Yoga, Tantra and other forms of Asian meditation are practised in modernised forms throughout the world today, but most introductions to Hinduism or Buddhism tell only part of the story of how they developed. This book is an interpretation of the history of Indic religions up to around 1200 CE, with particular focus on the development of yogic and Tantric traditions. It assesses how much we really know about this period, and asks what sense we can make of the evolution of yogic and Tantric practices, which were to become such central and important features of the Indic religious scene. Its originality lies in seeking to understand these traditions in terms of the total social and religious context of South Asian society during this period, including the religious practices of the general population with their close engagement with family, gender, economic life and other pragmatic concerns.

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of figures</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Introduction 1
2. Stories and sources 15

**PART ONE MEDITATION AND YOGA**
3. The Second Urbanisation of South Asia 41
4. Two worlds and their interactions 61
5. Religion in the early states 94
6. The origins of the Buddhist and Jaina orders 119
7. The Brahmanical alternative 153
8. Interlude: Asceticism and celibacy in Indic religions 173

**PART TWO TANTRA**
9. The classical synthesis 193
10. Tantra and the wild goddesses 229
11. Subtle bodies, longevity and internal alchemy 271
12. Tantra and the state 291
13. The later history of yoga and Tantra 324
14. Postlude 339

*References* 354
*Index* 402
Figures

1.1. ‘Proto-Śiva’ Seal (M-304, after Parpola 1994: 188) page 4
1.2. Seal Mohenjo-Daro M-1186 (after Parpola 1994: 260, Fig. 14.35) 5
3.1. Map: Painted Grey Ware and Northern Black Polished Ware (after Schwartzberg’s Historical Atlas of South Asia) 44
3.2. Map: Areas of Early Urbanisation (after Allchin) 46
3.3. Map: The Mahājanapadas (after Schwartzberg) 57
3.4. Map: Nanda and Mauryan states (after Schwartzberg) 59
4.1. Map: The Two Worlds (c. 500 BCE) 62
4.2. The Candravamśa (Lunar Dynasty): Outline Diagram 65
4.3. The Sūryavamśa (Solar Dynasty) and the Kings of Mithilā: Outline Diagram 66
4.4. The Early South Indian Caste System according to George Hart 86
4.5. The Brahmanical Varna System 87
5.1. Unidentified Yaksā. Vidisha Museum (photo by author) 103
5.2. Indra disguised as a woodcutter offers grass to Śākyamuni (accompanied by Vajrapāṇi), Gandhara, 1st cent CE, Peshawar Museum (photo by Sylvia Sax) 105
5.3. Vaiśravaṇa. Modern Tibetan wall-painting, Tongsa Gompa, Kalimpong (photo by author) 106
5.4. Gajalakṣmī on Stūpa 2, Bharhut Stūpa, Indian Museum, Calcutta (photo by author) 108
6.1. Śākyamuni prior to his enlightenment (accompanied by Vajrapāṇi) consults a jātīla Brahmin. Gandhara, late first century CE, Peshawar Museum (photo by Sylvia Sax) 121
6.2. Stūpa as depicted on Bharhut Stūpa, Indian Museum, Calcutta (photo by author) 141
List of figures

6.3. Two Deities. Bharhut Stūpa, Indian Museum, Calcutta (photo by author) 143
7.1. Veena Das’s Diagram of the Value System of Indian Society 168
9.1. Map of Kuśāna and Sātavāhana States, first to third centuries CE (after Schwartzberg) 196
9.2. Map of Gupta, Vākātaka and Pallava States, fourth to sixth centuries CE (after Schwartzberg) 198
9.3. Early states in SE Asia to c. 650 CE (after Schwartzberg) 200
9.4. Anointing of Kumāra as Divine General (India, Gupta Period) (photo from Theresa McCullough) 206
10.1. Bhairava, Vidisha Museum (photo by author) 244
10.2. Cakreśvara. Mount Abu (photo by author, 1972.) 258
10.3. Guhyasamāja, probably 16th century, Vajrabhairava Temple, Tsaparang, Western Tibet (photo by Rob Linrothe) 261
10.4. Hevajra. Abu Cave, Piyang, Western Tibet, probably 17th or 18th century (photo by Rob Linrothe) 263
11.1. Meditator with Cakras and Kunḍalinī (Wellcome Library, Sanskrit & Prakrit MSS No.640) 272
12.1. Map of South Asia, eighth to tenth centuries (after Schwartzberg) 294
12.2. Map of Southeast Asia, eighth to tenth centuries (after Schwartzberg) 296
12.3. (left to right). Indrayāṇi, Brahmāyāṇi, Cāmuṇḍā (from Vergati 2000) (photos by Suzanne Held) 316
12.4. ‘Cham dancer at Zangs mdog dpal ri dgon pa, Kalimpong (photo by author) 318
12.5. Bhuta dancer, South Kanara District (photo by Mark Nichter) 320
Preface

This book is based on the Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion, which I delivered at the University of Oxford in November and December 2002 under the title ‘Indic religions to 1200 AD: a critical and anthropological approach’. Those who were present at the lectures will realise that this book differs from the lectures in other respects besides the title. Most of the text of the lectures is here, in one form or another, but I have taken the opportunity to rethink and extend the argument in many places. Unfortunately, the extensive visual material presented in the lectures has had for practical reasons mostly to be excluded from the book.

This is a relatively short book, however, on a very large subject, and there has been no attempt to be comprehensive. The book focuses on the development of the yogic and Tantric tradition in Indic societies, and while I have discussed the wider context in which these events happened in considerable detail, I have not attempted to provide a comprehensive history of Indian religion.

It is difficult to deal with language transcription consistently and systematically in a book that ranges over several bodies of scholarly literatures with different conventions. The omission of diacritics is nevertheless a major irritant and often deprives the reader of vital information, quite apart from rendering it impossible to know how words might be pronounced. My general strategy has been to give only modern place names and words that are thoroughly Anglicised without diacritics. I have generally given Sanskrit forms in preference to Pali or other Prakrits, though have employed the latter in contexts where it would seem clumsy or inappropriate to do otherwise (e.g. when I am citing the Pali Canon). I beg the reader’s indulgence for remaining errors and inconsistencies; I am not a Sanskritist.

I wish to express my appreciation to the Electors of the Wilde Lectures for allowing me to give the lectures, and in particular to Richard Gombrich, who was a most kind and gracious host during my stay in Oxford, as indeed during my previous stay in 1999, and who helped me in very many respects.
Preface

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I also thank the University of Newcastle, New South Wales for allowing me to undertake two periods of study leave during which much of the research for the book was undertaken, the Leverhulme Trust and Brian Bocking for a visiting professorship at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2003–4 which gave time for valuable further work on this project, and Cardiff University for appointing me to the Professorial Fellowship which has allowed its completion. I also wish to acknowledge the participants in the May 2004 workshop at SOAS on the politics of Asian religions, among them Saunaka Rishi Das, Madhu Kishwar, Rajiv Malhotra, Hiroko Kawanami, Chakraborty Ram Prasad and Ursula King, who helped greatly in formulating some of the ideas in Chapter 1 and elsewhere in the book. I do not think that at this point in time there is any fully satisfactory answer to the questions raised on that occasion, but I hope that this book will be in its way a positive contribution to the ends towards which that workshop was directed.