, they reflected or reported social and political circumstances, then, we must assume them to have done that obliquely, as well.
    We can look for such reflections and reports. This is quite different from mere euhemerism. When the archaeology reveals conflict on the ground and the texts expatiate on *asuras*, then it is hardly speculative to suppose that those *asuras* may represent the people whose buildings got burned down (and then to seek further indications that might support or invalidate that supposition).
    If we find much that is consistent with the hypothesis, and little or nothing that is clearly inconsistent, we can justifiably attribute that level of meaning to the text. It may not be the only applicable meaning, but it must surely be one.
    The same goes for the art. When violent images are presented in a temple built on the ruins of an earlier *stūpa* complex destroyed for the purpose, those images may well relate to that physical violence.
    - Conversely, the artistic and textual corpus can help in deciphering the archaeology:
        - In various places the same circumstances recur: a Buddhist site has been burnt and/or dismantled and

a neo-Brahmanical temple complex erected; the local purāṇa dilates upon divine war; and there are violent images in the temple complex. So it seems likely that one party was ejected with extreme prejudice and the other built a monument to mark the spot.

• In other places, where the archaeology is more confused but the textual and iconographic data conform to the same pattern, we may therefore hypothesise that we are dealing here with further instances of this established pattern — and then look for evidence that weakens or strengthens that hypothesis.

II. Sites cited

To a significant extent, archaeology, text, art and epigraphy coincide. They indicate that, whatever else it may also signify, the immense literature on *deva*/*asura* warfare is certainly about the neo-Brahmanists' conflicts with heretical *pāṣaṇḍas* (the derogatory term for *śramaṇas* and particularly Buddhists). This conflict seems to have been central to the social reality manifest in the relevant Brahmanical sites. Thus the history of Buddhism is written in Brahmanical texts and monuments (as is the history of Brahmanism in Buddhist texts).

Verardi enters this challenging territory by way of the monuments. The insights he wishes to impart came to him site by site as he explored what was left of Buddhist India.

Gayā

Gayā was always important for Buddhists. They built a *bodhighara* there, a shrine for the Bodhi tree. Into it they put a *vajrāsana*, a diamond throne. For about four centuries, from the third century BCE, this arrangement remained — they just enlarged the *bodhighara*. Aśoka came and put up a pillar.

Then neo-Brahmanism arrived. After that Gayā was fought over.

Since it was so special for Buddhists, their opponents were keen to appropriate the site. So they declared Gayā a centre for *srāddha* rituals (for the dead).

When neo-Brahmanists achieved political control in the locality, they tried to expand this *śrāddha* activity. But the enduring Buddhist heartland was not far off, a little to the East, so they were evidently inhibited — for a while at least.

Then, at some time after Faxian's visit in 404CE, we see a dramatic change. The Bodhi tree was removed, the *vajrāsana* was shifted and a brick structure was erected, the first on the site.

An Appendix to Verardi's book analyses the relevant material. The conclusion is that, during the period of Gupta hegemony, this site, perhaps the most sacred of all Buddhist places, was trashed.

The tree must have been huge by that time but they uprooted it. Bits of the *bodhighara* were scattered far and wide — some were found in the nineteenth century in the residence of the Mahant, the incumbent of the local Śaiva Maṭh ('monastery').

Later, at some time after the brick temple was built, Buddhists regained Gayā. They planted another Bodhi tree and set the *vajrāsaṇa* up next to the new brick structure. But they did not take that structure down. It seems to have provided the basis for what now stands on the site.

That is the story of the Bodh-Gayā temple. It commemorates an ancient act of cultural vandalism.

The *Gayā Māhātmya* (a text attached to the *Vāyu Purāṇa*) records the struggle for the territory of Gayā in the form of a story about an *asura* named Gayā. Rajendralal Mitra observed in the nineteenth century that Gayāsura, though evidently the villain of the piece, seems inoffensive. He

> revels not in crime, he injures none, and offends neither the gods nor religion by words or deed. [... But,] he was a heretic. This character has always been assigned to the chief among the Buddhists. They were pious, they were self-mortifying, they devoted themselves greatly to penance and meditation; but they did away with the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Brahmans … Gayá therefore may safely be taken to be a personification of Buddhism.

It appears that demons do not have to be bad. They just have to be Buddhist.

The (late) *Kalki Purāṇa*, tells the story of Viṣṇu's last avatar, who 'makes the filth disappear from the world'. He marches on Gayā, the Buddhists give battle, and fighting rages. When the Buddhists are having a hard time, their leader invokes the goddess Māyā. They draw up again in battle order behind the goddess, accompanied by 'millions of outcastes'. But it is to no avail. The Buddhists get massacred. Their wives try to fight on.

When, around the 1970s, it came to wider attention that Bihar had fallen into a state of low-level civil war, this prompted hand-wringing. But perhaps no one should have been surprised. The war seems to have been going on for some time.

Kāñcī

The Kailāśanātha complex in Kāncīpuram celebrates a great victory. The key to the iconography is that elephants stand for Buddhists, lions for neo-Brahmanist monarchs. The *Śaṅkara Digvijaya* makes this explicit, as do Campantar's hymns and a whole series of inscriptions. Hence Śiva's *Gajāsurasaṃhāramūrti* form/ legend, in which the god kills the elephant-demon.

The Pallava emperor Rājasiṃha erected a temple in the complex. In it he left an inscription which calls him 'that pious king of kings, … who proved a royal lion [Rājasiṃha] to the dense troops of the elephants of his daring foes!' He reminds readers that Puruṣottama (Viṣṇu) 'was born to rescue from the ocean of sin the sinking people, who were swallowed by the horrid monster, (called) the Kali age!.'

Then comes a panel showing Śiva triumphing over defeated *asuras*. At his feet, parodying the Buddhist iconography of the Deer Park, are two fawns. The scene is tastefully framed upon elephant heads.

Similarly, consider the Kāmākṣī Temple in Kāñcī. TA Gopinatha Rao, a formidable scholar of Indian iconography, staunchly orthodox, took it for granted that this temple too was built on the site of a former Buddhist building, for numerous Buddhist images had been found scattered exactly in that area.

Then we come to the Vaikuṇṭha Perumāḷ Temple. Here, where, as Verardi says, 'the visitor is snarled at from both sides', the Āḷvārs are celebrated, poets who were particularly keen to get rid of śramaṇas. In one of his Tirumālai hymns, the Āḷvār Toṇṭaraṭipotti says

> Oh Lord of Śrīraṅga, our ears have become diseased by listening
> to the series of unceasing and unbearable slanders of the so-called
> preachings of the Samaṇa ignoramuses and the unprincipled Śākyas.
> If you would only endow me with sufficient strength I shall deem it
> my duty to do nothing short of chopping off their heads

A series of panels in the cloister bear upon the religious policy of the sponsoring king Pallavamalla. He is clearly with Toṇṭaraṭipotti on this.

One panel shows two men being impaled while the king sits in judgement.

The next panel to the right shows, in bas-relief: an Āḻvār; a representation of the temple itself; and a relief of the Viṣṇu image held in the temple. C Minakshi observes that 'this row of panels represents nothing less than the establishment of Vaiṣṇavism on the destruction of the heretics.'

In the South, the veiled language of the Sanskrit *Purāṇas* is less in evidence. Following McGlashan, Verardi tells us how the hymns of the first three Nāyaṉmār boast of their role in suppressing the *śramaṇas*. The *Tēvāram* hymns offer an inventory of the *sthalas* (i.e. *tīrtha sthalas* or sacred sites), conveying '[t]he sense of the earth appropriated in the service of Śiva'. Incidentally, Campantar's triumph in having the Jains impaled is still re-enacted annually in Tinnevelly, Tiruchendur, Kalugumalai and Vilattikulam.

The Buddhists were similarly despatched. Their story is enlivened by the episode when, before a scheduled debate can get under way, their champion's head is severed from his trunk 'by a mantric weapon'. The Buddhists react with disbelief, insisting that a proper debate be held — not '[...] by mantric disputation, / but by disputation through words'. Alas, the goal-posts had been moved: the 'mantric' dimension, i.e. forceful expressions of willpower, was now to the fore.

An index of this radical shift was the emergence of the Kāpālika sect. Their story echoes the way Śiva appears in the hymns of the Śaiva poet-saint Appar. The god is in his *vāma* (i.e. 'left-hand' or, we might say, 'flip-side') aspect as the fearsome Bhairava — with a garland of skulls and a skull bow, and '[h]olding a garland of dead men's skulls in His hands'.

Bhubaneswar

Cāmuṇḍā is a terrifying aspect of the great Goddess, Devī. One of the seven *Mātṛkās* or 'mothers', she leads the *Yoginīs* (some lesser Tantric goddesses). Her cult involves alcohol use and animal sacrifice, and she is said to demand human sacrifice. Her image is found on sites and in artworks associated with suppression of Buddhists, for instance in Orissa.

A Cāmuṇḍā temple in Bhubaneswar, called the Vaital Deuḷ, has a story to tell. KC Panigrahi has shown it to have been a shrine of the Kāpālikas, whom indeed we see in a recess on the superstructure, naked and holding fearsome clubs (*khaṭvāṅgas*). Verardi reviews the temple art in the light of Lorenzen's study of the sect.

In the fourth and fifth centuries CE, land grants to Brāhmaṇas start to be recorded in Orissa's coastal plains. But this is frontier country, bordering the

Buddhist heartland in Bengal, so the neo-Brahmanical campaign seems to have made slow progress, triggering much conflict. Enter the Kāpālikas.

They are uniformly reviled across the ancient literature, yet in the eighth century high-level patronage was available to build this temple for them. It appears they had a role to play.

Outside the temple a worn, reworked Buddhist sculpture serves as the base of a *yūpa*, a sacrificial post. This was where the Kāpālikas offered sacrifice to the goddess. What manner of sacrifice might that have been?

The Kāpālika brotherhood was united in a great vow. In it they undertook to do penance together. It was a very specific penance, taken from the *śāstras* — the penance to remove the sin of killing a brāhmaṇa.

They swore to carry the skull of the dead person on a stick, like a flag, and to take a human skull as their drinking vessel. Referring back to the *śāstras*, we find that the drinking-vessel observance was specified only if the person killed had been not an ordinary but a learned brāhmaṇa. Somehow, then, the Kāpālikās were associated with the murder of learned brāhmaṇas.

The construct of the murderous ascetic is shocking. How to make sense of it? Śiva's story seems relevant. He does not start as an ascetic. First he indulges his *saṃhāra* (destructive) aspect, exterminating *asuras*. Only when able to lay that burden aside does he take up ascetic practices. In one story, Śiva cuts off Brahmā's fifth head. To expiate this sin he must live by a penitential vow. So he makes a great vow (*mahāvrata*) — the very vow that the Kāpālikās have made their own.

The Vaital Deuḷ temple conveys the flavour. It features ithyphallic deities — a Lakulīśa, a Śiva and another in the Bhairava form. This latter, a skeletal figure, wears a garland of skulls and 'sits in a fighting posture', resting his weight on the left knee, with a *kartrī* or sacrificial knife in his right hand. A severed head, unmistakably a Buddha, lies in front of him. On a tripod on the pedestal, more chopped heads are depicted. The implication is that these Buddhists had been brāhmaṇas.

In the *Śiva Purāṇa*, Śiva (as Kālabhairava), having decapitated Brahmā, is then condemned to wander from *tīrtha* to *tīrtha* until delivered from his sin[3]. The Kāpālikās, who re-enact Śiva's deed, also kept moving. What took their

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[3] A *tīrtha* is literally a passage, channel or ford and comes to mean an object of veneration. In the neo-Brahmanical context, a *tīrtha* is a place of pilgrimage instituted around a temple.

travelling bands from place to place? What services were they offering? We may infer that their task was generally the same — to kill again, (and once again be pardoned).

Cāmuṇḍā herself bears the *khaṭvāṅga* and the skull, as well as a garland of enemy skulls. She wraps herself in an elephant skin and tramples on human bodies. There are many images of this trampling. Two patterns emerge. Sometimes she stands on a nude man, his nakedness emphasised by bringing the genitals into focus. There is a striking example in the Bhīmeśvarī Temple at Peragari, where the victim is to all appearances a *śramaṇa*. At other times, the body which the goddess tramples is that of a tribal warrior. These,, according to their foes, were the *śramaṇas'* allies — what modern India would call 'Scheduled Tribes'.

Bhubaneswar was a tough town, clearly, and Orissa a tough country. The *Ekāmra Purāṇa*, a work of the Āgamic Pāśupatas, tells us it was often fought over. A long passage speaks of Śiva's war on the *asura* Hiraṇyākṣa, who wanted to stop a *yajña* (sacrifice) and at first succeeded. KP Panigrahi observed that this story mirrored the 'conflict between the Śaivas and the Buddhists', presumably initiated by groups of Pāśupata Brahmanical settlers.

III. The story

Thus more evidence is available to historians of first-millennium India than has been recognised. Verardi pieces together a relatively full picture of the forces at play, and of how they interacted. A striking history emerges. Ideologically driven, internecine strife continued sporadically over an immense period: a millennium or so. This must tell us something important about India as a culture and a civilisation. Verardi has a suggestion here too.

The two models

Civilisation has evolved in separable blocs: in China, Europe and India, say, population density and economic output developed in different ways — something similar happened in each case, but the detailed processes differed. So we may say that civilisations have had different 'development models'. Generally, we expect one model per civilisation-area. But there is an exception. India has had two alternate, contending models. That, Verardi suggests, is the only way to understand the long, difficult struggle between opposed religious/ideological camps.

If two groups fight for territory and resources which both aim to exploit in similar ways, they will in time come to an accommodation — but a protracted series of wars suggests a dispute that goes beyond mere division of spoils. In India the wars went on so long that both sides were fatally weakened: Buddhism died and neo-Brahmanism ceded control to Islam. So the parties in this struggle were not merely contending for control of a society and an economy that both saw in the same way, but instead subscribed to two radically different socio-economic models.

Yet India has been understood using an inclusive paradigm. Indians are reputed to be tolerant and non-confrontational, a community of broadly like-minded people, who are not just culturally compatible but share essential attitudes and values. Hence the proclivity for syncretism — rather than condemning others' belief systems, Indians seem to prefer absorbing them. That is received wisdom, and there is clearly something to it. So what if historically India has in truth been unusually conflictual? There is some explaining to do. (This, however, Verardi rather omits. He is covering a lot of ground already and cannot deal with everything.)

The contrast
When it comes to the detail of the two contending models, he is similarly restrained, offering only broad-brush characterisations. Piecing the picture together, we can see that he suggests:

- The Buddhist model is cosmopolitan, open to non-Indian influences and apt to acquire influence among non-Indians. It also has a multi-cultural aspect at home — it attracts Indians of diverse caste backgrounds. This is an equal-opportunity India, of great antiquity.
  It is associated with certain types of state structures. If Aśoka's successors had continued to rule an empire like his, in his way, then the Indian idea of a state would surely have been different, giving less weight to purity rituals and more to the economy.
  In Buddhist polities, urban, trading interests dominated. Professional networks and guilds (*śreṇī*) became more important and caste bodies less so. Where possible, the policy priority was to generate big surpluses from long-distance trade, e.g. with Rome, China and/or Southeast Asia. To that end, government had to be at the same time activist and responsive to its constituency.

- The neo-Brahmanist model posits a diffuse state structure. Functions that officials performed in China or under Aśoka might, in a neo-Brahmanist India, devolve instead upon caste groupings. Caste bodies would exercise internal control over their members, and in so doing would transmit impulses arising from interactions with other, equivalent groupings — including ideological impulses transmitted via castes of nominally higher status. This distinctive model Verardi labels a '*varṇa* state society.'

  It understands itself to have developed organically (i.e. to represent a law of nature, and so to be entirely beyond question). At many places and times, alas, the evidence tells a different story. The model sometimes had to be imposed. Where Buddhists were entrenched and resisted, there was war, and then death squads. Even in peaceful areas, dynasties that claimed to be orthodox instituted coercive state policies to reassert caste discipline. This approach might be attractive to those setting up a dynasty — if you kept conservative opinion sweet, you could be as tough as you liked.

The conflict

There was from the first a potential for conflict. The ideological battle-lines were drawn as early as the period reflected in the Pali canon. We see them in the *Māgaṇḍīya Sutta*, the *Vasala Sutta* and the *Piṇḍolya Sutta* (Verardi has a useful summary).

It is understandable, therefore, that Aśoka's Buddhist success stimulated a backlash. Under the Śuṅgas, vigorously reactionary forces came to the fore. This reaction was also innovative — theistic neo-Brahmanism began to take shape.

A period of back-and-forth continued up to the time of the Guptas. Some dynasties fed Brahmins and conducted *aśvamedhas* ('horse sacrifices', asserting control over all the territory a horse might freely wander through in a year); others supported the Saṅgha and organised *pañcavārṣika* ceremonies (a quinquennial tax-rebate-cum-potlatch, distributing accumulated surplus to charitable causes).

When the Mediterranean basin trade collapsed, the Buddhists were weakened, but not fatally. By this time, however, neo-Brahmanism was on the march. It soon registered striking success. In the South, established Buddhist and Jain presences were after a while entirely eliminated.

The dynasties favouring one side or the other tended to be of different types. The orthodox produced quite a few Brāhmaṇa dynasties, and others that rose in alliance with Brāhmaṇa groups. Buddhist kings, by contrast, trumpeted their nominally modest origins and developed links with monasteries.

The Guptas, still themselves largely Vedic, worked with theistic cult groups on a programme of social change. A city hit by falling trade would be designated a *tīrtha*, and temples erected to reconfigure the urban space. Thereafter control could be exercised through cultic institutions. By way of land grants, cultic neo-Brahmanic allies were planted across the countryside. From there they supported the temples and kept order in their localities. 'Middle peasants' were enlisted by channelling ecstatic practices. Extreme measures reminded untouchables where they belonged. This policy produced a rural economy with some resemblance to serfdom.

Such Gupta and post-Gupta activism generated resistance and triggered adaptations among Buddhists. The two sides set off changes in each other, reciprocally, as the conflict progressed.

A race for the bottom?

Bhāgavata and Pāśupata groups eventually tipped the balance in favour of neo-Brahmanism. But such theists had initially been unacceptable to orthodox, Vedic opinion. They had been condemned along with the śramaṇas! Post-Aśoka, during the period of the Epics, this changed. Vedic conservatives took the theists on board. They went down-market. At the bottom of the slippery slope lay the Kāpālikas.

The Buddhists had to respond. From the pudgalavāda through to the late-Vajrayāna efflorescence of terrifying deities, Buddhist doctrines and practices developed under pressure — political pressure, often violent.

Doctrinal history must take account of this dimension — religious developments are not reducible to socio-political categories, but the social context cannot be disregarded. The same applies across the divide — Hinduism develops in a context of conflict and pressure. The foundational texts of South Indian Śaivism repeatedly celebrate 'debates' that end with Buddhists (or Jains) getting crushed in oil-mills.

Debates are critical to this story. It is clear that initially they had an intellectual content. Consider how the philosophers of the two parties gradually adjusted to one another's positions. In Gupta times, for instance, Vātsyāyana's Nyāyabhāṣya, in criticising Nāgārjuna, started to clarify the theistic doctrine of

the early Nyāya sūtras. But in different times and places this social form that had at first been quasi-academic was subverted.

Yijing on the Buddhist and Kumārila Bhaṭṭa on the Brahmanist side both suggest the Buddhists initially exploited the debate format to good effect. Teachers with a following used to visit kings to persuade them and their courts to discard the Veda and practise Buddhism. This, Scherrer-Schaub confirms, is how Nāgārjuṇa came to prominence[4].

Around Kumārila's time things seem to have got rougher. In the end discussion on doctrine became secondary. The debate format morphs into a competition between mobs, where the party that can muster more support wins and can then kill or exile its opponents.

Kumārila is reported to have studied first in a Buddhist school and eventually to have debated Buddhist opponents who were then murdered. His own former guru succumbed to this wave of kangaroo court debates. He is said to have committed suicide in remorse.

The story of the Jain controversialist Akalaṅka tells us firstly that the Jains, having suffered in earlier debates, sharpened up their act — and moreover took to speaking as advocates of theistic religion. They ganged up on the Buddhists.

Then, the Akalaṅka stories indicate something even more interesting. The contenders in these debates seem often all to have been brāhmaṇas, all educated according to much the same curriculum and all part of the same political milieu.

Yet after a while their debates began to have fatal results. As long as the discussion remained between the intellectuals, the Buddhists held their own — but then the neo-Brahmanists called in the goons.

> The history of debates reveals an incurable split in the brāhmaṇavarṇa: if a part of the brāhmaṇas could not be admitted to live in one and the same territory, it was because they represented the intellectual leadership of an incompatible social model.

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[4] Scherrer-Schaub, Cristina 'Immortality Extolled with Reason: Philosophy and Politics in Nāgārjuṇa', (in *Pramāṇakīrtiḥ: Papers dedicated to Ernst Steinkellner on the occasion of his 70th birthday* B Kellner et al, eds, Wien 2007 pp 757-93)

Endgame

Eventually, the Buddhists withdrew towards their Eastern heartlands under the Pāla aegis. Along the borders war was vicious but sporadic and relatively stable. The Buddhists were in trouble, as when the Senas overthrew the Pālas, but they were still a pan-Indian force.

The Muslim armies broke the deadlock. From their earliest incursions into Sind, they found themselves holding the ring in a fight that had been going on forever. The Buddhists hoped the Muslims would get the neo-Brahmanists off their backs, but lost out in the end — the neo-Brahmanists were willing to fulfil a subordinate role in a Muslim-dominated polity if the Muslims would let them suppress the Buddhists, and on that basis deals were done. Leading Buddhists were wiped out or fled. Those who remained and survived were degraded and/or converted to Islam.

Thus the Buddhists are expunged from history. It is as if they had never been.

The sense of beleaguered hostility that had developed among the neo-Brahmanists, however, has perhaps not entirely gone away. Only it now tends to be focused slightly differently.

That is roughly how we got to where we are today. That is the unknown history that has been hiding in plain sight.

A dominant narrative and a counter-narrative took shape as religious systems, and contended. The dominant narrative was in place when the alternative emerged — so the alternative, defined in opposition, was subaltern and, in Verardi's word, 'antinomial'. Between the two narratives' respective adherents the relationship was at first distant. There was room for both. Then hostility increased and the parties struggled. Neo-Brahmanist forces took the initiative, mobilising widely and motivating their people intensely. Over time they kept advancing, but it was hard. There was deadlock. Finally the Muslim third force intruded. The neo-Brahmanists could deal a knock-out blow to their old adversaries. They came out ahead, but at a cost. The prize of social control, almost within their grasp, was snatched away. Disappointed, they were hardly going to be generous in victory.

IV. Looking ahead

It is difficult for a society deliberately and completely to blank out a major, vibrant component of its own culture. So what we now understand to have happened to Indian Buddhism seems fairly unprecedented. As Verardi suggests, this is surely important for anyone interested in Buddhism and/or in India.

As to just how it happened, there is doubtless more to be said — yet this book cannot be dismissed. It may not be correct, let alone offer the last word, on all the many topics it covers; the truths it highlights may not be the only truths, and may need to be set in context; but it certainly opens new vistas. For instance:

- For some at least, at some periods, Buddhism was a daring, non-conformist, dangerous lifestyle-choice, attractive to intellectually-inclined members of the comfortable classes. For others, it was largely an ideological instrument in the struggle against oppression.

- It would seem inevitable that the development of Indian Buddhist traditions must have reflected a certain conflict fatigue.

- From the history of the 'debates' to the tales of Śaṅkarācārya's purges, a strange conjunction of high philosophy and mob violence seems to have played a key role in the development of Indian society.

It will be important to explore these avenues. That may not be easy. For how are we now to frame Indian Buddhist history?

The conflict around Buddhism got out of hand. Indian culture and society suffered, and Indian Buddhism, long a vital element in the mix, actually died. India was arguably diminished; at the very least, this was a difficult period. Something evidently went wrong. What do we suppose that to have been?

Aśoka clearly annoyed many people. Still, the Buddhists do not generally appear as aggressors. Their opponents, by contrast, sometimes come across as a little disturbed. But how helpful would it be if our reading of this history were, even implicitly, to allow a simplistic attribution of blame to 'the Brahmins'?

During the period of Indian Buddhism, many Buddhist champions were Brahmin, some self-consciously so. It follows that the Buddhists' opponents were not 'the Brahmins' as such, but rather some bodies of opinion that at times developed and/or were well represented within Brahmin groups.

So do we blame neo-Brahmanist thinking? Many proponents of neo-Brahmanical cults seem, after all, to have been determinedly anti-egalitarian, ideologically caste-ist. But to suppose that all neo-Brahmanists were (or are) the same would be to fall into the essentialist trap. In areas where Buddhists had never been strong, there can hardly have been violence, and even where the

conflict was vicious it is conceivable that many devout theists would have been happier to live and let live.

It seems that politically motivated people, keen to make a career out of the social changes associated with temple building, often fell into an extremist mentality and allied themselves with mafia-like organisations and networks. But, like critics of Zionism, revisionist historians of India risk falling back into a swamp of old ill-will. While recognising the brute reality of caste conflict, it will be important to guard against that view of Indian history which, at the extreme, comes down to the idea that the big, bad Brahmins have always messed things up, and that that is all we need to know. The behaviour of neo-Brahmanical forces did certainly get out of hand, particularly in disputed border territories like Orissa or Bihar; but no social order that manages to sustain itself can be uniformly terrible (or wonderful), and that must apply to neo-Brahmanism too.

Well, it is easy to say that; but it will be hard to adjust our understanding of Indian Buddhist history to take account of Verardi's findings without stirring up negative emotions, for instance in ourselves. We would do well to proceed carefully, exploring different ways to contextualise the facts and conceptualise the history. This is not just to do with presentation: we should guard against our own biases too.

For instance, we may start by recognising that this is not just a story of religious differences that got out of hand. No: groups with divergent interests came into conflict — and, as they struggled, accentuated their ideological and religious differences. Thus Indian Buddhist history is also about a social conflict. At this point, we are apt to fall into a liberal or a Marxian notion of progress, so that we stereotype the parties, seeing one as incarnating healthy impulses towards change and the other as projecting dark negativity — and then leaving it at that.

We cannot avoid the moral question. There was (and is) oppression, and the Buddhists were generally on the side of the oppressed. But we cannot stop there. It will be important to explore how, at a certain stage, Indian society found itself unable to reconcile different assumptions and priorities, different institutional patterns and interest groups.

To that end, it will be natural to fill out and/or adapt the picture that Verardi offers (correcting it where necessary). Those who have followed the story will doubtless have started to form their own research wish-list. Personally, I should like to know more about how non-Buddhists' understanding of Buddhism changed. Are there aspects of Buddhist thinking and practice, both religious and

social, which initially seemed unexceptionable but then, after a while, began to appear deeply disquieting to some non-Buddhists? If so, when and how did that happen — what were the settlement patterns like at the time, and how was business?

Verardi does not address such follow-on issues, though he touches on the systemic nature of the conflict when he suggests a practical rationale for the neo-Brahmanist model, namely more efficient exploitation of agricultural resources. The idea seems to be that a static society of a caste-based pseudo-serfdom could at a certain stage produce a relatively good cost/yield ratio.

He also suggests that the Buddhists were fundamentally transgressive, in that they were sceptical and individualist, impatient of naïveté and unwilling to enthuse about the social order, to sing the company song. Like the Gnostics, therefore, they tended to annoy plain, straightforward folk. Yet Buddhism was for a while widely acceptable (under Aśoka, fairly dominant) — so while Verardi is clearly right to suggest that this was a daring mind-set, far ahead of its time, nonetheless the population at large was able to work with it, at least for a while. There is something fundamentally subversive in Buddhism's blanket refusal of ontologies, but at first this did not matter. If then it did so, what changed?

In a sense, such issues may seem secondary: what matters is that the Buddhists of India were violently repressed and 'cleansed'. That truth demands recognition. But surely it is important to consider why it has for so long been so hard to look clearly at the death of Indian Buddhism.

Whenever it becomes necessary to review accepted, overarching notions about history, scholars are bound to think of public opinion. That is particularly true in this case, for difficulties with public opinion go a long way towards explaining how a flawed history came to gain currency. Accordingly we must expect that if and when the Indian public begins seriously to engage with this recasting of its history, there is likely to be soul-searching. At that point, a collapse of confidence would not be in anyone's interests. So how can it be avoided, while respecting the facts? How, without obfuscating bitter truths, is it possible to draw from this difficult story an India that people can, on balance, feel positive about?