

Newsletter

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DISPATCHES FROM THE NORTH EAST | PANKAJ SAXENA

The River Cremations of Baghmara

The Someshvari was running high for a winter night. There were twenty seven of them, moving quietly through the rushing water. They needed to reach the Bangladesh territory before anyone from this side of the border noticed. The water would only be knee deep usually at this time of the year, but it was an unusual night by many standards. The dead body had to be kept completely out of water, but the water that splashed around the moving party kept trying to reach the pier. The wind added to the chill, and some were heard chattering their teeth. A few women quietly watched from the shore. Their hearts crying, and their chests heavy with pain, for it was a young, untimely death. However, their lips were closed and their eyes full of fear, for they could not risk waking up the members of the majority community.

This was a constant fear in the minds of the men in the water and the women on the shore: of being discovered by the majority Christian community, in the very simple act of cremating the young boy that died an unfortunate death that day.

They were one of the most unfortunate people on earth, the Hindus of Baghmara, Meghalaya. A border town in a Christian majority state of India, Baghmara is also host to a minority Hindu community. While Christians are around 75% in

the rest of the state, in South Garo Hills district, they are around 95% and Hindus are in an extreme minority. Most of these 4% are the Bengali Hindus who had come as refugees to this part of Meghalaya due to the long running genocide of Hindus of Bangladesh by the majority Muslim community. This part of Bangladesh is Mymensingh, the most notorious Bangladeshi province for the Assamese as well as the hill communities of the north-east of India. This is the birthplace of ‘Mymensinghias’, or the ‘Mia Musalmans’, as they are known in Assam. Mymensingh generated and still generates the most massive waves of Bangladeshi illegal Islamic immigrants in India, who have changed the entire demography of Assam and many other states in the north-east.

While Bangladeshi illegals in India are an issue on which everyone in the north-east unites, another tragedy unfolded on the sidelines, without anyone even noticing it: the tragedy of those Bengali Hindus on Bangladesh-Meghalaya border, who had nowhere else to go while fleeing from Islamic persecution in Bangladesh, but to Meghalaya, a tribal hill state in India. While immigrant-native issues exist in many other states of India and it is not easy for Hindu immigrants to settle anywhere in India due to the lack of any formal process, in Meghalaya the issue becomes even worse. This is

because almost the entire state of Meghalaya comes under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution which means that it is reserved for the tribals or the members of the scheduled tribes. This means that for buying or selling any piece of land, the permission of local tribal chiefs has to be taken.

This was and remains the crux of the issue. For those Bengali non-tribal Hindus who fled Bangladesh to save their lives and settled in nearby Meghalaya, it is impossible to buy or sell land, even for a cremation ground, without the full co-operation of the local Garos, who are mostly Christians. Even this would not be a problem with those Garos who still follow indigenous religions, as they do not impose their religious views of others and in Arunachal Pradesh which is still a non-Christian majority tribal state in India, all methods of disposing the dead, like cremation and burial go side by side, without any problem. Even the converted Garos are quite friendly people in general but the role that the Church and its pastors play here has created the problem. The Church has convinced most of the Christians that Hindus create demons when they burn the dead and so they cannot be allowed to do so. Their reasons are not simply sadistic but quite practical, as this persecution of Hindus with no or very little state protection results in situations of religious strife and conflict in persecuted Hindus, presenting situations for the Christians to convert, and in many cases this has been admitted by the Church pastors. Many of them have called upon the Baghmara Hindus to convert to Christianity and start burying their dead, and for that they are willing to give them as much land as they want, but only if they convert to Christianity. This is the crux of the issue.

They were never allowed to cremate their dead in Meghalaya, and for more than five decades they had to cross the international border, and go to Bangladesh to cremate their dead in the dead of the night. It was not like Bangladesh also allowed them to do this, but in the first five decades after the Partition while there was no border fencing and borders remained almost completely open, these activities were possible when darkness enveloped the land. But in the past two decades border patrol became serious on both sides of the border. Fences came up and started being manned and ever since the issue of Bangladeshi infiltrators became big in India it became increasingly impossible for the Bengali Hindus of Garo Hills to

keep cremating their dead across the border, in Bangladesh.

What was a cause of celebration for most Indians, fencing, was something terrifying for the Hindus of Baghmara. They could not cross the international border to cremate their dead. They could not cremate their dead in their own country, India, for the majority Christians did not allow it. Crossing the border now became increasingly risky. Trying to cremate one dead body could mean the possible deaths of many more. Buying land in Meghalaya, even a piece of land as small as to allow one or two piers to burn, was not possible. But the dead had to be burned. The rituals had to be completed. For people keep dying. It is their nature to do so. Even if they are as unfortunate as the Hindus of Baghmara.

They came up with a solution which sounds so bizarre and fatuous to non-locals that it takes one to see the situation for oneself to believe it. Baghmara is situated on the banks of the Someshvari river, which is also called the Simsang by the Garos. This river originates in the hills of Meghalaya and enters the plains of Bangladesh at Baghmara. It so happens that the international border following its zigzag manner, creates a wedge of Bangladeshi territory in the middle of the Someshvari river, where there is no permanent land, but is usually full of shifting sand banks, or what are called as chars in the Brahmaputra delta. These shifting, silting sandbanks are the temporary pieces of land, technically under control of Bangladesh but virtually still border less as they are in the middle of a vast flowing river. It is on these sandbanks that the Baghmara Hindus chose to burn their Hindus.

As incredulous as that sounds, this is the route that the Bengali Hindus of Baghmara had to and still have to take to cremate their dead. To wade through knee deep and sometimes waist deep water, in the dead of the night, when the wind and water are chilly even in summers. Even this they have to do it secretly as if they are discovered then the rituals can be disrupted at the very least. But the very process is so uncertain it defies imagination that this is the route that the unfortunate Hindus had to take for so many years. For while in winters and summers, there are enough sandbanks in the centre of the river, in the rainy season when the river floods, the sandbanks almost disappear. What if somebody dies during that time? What if they are discovered? What if the

currents are too deep and it washes the folks carrying the dead away? What if the pier gets wet? What if the waterflow increases while the pier is burning and it douses the flames?

All these emotions were coursing through the mind of every one of those Hindus that night as they were going to the sandbanks in the middle of the river. They reached the middle of the river somehow. The sand was wet, as some waves of water were regularly sweeping over most parts of it. A mound of sand had to be created to ensure the fire did not get doused while the body was still half burnt. After a mound of wet sand was built, the wood was piled over it, the body was laid on it and the rituals were completed with a hurry that should make an onlooker cry. The fire had to be aided to help it burn the body quickly. And when it was done in a few hours, the party started ‘wading back to India’. But there were still worries on their minds, for sometimes these sandbanks were raided in the morning and the last ritual in the life of a Hindu, that of the asthi chayana and visarjana could not be completed. The father of the young boy that had died, suppressing all the pain in his heart, had only one thought in his mind: Maa Kali, just let the asthis of my son be found next morning. Just let me complete his last rites.

Such is the tragedy of the Baghmara Hindus and more than 99.99% of Hindus of India do not know about it. Hindus remain the most unrepresented people on earth, their stories untold, their tragedies forgotten, their genocides unspoken for, their persecution presented as aggression. But even in this deep civilizational pain there are layers upon layers, and while some layers have come to the attention of a few Hindus now, most of the layers remain hidden and forgotten. The non-tribal Hindus of Meghalaya remain a community which is a minority of a minority. They are a minority in Bangladesh. They are a minority in Meghalaya. They can’t live in Bangladesh. They can’t bury their dead in Meghalaya, or buy any land. While the world is busy celebrating the ‘rise of Hindu nationalism’ in India, the story of the persecution of Baghmara Hindus is so small a concern in the grand scheme of things that it remains almost entirely forgotten.

But it is the duty of fellow Indians to remember their tragedy, to help them come out of it and tell their story to the world, and to correct the story of civilization. This is the purpose of Bodha as well.





THE SOUND OF THE TEMPLE BELL | AKSHAY JHA

The Divine at Hand

In the Hindu experience, deities have been a living presence in human life for as long as our civilization can remember and as far as the vision of the seers can perceive. They are neither relics of a distant past nor products of intellectual imagination. Their presence is a lived reality, experienced by generations of sages and transmitted to devotees through gurus, and institutions such as temples.

At the heart of every temple stands the deity. Everything else, the architecture, rituals, and festivals, is organized around that presence. While the tradition says that the gods may be approached directly through personal sadhana and rituals, it is seldom that we encounter an individual who is capable of this. For most people, the temple serves as a sacred and consecrated centre that transcends the limitations of individual practice. A temple is therefore much more than a place of congregational worship. Hindus have darshan. Through the process of consecration, an image ceases to be a mere idol and becomes a vigraha. A living presence of the deity that can be approached through invocation.

This relationship is not one-sided. Our gods speak to us too.

In Goa, there exists a common tradition known as Prasad/Kaula Prashna. An ancient ritual where

individuals pose questions to the deities. One may wonder if it is even possible to ask questions to a deity, not metaphorically and even get a response? But it is a living reality for the people of Goa. When faced with significant life choices, or even social disputes, many people or families engage in this ritual. It is also observed in cases where disputes arise within temples that the management cannot resolve, particularly regarding rituals, the deity is consulted through this process. The Kaula (word/declaration) is a mystical method used widely in Goan temples. Through this ritual, a binary yes/no answer is obtained through coconut, flowers, or similar material offered to the deity. The decision of the deity is final and accepted by all the parties involved.

This is not an asymmetrical engagement with the deities. Often, the local deities/grama devatas communicate with the villagers in their own ways. In Goa itself, there is a temple of Shanta Durga in Fatarpa who is famously known as Magnechi Devi. Devi here does not passively await worship. She makes her wishes known. The tradition says that the Devi herself initiates the communication by appearing in dreams of devotees. She makes her ‘magni’ (her request/ her demand) and indicates what she desires - a certain puja, an offering, a vow, a just a visit to the temple. The dream is understood as a direct instruction from the Devi.

Once a devotee has received a dream that they believe to be a Magni from the Devi, they come to the temple and submit the dream to the Kaula ceremony. Devi then confirms or denies whether what she asked for has been understood correctly. This way the goddess has a direct connection with each household of the village spanning generations. These dreams are not limited to nearby villagers or just to Hindus. It is said that she even appears in the dreams of those who have visited her even once, sometimes those who have been posted to Fatorpa on service, and even non-Hindus who carry Shanta Durga in their hearts.

There is another fascinating custom at the Shri Mahalasa Temple in Mardol. It is renowned for the practice of taking oaths beneath its bell. This tradition of swearing an oath in the temple's chowk was held in such high regard by the community that even colonial authorities acknowledged its significance and incorporated it into the judicial framework. Usually, oaths were taken by placing the right palm on the sacred text of the Gita or on the heads of family members, on heated iron, on a cow's head, on coconut, betel, arecanut, rice, on a wheel, or on the sacred thread of Brahmins. The decisive oath taken under the bell of Shri Mahalasa was deemed the most serious and was greatly feared, as it was believed to invoke the divine power of the deity. Consequently, it received formal recognition through various government decrees and orders. It is widely believed that anyone who takes a false oath in this manner will lose their sanity immediately upon leaving the temple grounds. A similar practice is prevalent at the famous Lakshmi Narayana Temple in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh. In front of the garbha-gruha stands a raised platform known as the Dharma Chabutra (Seat of Justice). This platform is out of bounds for ordinary devotees. In the event of a local dispute, the concerned parties are summoned to this platform, where a council hears the matter and delivers its verdict. The decision is then accepted by all parties involved. This helps greatly in resolving disputes at the local level, avoiding recourse to the formal legal system, keeping the divine at the centre.

These are great examples of the significance that the presence of a deity or temple holds for a devotee. They become an integral part of devotees' lives, offering guidance at every critical juncture. Such practices are observed throughout Bharatvarsha in various forms. In Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, legends of posing

questions to deities are everywhere. Bhuta Kola in coastal Karnataka, Bhopi in Rajasthan, Aruda in Tamil Nadu and Velichappadu in Kerala are few examples of the local oracle traditions practiced all over India. Here the deity takes possession of a devotee after intense rituals of invocation. The devotees approach the oracle one by one with their queries and take the blessings of the devata present. These rituals and traditions bind the devotees and the deity in a sacred bond where a deity becomes a living presence among them.

These practices have been part of natural religions all over the world, although they were wiped out in most regions by monotheistic faiths. India is unique in that these traditions were neither looked down upon nor persecuted. Here, the central and unifying thread of the Vedic-Pauranic tradition sheltered regional customs and rituals and incorporated them into the mainstream. This is the underlying unity of Hindu culture in India - its deities, rituals, customs, and knowledge systems. It is this unity that enables an individual from one part of the country to connect with another region despite differences in language, food, and local practices.





CIVILIZATION AND HISTORY | AMRITANSHU PANDEY

The Rishi Function and Bharata's Anti-fragility

There is an unmistakable kinship among the cultures of the pagan and pre-Abrahamic world. The Yoruba and the Cherokee, the priests of Heliopolis and the seidr-women of pre-Christian Scandinavia, the Aymara of the Andes and the keepers of the Eleusinian rites - all of them recognized that the cosmos was layered, that the visible world was a thin film over a deeper one, that beings of various powers and intentions moved through both, and that the human task was to maintain right relation with the larger field. They had divinities. They had dark entities. They had ancestral lines that had to be honoured. They had ceremonies that did real work. None of them mistook nature for a backdrop.

And yet only one of these civilizations developed into a continuous, self-clarifying, multi-layered architecture - one that has survived millennia of pressure without having to be rescued by anybody. Hinduism. Or in its own self-name, sanatana dharma. The rest, with extraordinary partial exceptions, dissolved. They were absorbed, displaced, fragmented, demoted, driven into hiding. Some fragments survive as folk practice, some survive as costume, almost none survive with their cosmology and their epistemology and their social architecture all still working in coherent reciprocity.

Why?

The usual answers describe the result rather than account for it. Hinduism is older. It spread across a vast geography. It absorbed waves of incomers. It produced a written corpus of unmatched scale. But these geographic, demographic, and textual facts are consequences of something. They are not the something.

Here, we propose a thesis - in itself not particularly novel. Bharata, and the dharma it carries, were founded by its rishis. From the saptarishis at the cosmogonic horizon, through the rishi-families of the Rigveda, the seers of the Upanishads, the architects of the darshanas, down to figures like Yaska, Panini, Patanjali, Bhartrhari, Shankara, Abhinavagupta, Madhva - and onward in unbroken line - it is the rishi who is the hidden infrastructure. The rishi-function is what made dharma capable of being transmitted, capable of being challenged from inside, capable of regenerating after collapse. Other pagan civilizations had priests. They had shamans. They had bards and oracles and mystics. Bharata had rishis. These are different categories, and the difference is civilizational.

What the Rishi Was

The word itself encodes the answer. Rishi - from √ṛṣ, to rush, to flow, to glow, with a deeper relation,

recognized by Yaska in the Nirukta, to $\sqrt{\text{drś}}$, to see. The rishi is one through whom something flows, and one who has seen. Both senses are needed at once. The rishi is not a recipient of revelation in the way that the Abrahamic prophet is. He is also not an interpreter of inherited mystery, in the way that an Eleusinian hierophant or an Egyptian priest of Amun was. The rishi is a node in the cosmos through which rta becomes audible. He is the place at which mantra and satya surface, because his consciousness has been disciplined into the right shape.

To be fair, this appears to be a strange ontological position. The closest Western analogue is what the Greeks dimly approached with theoria, direct seeing, though with a vastly less developed methodology. Tapas - the deliberate heating of consciousness through restraint and inquiry. Svadhyaya - the recursive study of self and source. Samadhi - the steadying of attention into a field that begins to yield. The rishi is the person who has performed this work and whose perception has consequently widened. It is reproducible. It is teachable. It is open to anyone who undertakes the discipline.

A rishi was someone available to rta, and the category was open. Anyone could enter it, and the corpus of those who did was open-ended.

This matters because of what follows from it. If revelation is external - given by one God to one prophet at one moment - then the tradition that descends from it must guard the original moment, since no other can occur. If knowledge is acquired through inference alone, then the tradition is only as good as its current dialectic. If knowledge is the direct seeing of an order that is always present, accessible to anyone willing to undertake the work, then the tradition is renewable. New rishis can appear. They have been appearing for as long as the tradition has run. To understand this, we must detail how the rishi stands apart from apparent analogues.

Take the priest first. The Hindu purohita is a specialized figure who performs ritual technology, and the priest serves the rishi-tradition rather than constituting it. In Egypt, in Sumer, in much of Mesoamerica, the priestly class was bound to the temple-state. When the state fell, the knowledge died with the institution. There was no parallel category that held the ontology and theology independently of political infrastructure. In Bharata, the rishi sat outside this dependency. The

forest-dwelling rishi, the kshatriya-rishi like Vishvamitra, the householder-rishi - these were beyond the temple economy. The temple, when it eventually rose, was downstream of the rishi.

The shaman was something different again. The native shamanic traditions of the Americas, of Siberia, of pre-Christian northern Europe, of Africa, produce individuals of immense and confirmed perceptual capacity. Their work is real. Traditionally, the shaman was typically embedded in a tribe and a territory. His knowledge was personal, inherited from a teacher, transmitted in a small lineage, encoded in songs and gestures whose precision depended on a continuous demographic substrate. When the tribe was scattered or destroyed, the lineage broke, and the cosmology with it. The rishi-system was trans-tribal from the start. Vishvamitra and Vasishtha were sought by Bharata, by Puru, by Ikshvaku, by Yadu - across the early Aryan polities. The knowledge was not the property of any tribe. It moved.

And the prophet was heteronomous. The Abrahamic prophet speaks because he has been spoken to. The rishi sees because he has prepared his sight. The prophet is unique to a covenant, his message is sealed. The rishi is one of an indefinitely large set of seers, past and future, none of whom claim final say. Heteronomy versus svayam-prakasha. The first locks revelation to a moment. The second opens it to recurrence.

The bard was a memory-specialist. The Greek aoidos, the Norse skald, the Celtic filid - these preserved memories in metered verse, and were no doubt extraordinary. Their content was largely heroic and historical. But the rishi brought mantra, which is a different kind of object. A mantra is sound that performs. It is acoustic technology, calibrated to what it discloses. The Vedic seers built the entire phonemic order around the requirement that mantra be transmitted without distortion across geological time. No other oral tradition treated phonetic precision as a metaphysical responsibility.

The rishi crosses every category the rest of the world uses, and is therefore not contained by any of them. No other civilization developed his analogue, and the absence shows up as a structural difference.

The Architecture They Built

Once you have a category of person whose function is to see and to encode, and once that category is open and regenerable, a particular kind of civilizational architecture becomes possible. The rishis built it.

They built the language. Panini finished the work the Rigvedic seers started, building on material that earlier rishis had already analytically organized. The Ashtadhyayi is a generative description from which the entire surface of correct speech can be deduced. Panini's predecessors had seen the dhatus - the verbal roots from which meaning radiates. He systematized what they had discerned. Yaska before him gave the etymological method, the Nirukta, which treats every word as a frozen action and asks what action. This is rishi-work being done on language itself. The result is a medium in which philosophical and scientific discourse can be conducted with extraordinary precision, because every term carries within it the action it names. It is hard to find a comparable with developed linguistic substrate to this degree of self-consciousness.

They built the transmission system. Sruti - what was heard, the Veda - was committed to a memorization architecture so redundant that it has survived thousands of years of geographic and political turbulence with essentially no textual error. Patha modes - jata, ghana, krama - encoded each verse in multiple permutations so that any slip would be detected by cross-checking against the others. This was deliberate engineering. It assumed that copies could be lost, that scribes could fail, that political collapse could occur. It was designed against entropy.

They built the darshanas. The six classical schools, plus the Buddhist and Jain darsanas that arose alongside, plus the tantric and bhakti currents. The darshanas are different angles on one terrain. Sankhya and Yoga, Nyaya and Vaisesika, Mimamsa and Vedanta - each a complete philosophical apparatus, with its own logic and its own methodology, addressing different facets of the same field. They argue. They refute each other. They also accept each other's existence as legitimate. Hindu philosophy is conducted in something like a parliament. No darshana ever achieves monopoly. None tries, in the sense that an Abrahamic theology tries. Each darshana sharpens the others by opposition. The pluralism is structural - a recognition that rta is too large to be exhausted by any single account. Modern liberal

tolerance has nothing to do with it. The rishi-tradition built itself with this recognition baked in.

They built the lineage system - parampara, gurukula, gotra. Each rishi-family carried its corpus forward through the institution of teacher to qualified student. The qualifications were stringent and the transmission was personal. This produced redundancy. Hundreds of gurukulas, thousands of teachers, tens of thousands of disciples. No single library at Alexandria. No single temple at Karnak. The knowledge was distributed across the subcontinent in a fault-tolerant network. When invasion or famine took out one node, others continued.

They built itihasa and purana. The Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the eighteen Mahapuranas and their dependents. These hold the civilization's memory in narrative form, accessible to those who would not enter the gurukula but who needed nonetheless to live within the dharma. The same metaphysics that the Upanishadic rishis encoded austere is encoded in Vyasa's narrative dramaturgy with full emotional reach. A child can take it in. A philosopher can take it in. The same content, two registers, both rishi-made.

What the rishis built was a civilization-grade epistemic infrastructure - language, transmission, dialectic, lineage, narrative - within which dharma could be carried forward by people who did not themselves need to be rishis.

A tradition that depends on a single institution dies when that institution dies. Egypt is the canonical case. The temple-priesthood was the carrier, and when Egypt was politically broken and religiously overwritten, the whole apparatus went with it. The mythology survives in fragments because its architecture had no redundancy independent of the temple-state. A tradition that depends on a single text dies when interpretation freezes. This is the problem the Abrahamic religions have had to manage by repeated reform movements, with mixed success. The text is fixed, the tradition's flexibility consists in disputing what the text means.

A tradition that depends on demographic continuity dies when the demography is broken. This is what happened to the Native North American traditions, to the Aboriginal Australian traditions, to large parts of pre-Christian Europe. The shamanic teacher-student lineage requires a stable population that can spare specialists. Disrupt the population and the lineage breaks.

The rishi-system depended on none of these alone. It had texts, but the texts were re-discoverable through new rishis when seen as such. It had institutions - gurukulas, mathas, akharas - but no single institution was load-bearing. It had demographic depth, but the same depth could be reconstituted from any fragment because the methodology was reproducible. Tapas can be undertaken anywhere. Svadhyaya requires only work and discipline. Samadhi is portable.

When the Buddhist universities of the north were destroyed, Hindu philosophy continued in the south and the west. When the temples of the north were broken, the south kept building. When Sanskrit learning was suppressed under colonial education, it was carried in private gurukulas and family transmission. When even those were thinned, individual scholars and yogis carried it forward. When those were thinned further, householders carried fragments, and the fragments were still operational because the architecture of dharma is fractal - the smallest piece contains the structure of the whole.

This is anti-fragility in Taleb's later sense, and it precedes him by several thousand years. Hinduism does more than survive shocks. Under shock it generates new rishis. A civilization without rishis can only conserve. A civilization with rishis can also self-correct. This is what the others lost when they lost their seers, and what they could not regain because they had no method by which seers could re-arise.

The Rishi as a Total Knowledge-Category

There is one more move the rishi-system made that the other pagan civilizations did not. The rishi-category was not restricted to spiritual content. Panini was a rishi. Pingala, who codified prosody, was a rishi. Bhartrhari, who built the philosophy of language, was a rishi. Caraka and Susruta, the medical compilers, are placed within rishi-lineages. Aryabhata and Brahmagupta and Bhaskara, the mathematicians and astronomers, work within an episteme that is rishi-sanctioned. Bharata, the author of the Natyasastra, is a rishi - aesthetics is rishi-knowledge. Kautilya works within statecraft as a rishi-discipline.

This is decisive. In Egypt, the priests held cosmology while the scribes held administration and the craftsmen held technology, and these were not unified by a single epistemic claim. In Greece, the philosophers slowly and incompletely tried to

unify under reason what the older traditions had held under ritual, the unification was never finished and the ritual side was eventually lost. In Mesoamerica, calendar and sacrifice and statecraft were braided together but no broader integration of knowledge-categories occurred. In the rishi-system, all of it - grammar, prosody, aesthetics, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, polity, metaphysics, devotion, ritual - was understood as the same kind of knowledge, produced by the same kind of work, in continuity with the same source. A single epistemology covered everything from the pinda to the brahmanda.

This is why dharma never had to fight science. The two were not competing categories. Both were rishi-work. This is why a Hindu surgeon-rishi like Susruta could perform plastic surgery without it being heterodox, why an astronomer-rishi like Aryabhata could propose rotational and heliocentric hypotheses without being burned, why a grammarian-rishi like Bhartrhari could develop sphota theory without ecclesiastical interference. The integration was at the epistemic root. Other pagan civilizations had isolated geniuses. Bharata had a category that included its geniuses by default.

To see the difference, look at what those civilizations could not do. Egypt could not produce its own self-clarifying philosophical lineage. The Hermetica is late, syncretic, partly Greek. The mythology is rich, the metaphysics never received its own systematic articulation in Egyptian terms because the priestly class did not see that as its work, and there was no other class that did. The Native American traditions could not produce their own grammar of ceremony in a textually transmissible form, because their traditions did not include the figure who would do that work and survive demographic collapse. The Greek tradition came closest, with the philosophers, but it lacked a parallel transmission discipline for the experiential side. The Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries dissolved because there was no architecture to carry their interior content forward once the institutions lapsed. The pre-Christian European traditions had bards and druids, and the Roman destruction of Druidic Britain shows what happens when a tradition relies on a single specialist class without redundancy.

We do not say this to grade civilizations. The pagan world held knowledge that we, the heirs of the rishis, may not yet have fully understood, and there is much they could teach us. The point is

structural. They lacked the category that produces and reproduces seer-knowledge as civilizational architecture, and so when the pressures came they had no mechanism to regenerate themselves. They were mortal in a way that Bharata was not, and is not, because the rishi-function persists.

We are in a period in which the rishi-category is under pressure from a particularly modern direction. The colonial over-write tried to domesticate the rishi into the figure of the religious functionary, the temple priest, the caste authority - a much smaller thing, fitting into Abrahamic categories of clergy. Post-independence India absorbed Western academic structures that have no place for the rishi-function and routinely treat it as self-aggrandizing fiction or a quaint hagiographic convention. Even sympathetic accounts often translate rishi as "sage" or "poet," which is like translating brahman as "God." Technically not wrong, functionally a destruction.

The reason to recover the rishi-category, in our self-understanding and in our institutions, is operational. Nostalgia has nothing to do with it. The civilizational properties Hinduism has - its anti-fragility, its self-correction, its capacity to regenerate after pressure - are direct consequences of the rishi-function. To the extent that the function is supported, those properties remain. To the extent that the function is suppressed - by educational systems that produce technicians instead of seers, by scholarly conventions that pathologize the seer-claim, by economic structures that leave no space for tapas - those properties weaken.

The rishis founded Bharata. They produced the linguistic, epistemic, transmissive, and dialectical scaffolding within which dharma could be carried forward by everyone else. They did this and then mostly disappeared into what they had founded - which is itself a rishi move. Their names survived where useful and dissolved where not. The work persists.



From the Field

Battle for Dharma in the North East

For centuries, Northeast India has been a dharmic bridge between Bharata and Southeast Asia — its tribal cultures shaped by Bauddha, Vaishnava, Shakta, and indigenous traditions that predate the modern nation-state by millennia. That bridge is under strain. Colonial missionary activity, geographic isolation, and weak political will have together triggered mass conversions and demographic shifts, severing the region from its civilisational roots and feeding insurgency and anti-India sentiment.

Pankaj Saxena has been visiting the interior parts of Northeast India, documenting the situation on the ground.

1. The next field trip has commenced as part of the project.
2. We have initiated collaboration with the Chinmaya Mission network to support fieldwork activities in Tripura.

Hindu Models of Temple Management

Hindu temples have for millennia been the living centres of Bharata's civilisation — simultaneously spiritual, cultural, and socio-economic institutions that sustained entire communities across generations. Today, externally imposed bureaucratic management threatens to erode their indigenous self-governance and cultural integrity. Bodha is building case studies that illuminate the efficacy of our traditional temple management systems. By studying the indigenous methods of administration and governance within temple ecosystems, we can showcase their holistic approach to societal well-being.

We have undertaken the study of our next temple management cluster in Nepal. The desk research phase has been completed, and the first field visit to Nepal is scheduled for June.

Big Questions

Under our Big Questions initiative, we ask provocative questions about some of the most fundamental problems and open questions that Hindu society faces today. Issues that are not settled, questions that are perennially asked by every Hindu generation, and novel dilemmas that we face today.

The series will ask one significant question every year, and go to great scholars, activists, thinkers, leaders and stakeholders of Hindu cultural renaissance. Their answers will be compiled and published as an editorial book. With this we will facilitate intellectual churn, narrative building, and the re-establishment of Hindu worldview.

Big Question 2026 - Is Hindu Unity Compatible With Indian Diversity?

Would an overarching Hindu unity destroy, or lessen the diversity that exists in India? Or is Hindu unity compatible with Indian diversity? Will unity lead to the destruction of all diversity? Can diversity survive standalone without uniting forces? Or is there a third path? This big question goes deep into all these questions and brings to you answers from many different stakeholders.



This Big Question 2026 is made possible by the generous support of Shri Hari Kiran Vadlamani, the founder of coHari. We are grateful to him for his patronage.

See all Big Questions at our website-
www.bodharesearch.in/big-questions



BODHA ANVESH

Anveshi - Badami Chapter

Karnataka has been called the laboratory of Hindu temple architecture. And Badami is one of its greatest centers where the origin and evolution of temple architecture can be traced. Located in Bagalkot district of northern Karnataka, in the famed Deccan it is a great Hindu cultural center. Badami, along with Pattadakallu, Aihole and Mahakoota creates an ensemble which displays a wide variety of temples. The seat of the great Badami Chalukyas, Badami has one of the earliest cave temples of India, in which Hindu iconography touches some of its greatest heights. But it does not stop at cave temples and the evolution can be seen in the later temples around the lake.

Hindu temple architecture in its classical form reaches its zenith in Pattadakallu, where on one platform lie many different kinds of architectural styles and where Nagara and Dravida temples stand on one platform and the beginnings of the Vesara style can be seen. Aihole on the other hand displays the various stages of temple architecture evolution at one site. Mahakoota shows how ancient temples remain living and Banashankari temple shows how shakti pooja in this great land touches all walks of life.

Bodha Anveshi Badami chapter offers a deep study of Hindu temple architecture, sculpture and iconography in its various dimensions. It also aims to explore the dynamic of the living temple eco-systems which remain so vibrant in this part of Bharatavarsha.

REGISTRATIONS OPEN NOW
14 - 18 August, 2026
₹42,999/-

Learn more, and register at:
www.bodharesearch.in/anveshi/badami



BODHA ONLINE COURSE

Civilization Theory - Dhatus as Civilizational Code

A civilization's language is supposed to be a tool it uses. Sanskrit is something else. It is the civilization. When the tradition named its organizing principle dharma, it reached for √dhr - to hold, to bear, to sustain. When it named the cosmic order rta, it reached for √r - to move, to flow. When it named the process of collective refinement samskr̥ti, it reached for √sam-skr - to make well together. The dhatu is the thought, compressed to its most irreducible form, and everything the civilization built outward from it - the philosophy, the ritual, the social architecture, the art - is an unpacking of what was already there in the syllable.

This makes Sanskrit a civilizational source code - the operating system. To read the dhatus correctly is to read the operating system of Bharata. This course takes that claim seriously across eight sessions. Each session opens one or two dhatu-pairs and traces from the verbal root to the concept it generates, to the civilizational architecture it produces. The audience for this course is anyone who wants to understand how a civilization thinks - and specifically how Bharata thinks - at a level deeper than its doctrines, its texts, or its historical record. The dhatu is deeper than all of these. It is the thought before the thought was thought.

Civilizations encode an understanding of reality in their languages, and Sanskrit encodes beginning with the verb root, the dhatu. This course takes eight dhatu-pairs and builds outward from each - from etymology to concept to civilizational implication, revealing Sanskrit as the source code of Bharata's civilizational operating system.

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₹2499 | \$40

Learn more, and register at:
www.bodharesearch.in/academy/dhatus-as-civilizational-code

About Bodha

Bodha is a think tank and research group, focused on contemporary issues of cultural concern, to inform core areas of policy with wisdom drawn from Hindu traditions. We advance intellectual churn within the Hindu renaissance, and curate cultural experiences of core Hindu institutions such as the temple.

Our Verticals

Research

To illuminate hidden universal forces and long arcs in foreign and public policy; to reveal the design of core Hindu institutions like the temple, gurukula, family, and charity; and to turn the social sciences lens with a Hindu view, Bodha engages in focused research projects. These projects combine deep and immersive field research with rigorous theorization based on core cultural ideas.

Anveshi

Guideds tour of four to five days to beautiful and hitherto unexplored temples and kshetras of Bharatavarsha. Anveshi tours are full of architectural, sculptural and cultural splendor, and also an immersion into living systems carrying beautiful cultural traditions for thousands of years.

Bodha Academy

Modern fault lines in Hindu society stem from an identity crisis manufactured by the British, by institutionalizing identity-based fault lines through academia and other institutions. At Bodha, we address this by training scholars every year in anthropology and sociology from an Indic point of view.

The Big Questions

Every year we will formulate big questions stating major problems that capture core concerns in the contemporary journey of Hindu society, and put those questions to great thinkers, leaders and activists. The Big Questions vertical will seek answers which will move the needle towards solving the stated problems.

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