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Geoffrey Samuel
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The 'Indic Religions' of my subtitle are early forms of what we now know as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Their development, even with an arbitrary end-date of 1200 CE,[1] is a large topic, and only some aspects are covered in this book. I am particularly concerned with the growth of one of their central and most characteristic features, the group of traditions of mental and physical cultivation that developed into what we now know as 'yoga', 'Tantra', and 'meditation'. The indigenous terms vary, and do not correspond neatly to modern Western uses of these terms, but practices involving mental and physical cultivation, mostly directed towards the achievement of some kind of liberating insight,[2] are found in all the major religions originating in the Indian sub-continent.

The main body of the book consists of five chapters (3 to 7) focusing on the early growth of Buddhism, Jainism and the renunciate traditions within Brahmanical religion, roughly from the fourth to second centuries BCE, and three chapters (10 to 12) discussing the period from the fifth to twelfth centuries. The first of these periods corresponds, as far as we can tell, to the initial development of yogic and meditational techniques; the second period covers the growth of Tantric practices and the relationship between yoga and Tantra. The remaining chapters provide introduction and commentary, and sketch developments before, between and after these two key periods.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, these practices were scarcely known outside of South Asia and the Buddhist societies of Southeast and East Asia, a few specialist scholars and esoteric practitioners aside. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, millions, if not tens of millions, of

[1] I use BCE (before the common or Christian era) and use CE (common or Christian era) in place of the specifically Christian terms BC and AD, as is the general convention in religious studies.
[2] 'Liberating insight' is a generic term that I use in this book, following Johannes Bronkhorst (1993), for the various goals of the renunciate traditions of India (*nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*, *bodhi*, *kevala/kaivalya*, etc.).

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people around the world were practising Hindu yoga, Buddhist meditation and related traditions, and ideas, concepts and practices deriving from yogic and Tantric contexts had become a familiar part of global society. Although this massive social development is not dealt with in detail in these pages, it helps to explain why it is worth understanding these practices and their origins. Like many other people, I have lived through aspects of these developments in my own life, as a scholar of Tibetan and Indian religions and of social and cultural anthropology, as a friend and acquaintance of numerous people involved with the global spread of yogic and Tantric practices, and as an intermittent practitioner myself of several varieties of these traditions.

The impetus behind this book is the desire to understand what these developments mean, and what yoga, meditation and Tantra have become and might still become within their new global context. Part of the answer to that question has to come from a study of contemporary developments in their own terms. There have been quite a few studies of Western adoptions of Asian spiritual techniques and approaches, including some of my own, and there is plenty more to be done along these lines. Another part of the answer, though, involves re-examining the history of these practices within the Indic religions from which they originated. That is the focus of the present work.

Yoga, meditation and Tantra are complex and problematic labels, and rather than attempting to define them in detail at this point, I shall leave the scope and meaning of our investigation to emerge in the course of the book. Perhaps it is enough at this point to say that we are concerned with disciplined and systematic techniques for the training and control of the human mind-body complex, which are also understood as techniques for the reshaping of human consciousness towards some kind of higher goal.[3] In an earlier work, I have made some suggestions about the anthropological analysis of mind-body processes in human life (Samuel 1990). This book only occasionally ventures into such areas; it is primarily an attempt at the historical understanding of the development of a particular set of techniques and practices within Indic religions.

The most usual starting point for a history of Indic religions is the religion of the Indus Valley cultural tradition in what is now Pakistan and

[3] For any readers who are familiar with yoga primarily as a physical exercise, as one often encounters it today, it is important to appreciate that the physical aspects of yoga were historically a secondary part of a set of techniques that was aimed at training mind and body as a whole, and that (given some quibbles about exactly what is meant by 'religion') had a specifically religious orientation. See e.g. Alter 2005; de Michelis 2004.

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North-West India, best known from the extensive remains of the early urban societies at Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and elsewhere. These cities correspond to what is now known as the 'Integration Era' of the Indus Valley cultural tradition, and dated to around 2600 to 1900 BCE. The large body of imagery found on the seals at these urban sites has been particularly significant for scholars seeking to understand the religious life of the Indus Valley peoples. In particular, ever since Sir John Marshall's suggestion in the 1930s that one of the Indus Valley seals represented an early version of the god Śiva in a specifically yogic posture, it has been common to trace the origins of yoga and of various other aspects of Indian religion back to the Indus Valley cultural tradition (Marshall 1931: vol. I, 7).

I begin my account of the history of Indic religions by discussing some of these interpretations, but I should make it clear from the start that I do not feel that we can learn very much from this early material. Given what we now know about cultural continuities in the archaeological record between the Indus Valley cultural tradition and succeeding populations in the region, it is certainly possible that there was some continuity in the area of religion. The difficulty is that the early evidence is far from unambiguous, and that it is almost always interpreted by reading later religious forms into it.

Consider the well-known image (Fig. 1.1) that Marshall regarded as depicting a three-headed god, seated in a yogic posture, and saw as a prototype of Rudra or Śiva as Lord of the Beasts (Paśupati). This story has been widely accepted and the presence of a 'proto-Śiva' figure in the Indus Valley is perhaps the most frequent assertion made about religion in that period. However, on closer examination, the case for a 'proto-Śiva' interpretation of this image is far from conclusive. To begin with, Śiva is not shown in this posture in later iconography.[4] Nor is he ever shown with a horned headdress in later times. Nor is it clear that the image has three heads. Nor is it self-evident that the animals are to be read in terms of the main figure being a 'Lord of the Beasts'.

In fact, this image has been read in a variety of other ways. Alf Hiltebeitel has suggested that the head represents a buffalo (others have preferred a bull), and that the four surrounding animals correspond to the Vedic gods of the four directions (Hiltebeitel 1978). For Bridget and Raymond Allchin the image is ithyphallic (1982: 214). Herbert Sullivan and Shubhangana Atre have both argued that it does not depict a god at all, but a female deity (Sullivan 1964; Atre 1998).[5] As for the posture of the figure on this and similar

[4] For early Śiva iconography, see N. Joshi 1984 and Srinivasan 1984.
[5] For further interpretations, see Dhyansky 1987: 90–1.

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Figure 1.1. 'Proto-Śiva' Seal (M-304)

seals, for Yan Dhyansky (1987: 94–9) and Thomas McEvilley (2002: 104), it is clearly the yogic posture *mūlābandhāsana*, and has to be understood in terms of proto-Tantric techniques aimed at driving 'the sperm-marrow-soul fluid up the spinal channel' (McEvilley 2002: 110; cf. Dhyansky 1987: 100). Sullivan notes that the posture 'seems to us a natural enough one and need not be a yogic posture at all' (1964: 120), while Asko Parpola suggests that this 'so-called "yoga" posture may simply imitate the Proto-Elamite way of representing seated bulls' (1994: 250, caption to fig. 14.16)! The only reasonable conclusion is that we do not actually *know* how to interpret the figure, nor do we know what he or she represents.

Another possibly more explicit piece of imagery is the famous ritual scene shown on the Mohenjo-daro seal M-1186.

It seems reasonably safe to interpret this as a ritual scene, since a simpler version of the same scene is shown on several other seals, such as Harappa H-177 (illustrated in Parpola 1994: 110, fig. 7.13) and Mohenjo-Daro M-488 (illustrated in Farmer, Sproat and Witzel 2004). All three of these seals show a divine or human figure standing in a tree-frame of some kind (Parpola

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Figure 1.2. Seal Mohenjo-Daro (M-1186)

reads this as a fig-tree (1994: 256–61), another human figure kneeling or sitting before him/her, and an animal with long wavy horns. One might read the figure in the tree as a standing version of the 'proto-Śiva', and the kneeling or seated figure as a priest or priestess who is worshipping him/her, though it may be noted that in the two Mohenjo Daro seals both wear the horned headdresses (if that is what they are), and in the Harappan seal neither do.

For Parpola, the worshipper on M-1186 is 'probably the chief priest of the deity who possessed this seal' and the animal is a human-faced markhor goat. In front of the priest is a low table 'on which is placed a human head, identifiable as that of a warrior from its "double-bun" hairstyle which recurs elsewhere in fighting scenes and is of Mesopotamian origin' (Parpola 1999b: 249). The seven figures at the bottom are apparently female, since they wear their hair in a plait, so the rest of the interpretation is straightforward:

> The tree is probably the banyan fig, and the deity inside it a predecessor of Durgā, the goddess of victory and love, to whom a human sacrifice of a brave warrior has been made. The decapitated victim is likely to have been the groom in a 'sacred marriage' performed at the new year festival, and to have personified the

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predecessor of Rudra/Skanda/Rohita/Agni. [. . .] The seven females at the bottom probably represent the 'Seven Mothers' of this war-god, the stars of the Pleiades, which became the constellation of the new year when the nakṣatra calendar was compiled around the 23rd century BC. The markhor goat (*śarabha* in Sanskrit) is a symbol of Agni in Vedic texts; according to the Kālikā-Purāṇa, the Goddess most appreciates man as a sacrificial victim, but next to a human victim she likes best the *śarabha*. The human face of this beast in the seal may indicate that a ritual of head exchange was practised [. . .]. (Parpola 1999b: 249–50; see also 1994: 259–61)

Now, I must admit that all this *could* be true. What is happening here, however, is that Parpola, like other interpreters of these seals, is straining to interpret objects that are far from clear, and is reading them in terms of his knowledge of a wide range of texts and practices dating from a much later period. If we did not have these parallels in mind, it is unlikely that we would read the figure in the tree-frame as Durgā or Kālī, let alone see the scene as implying a human sacrifice of a god impersonating Rudra/Skanda etc.[6] It is hardly obvious that the object on the table is a human head, for one thing, though Farmer, Sproat and Witzel are apparently convinced, since they read the equivalent object on Mohenjo Daro M-488 as another human head (2004: 46, Fig. 13). It should also be noted that the *Kālikā Purāṇa* is generally dated to the eleventh or twelfth century CE (Urban 2001), so that Parpola is assuming that the Goddess's tastes in sacrificial meat remained unchanged for around three thousand years.[7]

However, as with the 'proto-Śiva' figure, a variety of other interpretations are possible. Jayakar, looking at the same seal (M-1186), reads the figure in the tree as a *yakṣī*, and the seven figures at the bottom as *apsarās* or virgins rather than the Seven Mothers. The kneeling figure is an alchemist-priest, and the trunk of the tree is 'shaped like the *garbha yantra*, the womb vessel, wherein the ultimate secrets of alchemy were revealed' (Jayakar 1989: 73). In her interpretation, the object that Parpola reads as the head of a decapitated warrior has been transformed into the Śrī Cakra, the 'mark and altar of the goddess' (1989: 73). Shubhangana Atre reads the kneeling figure as a 'High Priestess', noting that this 'is obvious from her attire which exactly resembles that of the deity' (Atre 1998: 168), and the seven figures, rather as in Jayakar's version, as 'vestal virgins'; she neglects to mention the alleged warrior's head, but interprets the scene as part of a sequence illustrating the

6 Note that Parpola needs to conflate Rudra and Skanda, because Rudra (Śiva) is the goddess's consort in later Brahmanical mythology, but it is Skanda who is associated with the 'Seven Mothers'.

7 For a more detailed presentation of Parpola's overall perspective on the origins of 'Śākta Tantrism', see Parpola 2002a.

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retirement of an older High Priestess and the consecration of a replacement from among the seven vestal virgins (1998: 167–8).

We note that both Parpola and Jayakar read 'Tantric' themes into the material (the sacred marriage and human sacrifice for Parpola, the priest-alchemist and Śrī Cakra for Jayakar), but the Tantric themes are completely different from each other and have nothing in common. Atre's interpretation is not 'Tantric' at all. Clearly, these seals are not self-explanatory. In all three cases, the reading of the seal depends on a whole set of assumptions about the nature of Indus Valley religion.[8]

I find similar difficulties with other readings of the seal-images, such as Jayakar's interpretation of what she regards as a series of seals depicting a goddess and a tree (Jayakar 1989: 71–3 and pls. 5–8). Here, again, the possibility of onward continuity of tree and goddess cults is quite tempting, but completely unproven. One has to strain quite hard to find continuities, and there is ample scope for fantasy.

In any case, we have little or no idea what these so-called 'seals' were used for, which makes it difficult to be sure that the images represent scenes of religious significance. They are too fragile for use for labelling consignments of goods, which seems to have been the function of apparently similar seals in the Mesopotamian context. Farmer, Sproat and Witzel apparently assume that they have a ritual function, and that the 'inscriptions' (which for them are non-linguistic) are collections of symbols of deities or celestial forces. Again they could be right, but there is little to inspire any degree of certainty in this or any other interpretation (Farmer, Sproat and Witzel 2004: 41–3).

Parpola's reading of a 'sacred marriage' theme into M-1186 (Fig. 1.2) is premised on his assumption of a linkage with sacred marriages in Mesopotamian religion (1994: 256), a suggestion also made by the late Prof. D. D. Kosambi. Kosambi suggested that the Great Bath at Mohenjo Daro served as an artificial 'lotus pond' constructed for ritual purposes, and was surrounded by rooms in which visiting men took part in ritual sexual union with 'female attendant representatives of the mother goddess to whom the citadel complex belonged'. 'This is not far-fetched', Kosambi continues.

[8] One could easily provide further possible interpretations. If the kneeling figure is seen as female and a high priestess, for example, as argued by Atre, the standing animal could represent her consort and Sacred King, giving another variant of Parpola's (Frazer-style) sacred marriage. This would link with the well-known seal from Chanhujo-daro which may (or may not) represent a 'bison bull about to have intercourse with a priestess lying on the ground' (Parpola 1994: 256, fig. 14.32), not to say with Biardeau's work on goddesses and buffalo-gods in modern South India (Biardeau 1989). One could then interpret the numerous representations of individual bulls and other animals on seals as representing Sacred Kings of particular communities. But the real point is that all these interpretations, Parpola's, Jayakar's, Atre's and my own, have to be regarded as speculative and unproven.

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'The temples of Ishtar in Sumer and Babylon had similar practices in which girls of the leading families had also to participate'. These priestesses were the origin of the later Indic mythology of the *apsaras*, 'irresistibly beautiful women who would entice men to consort with them and eventually lead the heroes to destruction' (Kosambi 1965: 68).

Kosambi was often a sensitive and insightful scholar, and such an interpretation might, like some of the other interpretations we have been considering here, enable us to take back the origins of sexual yoga in India by another 2000 years, but it does, like the work of Parpola, Jayakar and others, seem to go rather a long way beyond the evidence.

Other attempts to make positive assertions about Indus Valley religion strike me as equally conjectural (e.g. Jairazbhoy 1994). I am in no position to say that any of these interpretations are incorrect, but they certainly cannot all be right. Since there is no obvious way to choose between them, they do not actually take us very far. At the end of the day, we know quite a lot about the daily life of the people of the Indus Valley urban civilisation, but little or nothing for certain about their religious practices. In particular, it seems to me that the evidence for the yogic or 'Tantric' practices is so dependent on reading later practices into the material that it is of little or no use for constructing any kind of history of practices. I am therefore taking a more cautious view in the present work, and assume that we do not have conclusive evidence for yogic or 'Tantric' practices in the Indus Valley cultural tradition.

I find myself equally unpersuaded by attempts to see yogic or 'Tantric' practices in their developed forms in the Ṛgveda or Atharvaveda. There are certainly indications both of magical ritual for pragmatic purposes, and of ecstatic religious practices, 'shamanic' if the reader wishes to use the term. I shall discuss some of these in later chapters (7 and 9). There is also conceptual material, such as the role of 'breath' (*prāṇa*) within the body, which is taken up and reworked by later yogic and 'Tantric' theory.

There is nothing, however, to imply yogic practice, in the sense of a developed set of techniques for operating with the mind-body complex. Our best evidence to date suggests that such practices developed in the same ascetic circles as the early *śramaṇa* movements (Buddhists, Jainas and Ājīvikas), probably in around the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.

It is for these reasons that Part One of my book is focused in this period, which follows on what has been called the 'Second Urbanisation' of South Asia (the first being the growth of the Indus Valley cities in the third millennium BCE). The growth of cities and early states in the sixth and

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fifth centuries BCE was the context for the early *śramaṇa* movements, and this is where, as far as we can tell, the new techniques of spiritual development were first developed and propagated.

As for 'Tantra', much depends on what we mean by that much-contested term, which has a wide variety of meanings within the Indic traditions themselves. The central issue with which I deal in Part Two, however, is the development of the relatively coherent set of techniques and practices which appears in a more or less complete form in Buddhist and Śaiva texts in the ninth and tenth centuries CE. This comprises a number of elements: elaborate deity visualisations, in which the practitioner identifies with a divine figure at the centre of a *maṇḍala* or geometrical array of deities; fierce male and particularly female deities; the use of transgressive 'Kāpālika'-style practices associated with cremation-grounds and polluting substances linked to sex and death, and internal yogic practices, including sexual techniques, which are intended to achieve health and long life as well as liberating insight.

The various components of this set of spiritual techniques appear to come from different sources. I attempt to trace their growth, and to make sense of their adoption within relatively mainstream Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical contexts.

Thus my main narrative runs approximately from about 500 BCE to about 1200 CE. These limits are somewhat arbitrary, particularly given the uncertainties of dating for the early part of this period. 'About 500 BCE', however, represents a point at which I assume that an early form of 'Brahmanical' culture using an Indo-Aryan language had been firmly established in parts of Northern India (present day Punjab, Haryana and Western UP), but had not yet reached dominance over the North-Eastern areas (including present-day Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh), or over the remainder of South Asia. The year 1200 CE represents a point at which Muslim rule had been established over most of North and Northeast India, and the main remaining centres of Buddhist culture in these regions had been destroyed. This was far from the end-point of Indic religious developments, but it forms a convenient point at which to close a narrative that is already seeking to encompass a very large range of cultural time and space.

Islam, of course, had an impact on India and other areas of Indic culture well before 1200 CE. The story of the early stages of its incorporation within Indic societies is an important and significant one, but it goes well beyond my personal competence, and I have not attempted to tell it here. As for Buddhism, it continued to develop both within and beyond South

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Asia after 1200 CE, but that development entered a new phase, and took place in very different conditions. Part of that story, the part that involved the people of Tibet, was the subject of one of my earlier books, *Civilized Shamans* (Samuel 1993), and in some ways the present work is a kind of prequel to that book.[9]

The study of Indic religious traditions has to be approached today with some sensitivity and care. During the main period discussed in this book, Buddhism, Jainism and forms of Brahmanical religion ancestral to modern Hinduism were all vital parts of the South Asian religious scene, alongside a basic level of folk and village religious practice that still exists today in various forms throughout South Asia and is best regarded as neither Buddhist, Jaina nor Brahmanical.[10] Today's Hindus, Buddhists and Jains have their own traditions of scholarship and study, and their own ways of understanding themselves and their religions. Much of this may be a modern development, a reaction to the unequal dialogue with Christianity and other Western forms of knowledge during colonial times (cf. Lopez 1995; King 1999; Viswanathan 2003). The modernist self-understandings that have resulted from this dialogue, however, are a reality in the lives of thousands of millions of people in Asia and the Asian diasporas. These people have a legitimate concern with how their religions are portrayed. At times, however, this can lead to problematic attempts by pressure groups to control what is said about Indic religions and eliminate features that do not fit neatly into a spiritually sanitised and benign picture. This is unfortunate, since attempts at excessive purity in the religious field generally backfire.

At the same time, Western societies have developed their own modes of understanding Asian religions, both popular and academic, and these undoubtedly have their own flaws and limitations. Critics of Western academia often fail to appreciate the deep and positive engagement with Indic religions that underlies much 'Orientalist' and more recent scholarship. This aside, I would hardly want to suggest that all of this work is beyond criticism.[11]

[9] Three substantial chapters (Twenty to Twenty-Two) of *Civilized Shamans* discussed the history of Buddhism in India up to around 1200 CE. I realised at the time that an adequate treatment of the material in those chapters was a much larger project than I could then undertake. In subsequent years, I have become increasingly involved with the early history of Indic religions, particularly of Tantric Buddhism. The present book is to some degree an attempt to take stock of my work in this area.

[10] We can see these, for example, in the women's rituals of marriage (*strī-ācār*) practiced by Hindus, Muslims and followers of other religions in West Bengal and Bangladesh today and in similar rituals elsewhere in South Asia (Fruzzetti 1990; Good 1991).

[11] Much of this discussion in its modern form goes back to the late Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said's argument developed primarily in relation to the Arab context. The Indian and various

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