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BEYOND THE LOOKING GLASS: HEAVEN AND EARTH MIRRORED IN EARLY SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE

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The history of religion in South Asia boasts a lengthy and sustained dialogue between religious traditions, often leading to the development of different religious practices and ideologies occurring interdependent or in response to one another. When considering the structural similarities between religions across South Asia, the foundations of religious metaphysics often remain analogous to one another, with their similarities manifesting in observable parallel conditions with a subsequent connection forming between Heaven and Earth. Examining this connection between the two realms—and its subsequent impact on the procession of religion—requires an in-depth look at several religious texts across multiple religious practices to analyze the relationship between abstract religious ideology and the material reality of a religion’s practitioners.

Through an analysis of multiple religious texts, the necessary structuring of religion through a number of mirroring dualities originating in an observable parallel between conceptions of Heaven and Earth marks a distinctive feature of South Asian religious belief; this mirroring provides not merely a metaphysical foundation for religion but also a system that constitutes the manner in which heavenly or divine entities respond and develop against the more human. The complex relationship between society and religion within South Asia suggests a dynamic in which aspects of society intentionally mirror an understood structure of Heaven as it relates to Earth, creating an active dynamic of expected metamorphosis between people and their religious activity, with consequences manifesting materially and throughout people’s daily lives.

As religion in South Asia contains a complex history with several canonized texts with which to examine metaphysical structures of religion, the use of the *R̥gveda* and the *Buddhacarita* as the primary lenses through which to interpret the roles of Heaven and Earth in the procession of South Asian religion extends from the respective significance of the texts as some of the earliest examples of influential poetry for their given religions.¹ Poetry provides a unique avenue with

¹ Although earlier examples of poetry can be found within the Buddhist canon, these are largely personal poems regarding expression of religion and nature of enlightenment, and they do not

which to explore the relationship between Heaven and Earth—and any subsequent intentions or effects as a result of this relationship—as poetry easily lends itself to the abstract or complex with regard to subject matter and the apparatus required to explore inherently intangible concepts. Subsequent texts, such as the *Upaniṣads* and selected works within the Buddhist Pāli Canon, represent a transition from largely conceptual poetry into teachings informed by practical application, allowing for the development of religious praxis derivative of its preceding ideology, another aspect significant to the examination of religious tradition as it occurs and influences the everyday life of people within South Asia.

The Mirrored Structure of Heaven and Earth

An understanding of the unique similarities built between the metaphysical aspects of religion in South Asia and the concrete foundations of society can be observed first through the hymns of the *R̥gveda* (c. 1200 BCE), which expound upon the realm of Heaven and its origins in great detail, with these details often simulating or inspiring later details concerning the structure of material society. Moreover, the paralleled duality between the heavens and Earth appear as early as the creation story itself, which can be viewed as a mold for further comparison. As hymn 10.90, lines 1–3, describes:

*sahasraśīrṣā puruṣaḥ sahasrākṣaḥ sahasrapāt /
sa bhūmim̐ viśvato vṛtvāty atīṣṭhad daśāṅgulam // 10.90.1
puruṣa evedaṃ sarvaṃ yad bhūtaṃ yac ca bhavyam /
utāmṛtatvasyeśāno yad annenātirohati // 10.90.2
etāvān asya mahimāto jyāyāṃś ca pūruṣaḥ /
pādo 'sya viśvā bhūtāni tripād asyāmṛtaṃ divi // 10.90.3²*

The man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.
Having covered the Earth on all sides, he extended ten fingers' breadth
beyond.
The Man is alone in this whole (world): what has come into being and
what is to be.
Moreover, he is master of immortality when he climbs beyond (this world) through food.
So much is his greatness, but the Man is more than this:
A quarter of him is all living beings; three quarters are the immortal
in heaven.³

factor into consideration when analyzing constructions of Heaven and Earth within religious text. As such, works such as the *Khuddaka Nikāya* will not be examined over the course of this essay.

² All romanized Sanskrit and Pāli editions are taken from GRETIL: Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts and Indian Languages (<http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/>).

³ All translations of the *R̥gveda* are from Joel Brereton and Stephanie Jamison's recent three-volume set *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*. According to Brereton and Jamison (pp.

This famous origin story, involving Puruṣa—or “the cosmic man”—finds relevance when discussing the mirroring structure of the heavens in relation to the physical, and more specifically society itself, when considering Puruṣa’s dual role in the creation of the universe and the unique circumstance of his connecting the heavens with Earth. It is first significant that the cosmic sacrifice leading to the creation of the universe involves a being described as a “man,” even if many of his features (and their multitudes) transcend that which is typically associated with humanity, as this appellation suggests a connection between the purely human and the divine. The specifics of Puruṣa’s description only further this suggestion, as his existence serves as a sacrifice in the creation of both Heaven and Earth:

*nābhyā āsīd antarikṣaṃ śīrṣṇo dyauh sam avartata /
padbhyām bhūmir diśaḥ śrotrāt tathā lokām akalpayan // 10.90.14*

From his navel was the midspace. From his head the heaven developed. From his two feet the earth.

The sacrifice of Puruṣa to create existence itself, specifically Heaven and Earth, signifies that these realms, no matter their superficial difference, exist of the same cosmic substance and derive from the same cosmic man. Given that the two perform similar functions, acting as the temporary home for divine and human figures alike, their shared origin thus further reflects their eventual shared function. In the context of established resemblances between the metaphysical of religion and the layout of the physical, Puruṣa’s existence validates the notion that this is a deliberate parallel meant to have observable effects on the subsequent relations between Heaven and Earth and how the two realms are often linked and structurally similar throughout the hymns of the *Ṛgveda*.

Following creation itself, comparisons between Heaven and Earth continue throughout the *Ṛgveda*, with the connection between the two eventually developing into equal and complementary roles as the two are likened to parents. Within hymn 1.159, Heaven and Earth bear the following descriptions:

*pra dyāvā yajñaiḥ pṛthivī ṛtāvṛdhā mahī stuṣe vidatheṣu pracetasā /
devebhir ye devaputre sudamsasetthā dhiyā vāryāṇi prabhūṣataḥ // 1.159.1*

I shall start up the praise, along with sacrifices, to Heaven and to Earth, the two great ones growing strong through truth, the discerning ones, at the rites of distribution; those of

57–58), who were commenting on Max Müller and H. T. Colebrooke’s 19th-century observation, the *Puruṣa-sūkta* was very likely added in to the *Ṛgveda* at a later time as the text was reified by brāhmaṇical compilers.

wondrous power, whose sons are gods, who together with the gods tender things of value (to the mortal) who has an insight right to the point.⁴

Although the poet dedicates the hymn in its entirety to the relationship between Heaven and Earth, the hymn's opening lines introduce the similar duality of the two realms that suggests the nature of their mirrored states and its role within the procession of religion. As the dynamic between the two draws comparisons to that of parents, the complementary and paternal relationship that Heaven and Earth have toward both the gods and humanity defines the two beyond their roles as merely realms or planes of existence. Rather, there is a suggested agency or participation, particularity within the phrase "tender things of value," which serves to argue that these two realms exist dynamically, with their shared relationship acting as the basis for this dynamic. With the understanding that their mirrored state acts as a foundation for their role within religion itself, the dual nature of the two realms—particularly within the context of the *Ṛgveda*—becomes especially clear.

When examined closely, Heaven and Earth often appear as a pair within the *Ṛgveda*, even outside hymns dedicated to both Heaven and Earth as the primary subjects, with comparisons present between the two merely through the existence of their conjoined state. As the *Ṛgveda* presents Heaven and Earth as a distinct pair in 147 separate instances throughout the text, the significance of such occurrences is highlighted through virtue of the immense frequency of their joint depiction. In hymn 10.91, a poem devoted to the fire god Agni, the mention of Heaven and Earth together acts as a synecdochical representation for the relationship presented between Heaven and Earth throughout the *Ṛgveda* as a whole:

vasur vasūnām kṣayasi tvam eka id dyāvā ca yāni pṛthivī ca puṣyatah // 10.91.3

As good one [Agni], you alone hold sway over goods, which both Heaven and Earth foster.⁵

This verse echoes sentiments stated within hymns dedicated solely to the dynamic between Heaven and Earth, but it bears its relevance as this relationship exists within hymns removed from those specific to the two realms, suggesting the existence of this relationship throughout the duration of the *Ṛgveda*. A sustained presence of a conjoined nature between Heaven and Earth, specifically one in which the two realms act together with deliberately fostered similarities, indicates toward the continuous nature of this relationship, as it is neither static nor purely rhetorical,

⁴ Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, trans., *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.159.1.

⁵ Jamison and Brereton, 10.91.3.

but rather a basis for understanding other aspects of the religious text, such as with hymn 10.91 as it concerns the god Agni. This interplay between the established relationship of Heaven and Earth with the gods, in addition to other aspects of religion as presented in the *Ṛgveda*, further highlights the active component of this relationship given the gods' similarly active role throughout the contents of the *Ṛgveda*.

A connection between the heavens and Earth, defined by its role as an active component in religion, can be extended to other religious texts as well, including those outside Hinduism. The *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha), a first-century-CE devotional biography, may be understood as “an apologetic work presenting the Buddhist response to Brahmanical attacks” which “presented the Buddha’s doctrine, the dharma discovered through his Awakening, as the consummation of the Brahmanical text” that shares similarities with the *Ṛgveda* in terms of the dynamic relationship depicted between Heaven and Earth throughout the course of the text.⁶ This interpretation of the *Buddhacarita*—and, by extension, Buddhism itself—presents Buddhism not as a wholly unique religion separate entirely from Hinduism but rather as a continuation or supplementation of Hinduism, meant to adapt certain aspects of Hinduism while rejecting others based on the newfound knowledge of the Buddha’s awakening. The framework for the metaphysical aspects of religion, specifically the conceptualization of Heaven and Hell, remains largely the same—including the temporary nature of each realm with regard to its inhabitants—allowing for a similar analysis of the relationship between Heaven and Earth as it appears within the text of the *Buddhacarita* in comparison to that of the *Ṛgveda*.

Within the *Buddhacarita*, mentions of Heaven and Earth in relation to each other often occur in the form of direct comparisons, rather than through a personified presentation of their relationship as it relates to other aspects of religion as the two appear in the *Ṛgveda*. Often, the *Buddhacarita* explores the similar states of Heaven and Earth through their shared splendor. Aśvaghōṣa—the work’s poet—likens Earth to Heaven, particularly the city of the Siddhartha’s residence, describing “that city as joyous as paradise” (*puram tat svargam iva prahrṣtam*, 3.26a).⁷ Aśvaghōṣa elaborates on this comparison earlier in the text, depicting the city as

⁶ Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Life of the Buddha*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), xxiii–xxiv.

⁷ Olivelle, *Life of the Buddha*, 3.26.

muktaś ca durbhikṣabhayāmayebhyo hr̥ṣṭo janaḥ svarga ivābhireme // 2.13 a,b

Freed from famine, from danger and disease, people, thrilled, rejoiced as if in heaven.⁸

Through this description of Earth, and its subsequent comparison to Heaven, an understanding of both realms and their relation to each other becomes apparent, as Aśvaghōṣa presents the likeness of the two realms without fanfare or caveat, suggesting an intrinsic understanding of the similarities between the two realms. These descriptions of Earth as a heavenly place are significant primarily because they include specific details not considered within the hymns of the *R̥gveda*, while still furthering the concept of a shared state of identity between the two realms. Whereas the *R̥gveda* concerns itself primarily with the abstract likeness that Heaven and Earth share, the *Buddhacarita* expounds upon more concrete details, specifically the absence of perceived suffering, often associated with Heaven, suggesting the two realms as not only likened in physical structure but also as sharing similar circumstances of prosperity. Given that Buddhism especially leans into the temporary nature of Heaven, given that the finalized state of Nirvana is itself distinct from the temporary habitat of the heavens, a connection between Heaven and Earth in the context of Buddhism proves unsurprising, as the two are intrinsically likened through their shared impermanence.

Looking beyond even religious text and examining this parallel structure as it exists in religious expression, there is evidence of its role as a foundation of religious activity within modern-day South Asia. Cultural anthropologist Diane Mines describes Yanaimangalam, an Indian village that “compares both castes and gods along several dimensions.”⁹ Both humans and gods are stratified through language and, more significantly, through actual location:

Both humans and gods may be further distinguished residentially. Higher and “bigger” (powerful, landowning) castes live in a central residential cluster, while the lower and “little” (landless, service-producing) castes live on the peripheries of the village and in small hamlets out across the fields. It is the same with gods. The higher, more “pure” gods live in the interiors of the central village: in temples on village streets and in alcoves and in framed posters on the walls of residents’ houses. Low-ranking, “impure,”

⁸ Ibid., 2.13.

⁹ Diane Mines, “The Hindu Gods in a South Indian Village,” in *Everyday Life in South Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 236.

meat-eating gods live outside: out in the fields or the wastelands beyond, outside the house in the back courtyards facing away from the house.¹⁰

The implications of such a parallel structure, with the physical and locational distributions of the heavens matching that of humanity, validate the significance of such mirrored states within the context of religious text, as the phenomena can be witnessed within the practice of religion beyond textual ideology. This occurrence suggests the fundamental role of a mirrored Heaven and Earth state to the practice of religion within South Asia, implying further consequences resulting from its existence. In the context of the structure itself, this mirroring at its most basic shapes attitudes within the village:

[Lower] gods and goddesses are often subordinated to the village goddess as guardians who live near but outside her temple, much like the humans who live outside the central village residential area are thought by many higher-caste residents to be subordinate and unruly as well.¹¹

Here, the role of gods acts as a determiner for the role of humans, as the two are considered similar in both likeness and standing. Given this further understanding of the mirrored structure as a mold for society itself, it stands to reason there are further observable ideological and material consequences as the role of religion extends beyond simply spiritual to determine or influence class structures as well.

Divine and Human Mutualism

With such direct parallelism established between not only the heavens and Earth but also their inhabitants—the gods in Heaven and humans on Earth—a dynamic relationship between the two realms suggests a similar dynamic between the gods and humanity. In terms of the *R̥gveda*, interactions between humanity and the gods are defined primarily by devotional actions and subsequent prosperity. In hymn 6.28, a poem dedicated to chief of the gods Indra and his relationship with man depicts this dichotomy of action and prosperity:

indro yajvane pṛṇate ca śikṣaty uped dadāti na svam muṣāyati // 6.28.2a,b

Indra does his best for the man who sacrifices and delivers in full. He gives more; he does not steal what belongs to him.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 242.

¹² Jamison and Brereton, 6.28.2.

The significance of this hymn lies in the implied give-and-take between Indra and humanity; if man does not “give in full,” then Indra cannot contribute to man’s prosperity. Ultimately, man needs the gods to be prosperous, but the gods will bestow prosperity only on those who prove themselves worthy. As such a dynamic is formed, the conceptualization of prosperity as described in the *Ṛgveda* is as much religious as it is physical, as prosperity is contextualized by action itself through the man who “sacrifices and delivers in full” (*yajvane pṛnate*), with action as the suggested basis for religious practice. This relationship is further characterized within the text as an “alliance” in the first verse of hymn 4.57, with a god described as the “Lord of the Field”:

*kṣetrasya patinā vyaṃ hiteneva jayāmasi /
gām aśvam poṣayitv ā sa no mṛṣātīdṛṣe // 4.57.1*

By means of the Lord of the Field as if by concluded (alliance) may we win what prospers the cow, the horse.¹³

In this verse, the poet not only connects the gods to the concept of prosperity but also describes the role of the gods as occurring in the form of “a concluded (alliance),” highlighting the manner in which prosperity for man can be achieved only through the work of gods in accordance with man. As the *Ṛgveda* concerns itself both with the connection between Heaven and Earth and with a similar connection between its inhabitants, an existing influence or interplay can be observed between the two parallel connections.

The symbiotic roles between gods and man extend beyond the *Ṛgveda* to find relevance in other important Hindu texts, with the *Bhagavad-Gīta* similarly considering this relationship through the didactic teachings of Lord Kṛṣṇa to ambivalent warrior Arjuna. Kṛṣṇa’s advice builds upon the relationship presented within the *Ṛgveda*, as the dynamic he describes is more clearly bilateral in its impact on both humanity and the divine. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna:

*sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣtvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ /
anena prasaviṣyadhvam eṣa vo 'stv iṣṭakāmadhuk // 3.10
devān bhāvayatānena te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ /
parasparam bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ param avāpsyatha // 3.11*

When creating living beings and sacrifice,
Prajapati, the primordial creator, said:

“By sacrifice will you procreate!

¹³ Jamison and Brereton, 4.57.1.

Let it be your wish-granting cow!
 Foster the gods with this,
 and may they foster you;
 by enriching one another,
 you will achieve a higher good.”¹⁴

In this conceptualization of the relationship between gods and humanity, sacrifice exists as a means of communication between the two that works to enrich both in equal amounts, as suggested by the parallel grammatical structure presented within Kṛṣṇa’s teachings. In his words, Kṛṣṇa gives the fostering of gods by humanity and vice versa the same weight, suggesting a relationship that equates the substance of such interactions on both its sides. The significance of this is revealed when we examine this dynamic as it relates to the established relationship of Heaven and Earth. In the *Bhagavad-Gīta*, Kṛṣṇa describes men who reach “the holy world of Indra [and] savor the heavenly delights” (*surendralokam aśnanti divyān divi deva-bhogān*, 9.20c,d), who, after having

*te taṃ bhuktvā svarga-lokaṃ viśālaṃ
 kṣīṇe puṇye martya-lokaṃ viśanti // 9.21a,b*

long enjoyed the world of heaven and their merit is exhausted, they enter the mortal world.¹⁵

Kṛṣṇa then describes this process as obtaining “what is transient” (*gatāgataṃ labhante*). In his teaching, Kṛṣṇa indirectly expounds upon the impermanence that characterizes both Heaven and Earth, and he serves to contextualize the relationship between the gods and man as a facet of this impermanence. As such the temporary nature of Heaven and Earth’s residence mirrors that of the realms themselves, it suggests the derivability of the conditions of the former from the inherent structures of the latter.

As the dynamic between gods and man parallels that of Heaven and Earth, it can also be argued that it is derivative of that original relationship itself as expounded on in the *Ṛgveda*. In hymn 1.159, the concepts of devotion and prosperity are specifically characterized in the context of a relationship between Earth and Heaven:

asmabhyaṃ dyāvāprthivī sucetunā rayiṃ dhattaṃ vasumantaṃ śatagvinam // 1.159.5c,d

¹⁴ Barbara Stoler Miller, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gita* (New York: Bantam Classic, 2004), 3.10–11.

¹⁵ Stoler Miller, 9.21.

For us, o Heaven and Earth, through your kind attention establish wealth consisting of goods and a hundred cows.¹⁶

In creating a correlation between prosperity and Heaven and Earth as a given unit, hymn 1.159 intrinsically implies a similar correlation between a coupled Heaven and Earth and the subsequent dynamic between gods and humanity, as prosperity is at the root of this relationship. This hymn specifically links this dynamic between gods and man to the dynamic between Heaven and Earth, suggesting the former as a consequence of the latter, defining humanity's goal of prosperity as a result of a mirrored state between Heaven and Earth. Hymn 1.22 further supports this implied association:

*mahī dyauh pṛthivī ca na imaṃ yajñam mimikṣatām /
pipṛtām no bharīmabhiḥ // 1.22.13*

Let the great ones, Heaven and Earth, mix this sacrifice for us,
Let them carry us through with their support.¹⁷

Although Heaven and Earth are not presented as center of the act of sacrifice, the two offer “support,” marking their supplemental or influential role in the interactions between gods and man, as sacrifice and ritual are primary aspects of this relationship. Given this interpretation, the dual pillars of prosperity and action that define the interactions between humanity and the divine, combined with their ultimate material effects, can be considered derivative of the primary mirrored states of Heaven and Earth, with their mirrored state acting as a fundamental ideological basis for many South Asian religions.

Within the *Buddhacarita*, the parallels between Heaven and Earth as an influence on human-godly relations appears more directly than in the *Rgveda*, while nevertheless suggesting similar established interactions between the divine and humanity. As previously examined, several comparisons between Heaven and Earth—particularly the city of Siddhartha's upbringing—exist explicitly throughout the *Buddhacarita*. A more significant occurrence, however, is how these similarities are observed by those within the text and the consequences it derives. Aśvaghōṣa describes the manner in which the city so resembles heaven that “the gods residing in the pure realm [Heaven]” (*śuddhādhivāsāḥ devāḥ*)

jīrṇaṃ naraṃ nirmamire prayātuṃ saṃcodanārthaṃ kṣitipātmajasya // 3.26

¹⁶ Jamison and Brereton, 1.159.5.

¹⁷ Jamison and Brereton, 1.22.13.

created an old man in order to induce the son of the king to go forth.¹⁸

Although this creation exists in part to compel the Buddha-to-be's eventual journey toward awakening, it also suggests the heavenly nature of Earth itself, as the Earth is so likened to paradise that even the gods—within the “pure realm”—notice this resemblance and take offence to the likeness of the two. Given the level of their reaction, the similarity between Heaven and Earth, though not expounded upon, can be taken to be significant, so much so as to compel the gods themselves toward action. Although the expression is significantly different from that of the *Rgveda*, the *Buddhacarita* suggests the same conclusion: The mirrored states of Heaven and Earth inspire consequences beyond that of the similarities of the realms; they act as a catalyst for dynamic change.

An examination of relatively recent religious texts compared to the *Rgveda* also considers the interactions between the gods and humanity, specifically as an extension of an established Heaven-and-Earth parallelism. The *Upaniṣads* (c. 800–500 BCE), which primarily contain the didactic conversations between teacher and student regarding a number of Hindu philosophies, often deal in the philosophical consequences and extrapolations of many Hindu beliefs. In *The Early Upaniṣads*, translator Patrick Olivelle notes:

[T]he Vedic thinkers did not make a strict distinction between the gods and cosmic realities; so the cosmic sphere includes both. The central concern of all Vedic thinkers, including the authors of the Upaniṣads, is to discover the connections that bind elements of these three spheres to each other. The assumption then is that the universe constitutes a web of relations, that things that appear to stand alone and apart are, in fact, connected to other things.¹⁹

The conceptualization of the universe as “a web of relations” where seemingly independent things are actually interrelated acts as the lens through which to interpret the majority of the *Upaniṣads*, particularly concerning aspects in which the inhabitants of given realms interact and are influenced by these realms themselves. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, one such didactic tale explains the relationship between ritual, the gods, and the realms: “[Man] wins the earthly world through the hymn recited before the sacrifice, the intermediate world through the hymn that accompanies the sacrifice, and the heavenly world through the hymn of

¹⁸ Olivelle, *Life of the Buddha*, 3.26.

¹⁹ Patrick Olivelle, trans., *The Early Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24.

praise.”²⁰ Building off the parallel relationship established between Heaven and Earth within the *R̥gveda*, the *Upaniṣads* classify the role of this relationship within the context of religion on a broader scale, specifically in how it relates to ritual and sacrifice, a previously mentioned significant component to the relationship between gods and man. As consequence, the dynamic nature of South Asian religions exists in deference to this connected state of the metaphysical and physical realms, such that the practice of religion can be considered an extension of the exploration of this connected state.

Within the context of a modern practically applied religion, this dynamic can be observed in the village Yanaimangalam of Mines’s article, as she examines the capricious nature of gods toward humanity and the earthly realm. The earlier mention of stratification of gods, with a parallel stratification of humanity, can be witnessed and even subject to manipulation within the context of a relationship between the two groups. Mines describes a relationship between humanity and the divine that is characterized by both change and a natural ambivalence:

From one end of the spectrum to the other, soft gods (of which Brahmanical are the softest) are those who are generally calm, stable, and beneficent. Fierce gods on the other hand are wild, unstable, and unpredictable. The fierce gods may prove protective and beneficent at one time, then cruel at another. They may unpredictably attack a person if they feel the slightest insult.²¹

Given this depiction of not only the gods but also their ever-shifting relationship with humanity, an understanding of a practically applied dynamic of change within the context of practiced religion can be understood. When a given relationship between humanity and the divine is subject to change, visible ramifications become apparent, such as a blurring between the line of humanity and divine, mirroring the blurred distinctions between Heaven and Earth as they are often likened to one another within religious text. Mines provides an example of this occurrence in the killing of a man by a lesser god, which, after several generations, led to “the victim . . . becoming a lesser form of the god who had killed him.”²² Such a metamorphosis of identity displays a continuous state of change in religion and religious expression within the context of South Asian religions. When religious expression is subject

²⁰ Ibid., 3.1.10.

²¹ Mines, 237.

²² Mines, 244.

to change, there are undoubtedly material consequences of such change that can then be observed.

Consequential Materiality of Religious Metaphysics

An examination of the material aspects of life as affected by the dynamics within religion first requires an understanding of material value and its significance throughout religious texts. Primarily, this suggests several questions: What does it mean to be materially prosperous? How can material prosperity be measured? And finally, what is the relationship between material prosperity and religion? Considering these questions through the lens of the *Rgveda*, a connection between material prosperity and pastoral success can be ascertained. Given a lack of coinage analogous to modern currency, substitutes to measure a man's wealth as a sign of prosperity occur in the form of a man's agricultural success and his wealth of pastoral animals, specifically cows. In line 4 of hymn 4.57, the poet states:

śunaṃ vāhāḥ śunaṃ naraḥ śunaṃ kṛṣatu lāṅgalam // 4.57.4a,b

Prosperity (be) the draft-animals; prosperity the superior men; for prosperity let the plow til.²³

This hymn clearly connects the concept of prosperity to a man's success in agriculture and pastoral animals; in fact, these are the only measures of prosperity given. The more-prosperous man is the one more visibly thriving in his farming and pasturing. The fifth and sixth lines in hymn 6.28 further this connection by stating that “fortune has appeared to me as cows (*gāvo bhago me acchān*)” and

*yūyaṃ gāvo medayathā kṛśaṃ cid aśrīraṃ cit kṛṇuthā supratīkam /
bhadraṃ grhaṃ kṛṇutha bhadravāco bṛhad vo vaya ucyaṭe sabhāsu // 6.28.6*

You fatten even the thin man, o cows. You make even one without beauty to have a lovely face. You make the house blessed, o you of blessed speech. Your vigor is declared loftily in the assemblies.²⁴

These excerpts not only liken cows to fortune itself but also establish cows as an investment in further prosperity and elevate the importance of cows above all other as a sign of success. By acting as a sign of a blessed house and improving upon man, cows act as a display of established and lasting wealth and prosperity, as their impact stretches beyond the immediately practical.

²³ Jamison and Brereton, 4.57.4.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.28.6.

Given an understanding of material prosperity, it can then be understood that this measure of wealth closely interacts with similarly considered religious prosperity, both in how it is achieved and in its understood significance. The *R̥gveda* primarily suggests that, given the relationship between the gods and man as an instigator of success—with a man’s prosperity (or lack thereof) on display in the form of his agriculture success and wealth of cows—a man’s physical or worldly prosperity will always be tied to his perceived spiritual purity or devoutness. When considering in context, this redefines how a “rich” or “poor” man will be perceived within the context of Vedic society and religion, as a man found not prosperous is not only physically lacking but also spiritually lacking. Line two of hymn 6.26 highlights this sentiment:

bhūyo-bhūyo rayim id asya vardhayann abhinne khilye ni dadhāti devayum // 6.28.2c,d

Making wealth increase more and more just for him, [Indra] establishes the man devoted to the gods in undivided virgin land.²⁵

As this hymn explains that a man faithful to the gods will be given land and become prosperous, the implication becomes that a man not faithful to the gods will not receive these benefits. If a man does not experience prosperity or wealth, it is a result of his own lack of devotion; thus, the role of poverty as defined by the *R̥gveda* becomes one not of circumstantial burden but of personal and spiritual failing. The fifth line of hymn 6.28 further demonstrates this concept, as it likens cows to the divine itself:

imā yā gāvah sa janāsa indra icchāmīd dhṛdā manasā cid indram // 6.28.5c,d

These cows here—they, o peoples, are Indra. I am just searching, with my heart and mind, for Indra.²⁶

By drawing a direct comparison between cows—the most definitive sign of prosperity—and a god, the *R̥gveda* establishes prosperity as a sign of spiritual wealth; thus, the “rich” of society will be held as more spiritual and perceived as more devout in their faith to the gods. With this correlation between wealth and perceived spirituality, divisions in class would be considered not merely economic in nature, but religious as well.

An understanding of societal materiality as something both derived from and informed by religion suggests a heavy reliance on religious practice to ensure

²⁵ Jamison and Brereton, 6.28.2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.28.5.

prosperity, particularly in interactions with the gods, which leads to the fostering of relatively easy pathways for these interactions to occur. This is evident in the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (c. first century BCE), translated by Patrick Olivelle, which largely details various rituals and praise to give the gods as a means of ensuring prosperity, often in relation to how a man should conduct his household and manage his property as an extension of his religion. One *Dharmasūtra* author, Āpastamba, details a “Rite for Prosperity,” which entails a complex ritual to “attain great prosperity.”²⁷ The ceremony tasks the participant to

*udagayana āpūryamāṇapakṣasyaikaikarātramavarārdhyamupoṣya tiṣyeṇa puṣtikāmaḥ
sthālīpākaṃ śrapayitvā mahārājamiṣtvā tena sarpiṣmatā brāhmaṇaṃ bhojayitvā
puṣṭhyarthena siddhaṃ vācayāta // Āpastamba 2.20.3*

prepare a milk-rice oblation; make an offering of that in the fire to the Great King;* feed a Brahmin with that milk-rice mixed with ghee; and get him to proclaim success with a formula signifying prosperity while increasing the number of Brahmins fed to increase prosperity.²⁸

The inclusion of this rite, particularly in a text detailing the manner in which to follow dharma, bears significance on two fronts. Primarily, it dictates a specific route—one that both is time-consuming and requires numerous resources—via which one can achieve prosperity; this suggests a level of religious practice that occurs on a sizable scale in everyday life. Furthermore, this ritual highlights a repetitive action that’s subjected to inherent change through the increase of Brahmins as the ritual continues. As such, the rite can be viewed as a microcosm for not only religious activity but also the repetition of dynamic change that is inherent to the practice of religion in South Asia, as repetition through ritual and devotion are encouraged throughout Hinduism, with the expected change occurring in the relationship between gods and man.

The material consequences of a religion that encourages constant interaction with deities exist beyond the occurrence of action or ritual, existing also in the facilitation of these rituals through the upkeep of religious structures. In the village of Yanaimangalam, “there are at least sixteen temples and shrines to fierce gods and goddesses,” in addition to the number of shrines dedicated to “softer” gods and goddesses.²⁹ An account of the temples and shrines dedicated to deities

²⁷ Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Manu’s Code of Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.20.8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.20.3.

²⁹ Mines, 242.

throughout the village reflects the materials and labor that must have been required to build and upkeep these landmarks, especially given the significance they hold as central to village life. For example, Mines describes one temple dedicated to a brāhmaṇical god as “the largest structure in the village.”³⁰ Diverting or allocating the resources required for the maintenance of this structure suggests an impact on material and everyday existence within the community to a great extent, but this level of devotion characterized by physical structure is considered necessary within Yanaimangalam—and within many South Asian expressions of religion—to facilitate the relationship between man and the divine to ensure prosperity. The most pertinent example exists in the form of the “village goddess,” who, though existing under several names, has a universally recognizable influence and power within the context of the village:

But everyone in the village worships the village goddess. To her is attributed the power of fertility—fertility of the soil, of humans, and of animals. There is no one in the village unaffected by her power (cakti) to assure good crops of rice and to help the living bear healthy children.³¹

In the context of the relationship between villagers and the village goddess, the prevalence of numerous temples and shrines for the purpose of worship or ritual for a given god or goddess both acknowledges the power of this deity within the village and also provides a means to facilitate the possible or eventual use of that power as a means to gain prosperity. As such, it will always appear in the interest of villagers to maintain and upkeep such buildings and monuments, permanently affecting their priorities and the consummation of those priorities as a result.

Within the context of Buddhism, the intended material consequences of a dynamic between humanity and the divine stray from those associated with Hinduism, while still suggesting the significance of the relationship as it exists. As Buddhism emphasizes a path that rebukes material prosperity as a goal or desired achievement, the relationship between man and gods considers a more conservative understanding of prosperity. In the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*, a lesson dating from the late BCE, one monk relays to another monk the following teaching of Buddha:

abhabbo khīṇāsavo bhikkhu [...] abhabbo khīṇāsavo bhikkhu sannidhikāraṃ kāme paribhuñjītuṃ seyyathāpi pubbe agāriyabhūto [...] abhabbo khīṇāsavo bhikkhu chandāgatim gantuṃ // A 4.371

³⁰ Ibid., 238.

³¹ Ibid., 241.

A monk who has destroyed the taints is . . . incapable of amassing material things to enjoy as he did previously when he lived in a house; he is incapable of following a course of action out of desire.³²

As a consequence of his enlightenment, which, in the account given the *Buddhacarita*, occurs as a direct result of the actions of the gods, the Buddha has shunned the idea of life lived in the desire for amassing material wealth or prosperity. The material consequences of this exist in a religion that bases itself in an adherence to a certain level of frugality, a contrast to the importance given to material prosperity within the hymns of the *Rgveda*. This suggests not only the dynamic nature of South Asian religion itself—that even when rooted in similar ideology, different understandings of prosperity will grant different material consequences—but also the given change of the relationship between gods and humanity, as both instances of interaction derive opposing consequences, while still suggesting their shared roots and subsequently fostered dynamics. The result in Buddhism is not a life lived in the pursuit of material prosperity but rather a life founded in spiritual prosperity as the primary goal. Regardless, this devotion to spiritual prosperity above all else can be traced back to the same parallel state of Heaven and Earth that influences and directs Hinduism.

Religion in South Asia constitutes an inherent relationship between Heaven and Earth that informs several other aspects of religion as a product of its existence. In parallel states between Heaven and Earth, subsequent parallels between gods and humanity can be recognized and considered influenced by this primary relationship, with humanity often attempting to foster its relationship with the gods toward a recognized understanding of prosperity. When considering the influential role of the paralleled realms of Heaven and Earth, many aspects of the practice of religion in South Asia occur as either a direct or consequential response to this relationship, as ritual and monuments alike all exist within the framework of a conjoined Heaven and Earth and of the attempts of gods and man to bridge these mirrored states. In this sense, it should be understood that even the most abstract and originating concepts of religion suggest their own material consequences, evident through a concise delineation of how those conceptions develop within the practice of religion itself and significant in the manner and scope of their influence on the daily lives of a given religion's practitioners.

³² Rubert Gethin, trans., *Sayings of the Buddha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.471.

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