

Cross-Cultural Intelligibility and the Use of History: From Democracy and Liberalism to Indian Rajanical Thought

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Abstract: While numerous methodological and interpretive challenges confront the study of cross-cultural political theory, this essay examines a particular premodern Indian tradition as an example of such difficulties and one way in which they can be overcome. Exploring the problematic ways in which people have interpreted and made use of India's ancient past, it critically examines arguments for the existence of secularism, free elections, and democratic assemblies in the Vedas. Defending what I call a "critical revivalist" position, it is argued that predominant approaches to premodern traditions in contemporary Indian political theory place significant constraints on cross-cultural intelligibility and theory building within the Indian context. To elaborate this point, I shift from a "political" to rājan-oriented categorical register in an effort to reposition current understandings of self-rule (*svaraj*) in India within a broader rajanical tradition. Finally, this essay explains how contemporary Indian political theory can draw insights from this native tradition without necessarily reverting to familiar Western idioms.

Introduction

Scholars interested in understanding, comparing, or challenging positions across cultures and geographic regions confront not only the dangers of conceptual distortion but also methodological issues stemming from colonialist, orientalist, and Eurocentric emphases on texts as opposed to alternative epistemologies and modes of inquiry.¹ These interpretive challenges, however,

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¹For example, see Jakob De Roover, Sarah Claerhout, and S. N. Balagangadhara, "Liberal Political Theory and the Cultural Migration of Ideas: The Case of

also entail a few glaring issues that have not garnered the attention they deserve: the general lack in understanding of influential “premodern” traditions in various regions of the world, these traditions’ potential connections to contemporary issues and dilemmas, and finally, the problematic ways in which scholars and political actors have interpreted and made use of the past.² This essay argues that substantial progress can be made in addressing these issues through more sustained engagement with premodern traditions outside “the West.”³ Because the study of Indian political theory exemplifies many of these

Secularism in India,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 5 (2011): 571–99; Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, and Discipline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Leigh Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’ A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 741–55; Jenco, “How Meaning Moves: Tan Sitong on Borrowing Across Cultures,” *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 1 (2012): 92–113; Megan Thomas, “Orientalism and Comparative Political Theory,” *Review of Politics* 72, no. 4 (2010): 653–77. A central reason I focus on (orally transmitted) texts in this essay is because they provide the largest amount of evidence for examining pre-Classical Indian political thought.

²If not qualified properly a “premodern/modern” binary can also introduce potentially problematic, oversimplified cross-cultural assumptions. Sudipta Kaviraj, in arguing for a revisionist theory of modernity, has explained how a certain understanding of “premodernity” arises along with a particular theory of modernization that begins in Europe, which is then imposed on other geographic and cultural spaces to define them within a framework predicated on colonialist power relations. See Kaviraj, “An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of History,” *European Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 3 (2005): 497–526. In using the term “premodern” in this essay (omitting the quotation marks hereafter), I intend neither to oversimplify and deny the historicity of modernity as a concept and phenomenon, nor to claim it as a homogenous and universalizing category that serves as a code word for some type of cultural backwardness. For the purposes of my argument, I use it in a more general sense to clarify broad chronological distinctions across long periods of time. Although the critical-revivalist type of position that I will defend attends to premodern sources, in another sense my project could be seen as “a continuation of the spirit of modernity” and attempt to facilitate new, plural modernities through critical reflexivity and improvisation. See Kaviraj, “An Outline,” 521–24.

³It should be noted at the outset how any simplistic distinctions of “native vs. Western” or “self vs. other” are not as transparent as they may initially sound, and I do not wish to rely on an oversimplified assumption of civilizational difference. As Andrew Sartori has explained in the case of India, the idea of culture itself is a modern, Western formulation that is imbricated in modern liberalism and capitalism. Explaining how global capitalism shaped nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bengal’s embrace of “culturalism,” he provides one potential explanation as to why a particular mode of Vedic revivalism made sense in historical and political context. That is, a return to premodern texts might reflect attempts to locate a “native culture” in an idealized past, partly in response to socioeconomic alienation stemming from

difficulties that face cross-cultural political theory more generally, I will examine a particularly important premodern Indian tradition as an example of challenges facing this field of study and one way in which they can be overcome.

Importantly, this project has broader implications for a timely issue in political theory. Addressing debates surrounding the future of democracy under conditions of globalization, Melissa Williams and Mark Warren have recently explained how comparative political theory can help enhance the social conditions for critical reflection and reasoning across cultural boundaries.⁴ In so doing, they clarify how contextual studies of non-Western traditions help lay the groundwork for greater intelligibility and deliberation among “communities of shared fate” that exceed the boundaries of territorial states.⁵ On this account, a central aim of comparative political theory is to identify and investigate historical pathways and conceptual frameworks extending from the ancient past to the present in various political traditions around the globe. Following Williams and Warren, I agree that strengthening grounds for mutual intelligibility—especially across historical distance—can play a significant role in enhancing political theorists’ capacity for critical reflexivity and practical reasoning.⁶ The project outlined by Williams and Warren can be further advanced through sustained engagement with premodern traditions because such efforts create more space for historical and conceptual *co-reflexivity* within and across cultures. In turn, this historical approach opens new doors for innovative forms of questioning and problem solving that may flow critically in both directions, thereby expanding the categorical and conceptual scope of political theory as a field of study. As I will explain, this further requires dismantling unhelpful anachronisms and preventing the interpretive capture of the past for dubious political projects.

colonialism, the spread of capitalist marketization, and laissez-faire economics in many parts of modern India. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point. See Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁴Melissa S. Williams and Mark E. Warren, “A Democratic Case for Comparative Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 1 (2014): 26–57.

⁵*Ibid.*, 31, citing David Held in *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, ed. David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Perraton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 81; Held, *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 309.

⁶“First, it can give us the sort of critical distance that supports reflective judgment within our own societies (knowing ourselves through knowing the other). Second, to the extent that it renders their thought intelligible to us in a form that is recognizably valid for them, the practice of comparative political theory contributes to the social conditions of possibility for the emergence of intercultural collective subjects of practical reason—that is, intercultural publics” (Williams and Warren, “A Democratic Case,” 36).

In taking a historical approach to Indian political theory, this essay also draws upon recent theoretical and methodological observations in postcolonial and cross-cultural political theory. First, I challenge manifestations of what Rajeev Bhargava calls “epistemic injustice,” and Michael McGhee denotes as “unconscious heteronomy,” in Indian political thought.⁷ I argue that resisting problematic epistemic frames entails questioning the application of familiar Western idioms as interpretive categories, and alternatively employing indigenous categories such as “rajanical thought.”⁸ Here, the term “rajanical” invokes the Sanskrit verb *rāj-* (to rule) and will refer to a particular Indian understanding of rule that involves a unique cosmological dimension, sense of stewardship, and broad application across a human-nonhuman spectrum. Second, I develop the project of “deconceptualization” that Aakash Singh describes, which entails “retrieving and uncovering the indigenous conceptualizations, terms and categories of Indian political thought, to find and follow its own logic(s), and eventually to apply it normatively to theorizations of contemporary India’s political realities.”⁹ While scholars must remain aware of the major challenges to cross-cultural theorizing, they should not refrain from interrogating the past to better locate potential connections to contemporary political dilemmas, further aiming to cultivate greater attentiveness to indigenous conceptual frames for imagining alternative futures.

⁷Rajeev Bhargava, “Overcoming the Epistemic Injustice of Colonialism,” *Global Policy* 4, no. 4 (2013): 413–17. He defines epistemic injustice “as a form of cultural injustice that occurs when the concepts and categories by which a people understand themselves and their world are replaced or adversely affected by the concepts and categories of the colonizers” (413); Michael McGhee, “Learning to Converse: Reflections on a Small Experiment,” *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 4 (2013): 530–42.

⁸Some points of clarification are necessary regarding my usage of “politics,” “the political,” and “rajanical” in this essay. Scholars working in cross-cultural and comparative political theory often use the term “political” or designation “the political” in a broader, less specific sense rather than a narrower, more specific one. Following this custom and for the purposes of this essay’s argument, I employ the term “politics” in a broader sense, which, following Raymond Geuss, one might take as “any human activity of structuring or directing or coordinating the actions of a group.” For a helpful distinction between this broader understanding and narrower forms, see Raymond Geuss, *A World without Why* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 146–50. In the second section of the essay I explain how an Indian rajanical tradition, while “political” in a broad sense, nevertheless constitutes a culturally distinctive understanding of rule that is not captured in most specific and predominant Western conceptions of politics, such as Weberian, Arendtian, or Schmittian formulations. In turn, I believe this justifies the usage of “rajanical” as a distinct category, as it specifies an important cluster of Indian ideas and beliefs that also tend to fall outside democratic and liberal frameworks.

⁹Aakash Singh, “Deparochializing the Global Justice Debate, Starting with Indian Political Theory,” *Global Policy* 4, no. 4 (2013): 418–19.

To advance my argument, the essay proceeds in the following manner. The first section provides a critique of arguments for democratic and liberal political ideas in premodern Indian political thought, starting with a clarification of the historical and political context for situating the stakes of interpreting Vedic texts. The subsequent textual critique operates at two analytic levels. On the first level, I examine particular interpretations of the primary texts, and on the second I question the methodological approaches and method of reasoning that scholars use to undertake their analysis. My central claim at this second level is that predominant approaches both reflect and reinforce problematic interpretive sensibilities and conceptual frames, even when unintentional. Building on this critical analysis, the next section clarifies an alternative category for interpreting Vedic thought and considers this category's relevance for contemporary ecological issues and our understanding of *swaraj* (self-rule) in India. Here I argue that the rajanical as opposed to the political is more appropriate for designating a particular tradition extending from the Vedic to the contemporary period, as the term better captures some of this tradition's core concerns: the meaning of rule, its relation to the concepts of sacrifice and ritual, and the questions of *with* and *for whom* rulers rule within both human and nonhuman contexts. The last section explains how contemporary Indian political theory and practice have drawn upon and can continue to develop insights from this rajanical tradition without necessarily reverting to familiar Western idioms, including insights for debates about democratic citizenship and its connection to environmental issues. I conclude by commenting on both the promise and limitations associated with the analytic approach taken and arguments put forth in the essay.

The Intersection of Past and Present: Questions of Cultural Essentialism, Ancient Democracy, and Liberalism

To clarify a historical and textual landscape for my analysis, the Vedic Saṃhitās (ca. 1500–800 BCE) and Brāhmaṇas (ca. 900–650 BCE) constitute an ancient stratum of early South Asian texts that can be dated to the early Vedic period (ca. 1500–650 BCE), which predates the late Vedic (650–200 BCE) and early historical periods (ca. 200 BCE–500 CE). The Saṃhitās are collections of verses, chants, sacrificial formulae, and charms or incantations, while the Brāhmaṇas are sacrificial manuals attached to the Vedic Saṃhitās that describe the Vedic fire sacrifices (*yajñas*) and provide rules for the performance of each ceremony, including explanations of the purpose and meaning of the sacrificial acts and *mantras* (verses). These Vedic texts are incredibly significant from a historical perspective because they express the earliest tradition of political thought on the Indian subcontinent and precede the following, more well-known texts: philosophical Upaniṣads (ca. 800–200 BCE); epic Mahābhārata (ca. 400 BCE–400 CE) and Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki (ca. 400 BCE–400 CE); ritual and legal codes such as the Dharma-Sūtras (ca. 6th–1st centuries BCE) and

Dharma-Śāstras (ca. 1st–4th centuries CE); and most importantly, Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (ca. 4th cent. BCE–4th cent. CE) and Kāmandaki's *Nītisāra* (5th cent. CE), both of which represent a more systematic tradition of political theory that began as early as the Mauryan period (ca. 320–200 BCE).

Given the archaic nature of the Vedas, one might plausibly ask why scholars should even bother examining such an ancient tradition of political thought. Undoubtedly, such engagements are fraught with challenges. For the purposes of my argument in this essay, it is helpful to clarify three predominant types of positions on the question of how to approach and make use of ancient Indian political thought, especially early Vedic texts. The first position could be seen as a “skeptical-rejectionist” one that rejects the Vedas as overly archaic, irrelevant, or deleterious, often presuming that a focus on such ancient texts reflects problematic Orientalist or nationalist impulses.¹⁰ Consequently, this type of position takes a skeptical stance towards the Vedas and tends to suggest that political theorists focus their attention on more modern or contemporary thinkers, events, and movements. A second position, which one could call “modern-romanticist,” seeks to justify engagements with the ancient past by romantically projecting secular, liberal, or democratic ideas onto premodern texts. This is the type of position that I will focus on in the present essay. Finally, a third position views the past as important because it provides grounds for an essentialist Hindu culture and potential basis for a pan-Indian, nationalist identity. Such “Hindu-revivalist” positions exhibit a number of dubious political motivations and dangers. For example, beginning in the nineteenth and extending throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Vedas and brahmanical political thought have been at the center of major political debates concerning neo-Hindu nationalism, the caste system, suppression of Dalits

¹⁰For an example of such a position, see Ramachandra Guha, “Arguments with Sen,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 41 (2005): 4420–25, who provides a critical review of Amartya Sen's appeal to the past in Sen's *The Argumentative Indian* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). For Sen's response to such skeptical-rejectionist positions, see Sen, “The Politics of History,” in *Pluralism and Democracy in India: Debating the Hindu Right*, ed. Wendy Doniger and Martha C. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 21–34. In the wake of Edward Said's highly influential book *Orientalism*, Wendy Doniger astutely explains the logic behind many rejectionist positions and Orientalist indictments, and how a sense of guilt fuels an anti-Orientalism that has led to the unfortunate neglect of ancient texts: “[Said's *Orientalism*] taught us about the collusion between academic knowledge and political power... . But the sense of guilt that the excavation of the imperialist subtext has generated has taken a terrible toll on the study of the text itself. Anti-Orientalism has led in many quarters to a disregard for the philology and basic textual work that the Orientalists did very well and that still remains the basis for sound scholarship about Hinduism” (Doniger, *On Hinduism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2014], 563, 564).

(Untouchables), and conservative Hindu religious attitudes directed towards non-Hindus.¹¹

Pressing questions emerge when considering these alternative positions. Is it possible to defend the value of this early tradition against skeptical-rejectionism, which understandably raises questions about potential neo-Orientalism and neocolonialist motivations? If so, could one simultaneously resist ceding early Vedic and Hindu traditions to both neo-Hindu nationalists and those who would problematically impose secular, democratic, or liberal interpretations?

One reason political theorists have consistently neglected early Vedic and brahmanical texts as worthwhile objects of study, especially in the American academy, pertains to the difficulties one faces in responding to such issues. This essay provides an affirmative response to these questions by outlining an alternative position that could be called “critical-revivalist.” This approach suggests there are good reasons to hold some of these Vedic ideas in high regard and draw upon them to revive—or perhaps more specifically, creatively rearticulate or reappropriate—analogous views and practices better suited to contemporary dilemmas.¹² At a scholarly level, this position entails the careful, contextualized analysis of a tradition yet resists the claim to revive anything that is monolithically or culturally “essential.” Rejecting both secular and Hindu-essentialist interpretations, my approach seeks to prevent scholarly neglect *and* the capture of Vedic thought by Hindu Right groups such as the RSS, who might otherwise monopolize Vedic interpretation for harmful political purposes.¹³ Importantly, a critical-

¹¹Conservative religious and nationalist groups such as the Arya Samaj and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) frequently appeal to the Vedas for inspiration. For example, the founder of Arya Samaj, Swami Dayananda, used the Vedas as spiritual justification for the supremacy of Hindu culture in order to underpin a neo-Hindu nationalism and monolithic Indian cultural renewal. This move further entailed the exclusion of other religious traditions’ truth claims and contributions to Indian political culture.

¹²This formulation of the point is indebted to arguments advanced by Raymond Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). This claim is not meant to imply that all or even most Vedic ideas are necessarily valuable for theory building or practical reasons, and I do not argue that contemporary Indian politics should turn to a Vedic conception of rule in its entirety. For arguments that scholars must remain critical of various Vedic and Hindu ideas and not overly romanticize them, see Laurie Patton, “Nature Romanticism and Sacrifice in Rgvedic Interpretation,” and Lance Nelson, “Reading the Bhagavad Gita from an Ecological Perspective,” in *Hinduism and Ecology*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). For essays explaining how a variety of premodern Indian traditions express ideas that may help address contemporary environmental issues, see Chapple and Tucker, eds., *Hinduism and Ecology*. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting greater clarity on these points.

¹³For a discussion of Hindutva ideology and the political stakes involved in its interpretations of the historical past, see Sumit Sarkar, “Hindutva and History,” in

revivalist approach helps establish greater middle ground and conceptual space in understanding the past for those who might otherwise occupy a more moderate political stance, further helping to prevent gravitation towards the Hindu Right and its interpretation of the past.¹⁴ Such efforts may also help defuse political polarization within various Hindu communities by maintaining an open stance towards the past as a potential dialogic partner for deliberative reasoning about important contemporary issues. Because political theories and their interpretations of texts often serve specific political projects, ideologies, needs, or interests, one should not discount this political dimension and assume that the only or most important thing at stake is a purely academic, theoretical, or philosophical debate. While my critique will focus on various issues of interpretation, I do not want to discount the concrete political issues and interests at play in critically reviving past traditions such as the Vedic one.

Moreover, in response to skeptical-rejectionist challenges, locating and developing an indigenous Indian tradition of political thought requires overcoming particular anxieties that have prevented systematic engagement with premodern traditions. Invoking Bhikhu Parekh's criticism over two decades ago that post-independence India had failed to develop its own tradition of political theory, it is crucial to point out that locutions such as "Indian political theory" and "Indian political thought" tend to obscure the fact that most scholars' temporal referent is actually quite circumscribed.¹⁵ In defending the existence of a tradition of Indian political theory scholars have focused predominantly on modern and contemporary Indian ideas, thinkers, and movements.¹⁶ This is not a coincidence, as systematic inattention to and

Beyond Nationalist Frames: Postmodernism, Hindu Fundamentalism, History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 244–62.

¹⁴On the need for such middle ground, which could provide means for creating a more inclusive public culture in India and for helping to defuse political polarization in Hindu communities, see Gurcharan Das, "The Dilemma of a Liberal Hindu," in *Pluralism and Democracy in India*, 207–19, and Pratik Kanjilal, "The Baby and the Bathwater: Secularism in the Work of a Conservative Writer," *ibid.*, 233–42.

¹⁵Bhikhu Parekh, "The Poverty of Indian Political Theory," *History of Political Thought* 13, no. 3 (1992): 535–60. For a critical response to this assessment, see Aakash Singh and Silika Mohapatra, editors' introduction to *Indian Political Thought: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.

¹⁶Notable exceptions include Anthony Parel, "Gandhi and the Emergence of the Modern Indian Political Canon," *Review of Politics* 70, no. 1 (2008): 40–63, and Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the Historicity of 'the Political': *Rajaniti* and Politics in Modern Indian Thought," in *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices*, ed. Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent (London: Routledge, 2013), 24–39. My study seeks to further develop Kaviraj's argument for attending closely to vernacular Indian concepts and their longer historical trajectories, particularly those related to the concept of *rāj*, or rule.

discomfort with premodern texts, thinkers, or concepts partly result from additional postcolonial anxieties about political modernization.¹⁷ Presumably, reengaging the past would be largely irrelevant for contemporary concerns about democratic development and the adoption of things such as equal political rights. Even worse, premodern ideas may be thought to restrict democratization and liberalization unless—problematically on my account—it is possible to find democratic or liberal ideas in the tradition itself. Such uneasiness has spurred significant misinterpretations of particular premodern traditions, thereby placing constraints on historical and cultural intelligibility as well as contemporary efforts to draw upon unique aspects of Indian political thought for purposes of cross-cultural deliberation and theory building.¹⁸

For example, one of the central debates in ancient Indian political thought concerns the degree to which democratic or liberal political ideas can be found in the Vedic *Samhitās* and *Brāhmaṇas*. Theorists have debated whether or not there were popular, deliberative assemblies with ruling and judicial functions that were socially inclusive; as N. N. Law suggests, “it appears that the council of the Vedic period was more or less of a democratic character.”¹⁹ Another

¹⁷Following Ashis Nandy, a postcolonial fear of being politically “immature” may motivate such concerns. This false presumption of civilizational immaturity could be supported by evolutionary narratives of childhood and adulthood that serve as ideological proxies for colonial ambitions to “civilize” the third world. See Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), chap. 1; “Towards a Third World Utopia,” in *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987). Making this move into premodern Indian political thought may also seem troubling owing to the association of India’s ancient Vedic tradition with the modern-day caste system. Attentive historical and conceptual engagement, however, need not make the scholar an apologist for the various legal and normative uses to which Vedic ideas have been put. I believe it is a greater danger to shun this ancient past completely, and of greater benefit to understand it to see which aspects of the tradition are worth developing and which aspects are demeaning, unproductive, or superfluous in the current political context. On the connection between the ancient Vedic conception of *varṇa* and the modern caste system, as well as the significance of caste in contemporary Indian politics in general, see Laura Dudley Jenkins, *Identity and Identification in India: Defining the Disadvantaged* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 13; Rochana Bajpai, *Debating Difference: Group Rights and Liberal Democracy in India* (New York: Oxford, 2011). For important qualifications that highlight British colonialists’ role in developing the administrative infrastructure and institutionalization of caste identities and its attendant legal apparatus, see Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Dudley, *Identity and Identification*.

¹⁸On the importance of such projects, see Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, chap. 5.

¹⁹N. N. Law, *Aspects of Ancient Indian Polity* (Mumbai: Orient Longmans, 1960 [1921]), 37, see also 10–11. For arguments that deliberative ruling assemblies and

debate concerns whether or not kings (or rulers) were “elected” either by the people (*vis*) or other kings.²⁰ The central problem with such questions is that they presume misleading or inaccurate cross-cultural similarities to Western traditions, categories, and concepts. Such cross-cultural comparisons are often premature, requiring greater reflection and systematic effort in attending to Indian categories, concepts, terminology, and beliefs. While anachronism can be valuable on occasion,²¹ in the Vedic case it restricts our ability to locate the sorts of differences that help enhance conceptual range for political thinking, and thus our ability for critical reflexivity.

In the remainder of this section, I parse my analysis into three topical areas—secularism, cosmology, and democratic assemblies and elections—to clarify the most problematic interpretive moves I find in the literature. The first and second sections will be somewhat brief as they merely clear the basic conceptual ground for the third section, which is the main focus of my critical analysis. Exposing the weakness of democratic and liberal readings of

some form of “public debate” existed, see A. S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1958), 116, 143–44; N. C. Bandyopadhyaya, *Development of Hindu Polity and Political Theories* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1980), 60–64; K. P. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity: A Constitutional History of India in Hindu Times* (Bangalore: Bangalore Printing and Publishing, 1967), 12–20; Beni Prasad, *Theory of Government in Ancient India* (Allahabad: Indian Universities Press, Central Book Depot, 1968), 17; R. S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 99, 105–6; G. P. Singh, *Political Thought in Ancient India: Emergence of the State, Evolution of Kingship, and Inter-State Relations Based on the Saptanga Theory of State* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1993), 44; H. N. Sinha, *Sovereignty in Ancient Indian Polity: A Study in the Evolution of Early Indian State* (London: Luzac, 1938), v; John Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India: A Study of Kingship from the Earliest Times to Circa A.D. 300* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 93–94; V. P. Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and Its Metaphysical Foundations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), 19–20. Contra, see Ian Mabbett, *Truth, Myth and Politics in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Thomson, 1972), 22–3.

²⁰For arguments that kings were elected or that there was an element of popular choice and control in early assemblies, at least on occasion, see Altekar, *State and Government*, 80–81; Bandyopadhyaya, *Development of Hindu Polity*, 48–51; Charles Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community in Early India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 19–20, 22; Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 12, 186–87, 211; Law, *Ancient Indian Polity*, 10–11; Prasad, *Theory of Government*, 17; Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, 104; Singh, *Political Thought in Ancient India*, 43–44; Sinha, *Sovereignty in Ancient Indian Polity*, v; Spellman, *Political Theory*, 51; Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought*, 11, 19–20. For statements questioning or qualifying these claims, see Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community*, 24, 83; Mabbett, *Truth, Myth, and Politics*, 23–24; Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 58; Spellman, *Political Theory*, 19; Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought*, 21.

²¹For example, see Margaret Leslie, “In Defense of Anachronism,” *Political Studies* 18, no. 4 (1970): 433–47.

Vedic thought then establishes grounds, first, for identifying central rajanical ideas expressed in this early Indian tradition, and second, considering how they have been applied and developed in contemporary Indian discourse and politics.

A. *Secularism*

The first theoretical underpinning of democratic readings I seek to challenge concerns misguided arguments for secularism in the Vedic context. Theoretically, some sort of secular stance would mark out a space for an autonomous political sphere, which could then sustain political deliberations that were not determined by a religious viewpoint.²² If we look carefully at one of the most influential cosmogonies in early brahmanical thought—the Puruṣa-Sūkta (Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā [RV] 10.90), in which we see the first mention of four major social groups (*varṇas*) in a cosmogonic narrative—we begin to see how secularist readings face serious problems.²³ Not only does the ruling group (*rājanya*, later *kṣatriya*) emerge *after* the priestly (brahmin) group in the temporal sequence, but the brahmin is also hierarchically situated above the *rājanya* in the body imagery: Puruṣa's (the cosmic person's) mouth, associated with brahmin, stands over his arms (*rājanya*). The Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas suggest that the mouth, which offers up sacred hymns that please the gods and communicates seers' (*rṣis*) cognitions of reality, is superior to any physical might associated with the arms. In turn, brahmanical thought claims Puruṣa's cosmic body is the source of, and thus parallels, a sociopolitical body composed of four social groups (brahmin, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*), which remain fundamentally and hierarchically interconnected. Anything akin to an autonomous political sphere, therefore, would not make sense because the ruling function is linked to the other major social functions—brahmin-cognitive, *vaiśya*-productive, and *śūdra*-service—in an interdependent manner.

Another problem with secular readings can be gleaned from Louis Dumont's seminal work on Vedic thought, *Homo Hierarchicus*. This work advances a secularist reading by interpreting kingship as a political institution that is fundamentally separated from the brahmins' otherworldly, spiritual realm. Accordingly, Dumont explains that the *rājanya/kṣatriya* is a purely political or temporal power, categorically separate from the priestly, sacerdotal

²²In this section I do not wish to suggest that some alternative, purely secular form of kingship existed in the West, as both ancient and medieval forms of kingship across the globe have entailed mystical or cosmological elements. For example, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

²³*Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā*, ed. Max F. Müller, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1890–1892).

power. He thus claims, “the king in India has been secularized. It is from this point that a differentiation occurred, the separation within the religious universe of a sphere or realm opposed to the religious, and roughly corresponding to what we call the political.”²⁴ While I believe Dumont is correct to highlight a distinction between earlier religious forms of kingship or rulership²⁵ and the Vedic model, he pushes this distinction too far. In an attempt to explain how ancient Vedic rule is different from earlier “magico-religious” forms, he overstates similarities between Vedic kingship and later political developments by relying on a modern, Western notion of secularism. As the above quote displays, he admits that whatever this “political” sphere entailed, it remained “within the religious universe.” Therefore, it is misleading when he argues that “in India the king has lost his religious prerogatives,”²⁶ because it is precisely the “religious” (brahmanical) perspective mapped out in the Vedic *Samhitās* and *Brāhmaṇas* that establishes the cosmic necessity of kingly rule and contextualizes the meaning of rule.²⁷ In order for such an argument to work, Dumont would need to explain how a distinctly secular form of kingship could exist *within* a religious point of view that posited various truth claims accessible only by oral scripture and directed kingship toward nonsecular ends. While secular dichotomies may function as helpful distinctions within various Western traditions they can be quite problematic when applied to South Asian and Hindu traditions, especially notions of kingship.²⁸ This point raises a related question about the relationship between the priest and the ruler—a relationship that privileges brahmins and highlights a thoroughgoing cosmological orientation to rule.²⁹

B. Cosmology

Failing to interpret ruling relations between the priest and the king as thoroughly interdependent underemphasizes a deeply cosmological understanding of rule. That is, the early and middle Vedic conception of rule does not parse a humanistic-political dimension from an a-human, cosmological one. Rather, these dimensions are fundamentally intertwined. Theodore

²⁴Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 68.

²⁵That is, what he calls a “magico-religious” model seen in ancient Egyptian and Sumerian kingship.

²⁶Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 68.

²⁷See *ibid.*, 62–88.

²⁸For example, see Rajeev Bhargava, “The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism,” in *The Future of Secularism*, ed. T. N. Srinivasan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁹On the interdependency of priestly and kingly roles, see also Altekar, *State and Government*, 52.

Proferes, in contrast, offers a reading of political sovereignty and freedom in early Vedic works based on the idea that rulers are more or less independent. He suggests that the king/ruler stands at the center of the sociopolitical structure, claiming a type of clan-based federalism existed insofar as “sovereignty was invested in a king according to the free choice of the clans ... [and] [a]t the same time, sovereignty could be passed back to the clans.”³⁰ According to Proferes, ritual symbols and tools such as fire and water were used for purposes of political consolidation and legitimacy.³¹ When referring to the concept of political legitimacy, however, one should clarify if and how an idea of rights underpins the concept,³² considering whether concepts such as sovereignty and legitimacy make sense within the ideational framework of the texts themselves. Such considerations expose what I take to be a broader analytic-methodological issue in literature on ancient Indian political thought, beginning with potentially problematic assumptions about basic cross-cultural equivalences.

While Proferes’s argument that Vedic symbolism reflects ideas of political sovereignty is enlightening in numerous respects, it hinges on privileging a secularized political world *behind* Vedic texts. This approach portrays Vedic thought as following a two-world picture when the texts actually present a multidimensional, interwoven cosmological vision. In this regard, Proferes’s argument reflects a basic premise that I want to challenge: the idea that an anthropological approach is the proper way to examine and interpret Vedic political thought. Those such as Proferes approach the text with the presumption that symbols and cosmology are merely reflections of a priori human motivations to consolidate power and make collective decisions about how to organize their communities. Interpreting ritual uses of fire and water primarily as symbols for attempts at political unification exhibits a reductionist move that assumes political scenarios are, at the end of the day, anthropocentric. On the one hand, Proferes maintains that Vedic ideas of sovereignty were cosmologically holistic in orientation, but on the other, his analytic approach boils this holism down to human interests in such a way that nonhuman elements and their role in Vedic conceptions of rule do not receive enough attention, or simply become anthropocentrically instrumental. Importantly, these nonhuman entities include not only the gods (*devas*) but also a wide array of other beings such as plants and animals, as well as natural phenomena and elements such as the seasons, sacrificial fires, wind, and the sun.³³ As he explains

³⁰Theodore Proferes, *Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty and the Poetics of Power* (New Haven: American Oriental Series, 2007), 76.

³¹See *ibid.*, chaps. 2 and 3.

³²This is especially important when such vocabulary is employed alongside terms such as “election,” for example: “the election of a king involves transformation of an earthly leader into the sun” (*ibid.*, 91).

³³For a detailed study of the broad-ranging Vedic cosmologies and their accompanying taxonomic schemas, see Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient*

about a particularly important ritual fire, the *agni pāñcajanya*: “[the fire] expresses more than just political unity. It is identified with the totality of the cosmos. ... Cosmic and political themes are integrated here beyond distinction.”³⁴ As this statement suggests, the texts do not express a fundamental distinction between cosmology, natural elements, and rule, so interpreting ritual implements such as fire as metaphors or symbols does not fit Vedic beliefs. These things were not metaphors *for* something else, such as human-centric political motivations or a power-driven world behind the sacrifice. Rather, they were deep expressions of a belief in the interconnected nature of reality and well-being extending across various species and phenomena.

I thus question the claim that Vedic poets “use the metaphor of the intensification of light to express the consolidation of power,”³⁵ because such things were not metaphors for the Vedic seers and ritualists. While Proferes’s interpretive approach helps elucidate cross-cultural similarities at a level of anthropological generality and exposes important poetic themes, it does not necessarily provide evidence for a belief in ideas such as rights or political sovereignty predicated on free choice.³⁶ Beginning with analytic approaches that assume basic similarities across cultural divides does not allow us to glean important differences, which is necessary to gain the critical leverage for understanding how potentially unique aspects of one tradition can be developed and make novel contributions to a particular political question or issue.

C. *Democratic Assemblies and Elections*

As I shift attention to arguments about democratic assemblies and elections, it is important to note that most scholars have focused on the Atharva-Veda Saṃhitā as the central locale for democratic and liberal ideas. Generally considered to be the latest layer of the early Vedic corpus, the Atharva-Veda is somewhat unique insofar as it consists neither of original *mantras* or verses (Saṃhitās), nor sacrificial ritual formulae intended to make sense of the

Indian Varṇa System and the Origins of Caste (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). The vast scope and interconnected nature of Vedic cosmologies are quite unique from a cross-cultural perspective, and I will clarify some of the potential implications of these cosmological beliefs for the rajanical thought that I outline in the next section.

³⁴Proferes, *Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty*, 73.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 101.

³⁶For example, when Proferes talks about the “free choice” of the clans (*ibid.*, 76), one should ask: what does “free choice” mean? What assumptions about human nature, and potentially incompatible beliefs about a concept such as freedom, are packed into such a belief? These are the sorts of questions that lead back to the categories of Vedic cosmology and ontology, which do not express modern beliefs about freedom grounded in concepts such as autonomy.

mantras (Brāhmaṇas). Rather, these works consist of charms, incantations, and imprecations (*atharvāṅgirases* or *atharvans*) that can be invoked by the *brahman* priest, if necessary, during the sacrificial rituals. These charms and imprecations are not the cosmos-ordering *yajñas* (sacrificial rituals) that one finds in earlier Vedic works but rather minor charms that aim to achieve more limited personal goals, such as guarding a pregnant woman from demons, appeasing jealousy, or strengthening a man's virility. In this regard the Atharva-Veda exhibits a somewhat unique ritual world, and it is likely that these *atharvans* either arose from, or were heavily influenced by, popular nonbrahmanical sources. Nevertheless, the cosmological, metaphysical, and ontological context in this collection of hymns is generally commensurate with those in the liturgical Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas. Most importantly, a somewhat unique set of claims arises in the Atharva-Veda that appears to support arguments for the existence of ancient Indian democratic ideas, including political deliberation and the election of kings.

Following secularist premises, scholars have highlighted terms that seemingly indicate democratic, deliberative forms of rule. Debates on this topic tend to revolve around two important terms. The first term, *sabhā*, is an assembly, assembly hall, or communal meeting place. Macdonell and Keith point out that the *sabhā* was a multipurpose assembly where dicing and gambling took place, along with conversation regarding general communal affairs.³⁷ Ghosal concurs with this interpretation, explaining, "The gambler's addiction to the *sabhā* (RV 10.34.6) makes its sense and purpose clear."³⁸ Importantly, this Sanskrit term has given rise to the modern Indian term *sabhā*, which denotes both local and national assemblies. The second term is *samiti*, an assembly or place where members of the community gather. Here, the central question is: in these assemblies, did a type of political deliberation take place, and were communal ruling decisions made according to such deliberation by a relatively free and equal community of individuals? It is likely that scholars will not be able to answer such questions in any definitive manner, partly because they have been asked from an empirical-historical standpoint. While scholars argue about what did in fact happen in these assemblies, they do not have reliable historical documents for this time period, thus weakening their capacity to make precise historical claims. Unfortunately, we cannot know the exact nature of these *sabhās* and *samitis* because the requisite historical evidence simply does not exist. Attempting to reconstruct an accurate history from these texts is a tenuous exercise, and most arguments regarding these terms are veiled, if not explicit, empirical arguments.³⁹

³⁷ Arthur Anthony Macdonell and Arthur Berriedale Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. 1 and 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1912), 2:426.

³⁸ Pranati Ghosal, *Lifestyle of the Vedic People* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2006), 62.

³⁹ On this point, see also Spellman, *Political Theory*, 93, and Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought*, 11. For examples of those who do not follow this observation and tend to analyze the texts as if they described actual historical circumstances, see

In a modern and contemporary political context, one motivation for such “empirical” approaches, or sincere belief in the type of claims they produce, could be located in Hindu revivalist and nationalist concerns. The Arya Samajist ideology outlined and defended by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883) and Swami Shradananda (1857–1926), as well as the Hindutva ideology propounded by political activist and nationalist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), all drew upon the Vedas as historical texts. Claiming that the Vedas described a pure Aryan-Vedic culture, these political figures glorified and used them to support a sense of nationalist ethnic pride.⁴⁰ Treating the Vedas as historical texts, however, has not only led to problematic political claims. For example, the current Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an outspoken Hindu nationalist, has endorsed educational policies based on the highly controvertible idea that the Vedas display numerous mathematical discoveries and advanced scientific knowledge.

Looking past these historical issues for the moment, there is not sufficient textual evidence to provide a clear view of these assemblies’ character and purpose within the works themselves. Ian Mabbett also highlights problems with viewing these *sabhās* and *samitis* as democratic assemblies, wherein participants supposedly exercised popular sovereignty.⁴¹ For either or both of these assemblies to possess a significant ruling character or role, scholars must be able to marshal enough evidence to show that people in these assemblies ruled over the community, or at least participated in making ruling decisions. Previous scholars have not been able to make this argument without tremendous speculation and interpretive liberties, and the historical and textual evidence currently available likely precludes scholars from doing so.⁴²

When advancing these interpretations scholars generally neglect the context in which claims about *rājans* (rulers, chiefs, kings) and their supposed accountability to the *viś* (common people) in the assembly are in fact made.

Altekar, *State and Government*, 139–41; Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 12–20; Prasad, *Theory of Government*, 17.

⁴⁰See Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 31. See also Pandit Ganga Prasad Upadhyaya, *The Light of Truth (Satyarth Prakash)*, trans. Swami Dayananda, 2nd ed. (Allahabad: Ratna Kumari Svadhyaya Samsthana, 1981); Swami Shradananda, *Hindu Sangathan: Saviour of the Dying Race* (Delhi: Arjun, 1926); V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Sahitya Sadan, 1923, repr. 1989).

⁴¹Mabbett, *Truth, Myth, and Politics*, 22–23.

⁴²Some have noticed and relied upon the increased occurrence of the terms *sabhā* and *samiti* in the Atharva-Veda, using this to argue for a democratic element in early Vedic society. For example, see Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, 78–108, and Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 12–20.

Ritual chants and imprecations surrounding *rājans* always focus on or include deities (*devas*). One is hard-pressed to find any hymn in the Atharva-Veda that, in mentioning *rājans* and their relationship to the people, does not invoke *devas* or a particular *deva*. For example, a charm uttered at the consecration of a ruler states:

Let kingly domain [*rāṣṭra*] come to you with its brilliant power: Ascend forth! Rule the people as the lord and sole ruler. O king [*rājan*], let all four quarters call you; become one who is revered and deserving of homage. Let the people and these regions, as five goddesses, accept you for kingship [*rājya*]. ... Let the kinsmen invoking you, go to you; the agile Agni shall accompany them as messenger. ... First, the *Ásvins*, both *Mitra* and *Varuṇa*, all the gods, and the *Maruts*—let them invoke you. (AV 3.4.1–4)⁴³

This particular *atharvan* invokes a variety of *devas*, and this is not uncommon. Ruling claims involving *sabhās*, *samitis*, kings or rulers, and people (*viś*) never appear without the concomitant belief that human beings, at the most fundamental level, do not rule in any human-centric or selfishly individualistic sort of way. In this sense, ruling on the human plane takes place within a larger cosmological “flow,” and human beings are not the meaning-giving center of the cosmos, especially with respect to rule (*rāj*-). Rather, human beings are understood as ontologically open to and receiving meaning *from within* a broader network of entities and relationships. Because rule is built into the metaphysical structure of the cosmos, human beings take part in macro-ruling processes yet they do not “freely” control its structure or meaning in any independent manner. In undertaking narrowly focused analyses of particular verses (or parts of verses) and hymns that mention assemblies and kings, scholars tend to neglect the broader contexts in which ruling claims make sense. When examining Vedic works, scholars should not begin with the supposition that politics is a purely human activity predicated on concerns about power within the human community, and subsequently analyze claims about various nonhuman beings and phenomena merely as reflections of, and tools for, consolidating power or sovereignty. In contrast, I propose that we begin by taking Vedic claims on their own terms, with full consideration of their native conceptual context and beliefs.

In the liturgical *Samhitās* and *Brāhmaṇas*, a ruler’s royal consecration ceremony, or *rājasūya*, exhibits additional problems with the democratic reading.⁴⁴ A term frequently analyzed in relation with the *rājasūya* is *ratnin*,

⁴³*Atharva-Veda Samhitā*, ed. Vishva Bandhu et al., 5 vols., Vishveshvaranand Indological Series 13–17 (Hoshiarpur: Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute, 1960–64). Translations from the Sanskrit are my own.

⁴⁴For details about the ritual, see the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, ed. Albrecht Weber, 2nd ed., Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, no. 96 (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1964 [1855]), 5.2.3; *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa (Tāṇḍya Brāhmaṇa)*, ed.

a dignitary or member of the royal household.⁴⁵ Because *ratnins* are translated as “givers” (*pradātr*) and “takers” (*apādātr*) of a kingdom,⁴⁶ some find this as evidence implying a representative, deliberative assembly and perhaps even political principles of accountability, election, or popular control over rulership.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, much of this work devolves into historical speculation that is difficult to support with textual evidence. J. C. Heesterman explains that the *ratnins* are simply individuals who possess *ratnas*, which are ritual functions held by royal dignitaries and royal household members.⁴⁸ Accordingly, it is preferable to interpret *ratnins* as extensions and necessary parts of kingly rule and strength, and not as individuals who somehow control or “have a say” in ruling. These *ratnins* also do not appear in the context of the Atharva-Veda Saṃhitā, where their presence in *sabhās* or *samitis* might help support a political principle of accountability. Shifting attention to another significant term in the Atharva-Veda, I can further explain how the sacrificial ritual context of early Vedic thought makes democratic readings less plausible.

Interpretations of *sabhās* and *samitis* as popular assemblies are sometimes based on a problematic interpretation of the term *vidatha*, variously meaning divine worship, household, or sacrificial establishment.⁴⁹ Both Jayaswal and Sharma locate the earliest form of the *sabhā* and *samiti* in this frequently used Ṛg-Vedic term.⁵⁰ Because the *vidatha* is often glossed as a public gathering of sorts, some scholars prematurely deduce that it must have possessed popular, deliberative characteristics. However, Bloomfield astutely explains how the *vidatha* did not entail a public cult or religious sacrifice with a public assemblage, but was rather a private affair.⁵¹ Bloomfield argues that while the term *sabhā* can generally be associated with communal matters, *vidathatha* is associated with domestic affairs.⁵² Linking Bloomfield’s interpretation to Macdonell’s translation of *vidatha* as “divine worship” helps clarify the

Ānandachandra Vedāntagīṣa, 2 vols., Bibliotheca Indica, no. 62 (Kolkata: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1870–74), 18.8–11.

⁴⁵See J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration* (Gravenhage: Mouton, 1957), 49.

⁴⁶*Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, ed. A. Mahadeva Sastri (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1911), 1.7.3.

⁴⁷For example, see Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 196–97; Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, 146–47; Singh, *Political Thought in Ancient India*, 43–44.

⁴⁸Heesterman, *Royal Consecration*, 49.

⁴⁹I believe these translations are more accurate than “public assembly.”

⁵⁰Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 20; Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, 78–95.

⁵¹Maurice Bloomfield, “The Meaning and Etymology of the Vedic Word *Vidātha*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 19 (1898): 13.

⁵²*Ibid.* Bloomfield further explains how the *sabhā* does not always refer to a communal space, occasionally meaning “house” or “parlor” (*ibid.*, 18).

important sacrificial connotations of the term.⁵³ As Bloomfield explains, insofar as the sacrifice is a private event, the *vidatha* understood as a domestic sphere helps make sense of its connection to *yajña*, which refers generally to sacrificial ritual, and more specifically to the material oblation or offering given to the gods. The fact that the term *vidatha* is mostly used in the locative case while *yajña* appears in other cases indicates that the sacrifice took place in the *vidatha*, and should thus be interpreted as a sacrificial establishment that would have been the home, given the context.⁵⁴ Bloomfield also contends that *vidatha*'s meaning sometimes "advances from the meaning '(sacrificial) establishment,' until it reaches the meaning 'sacrifice' ... [which] may preferably be assumed for some of the passages relating to Agni."⁵⁵ Bloomfield's translation of *vidatha* as "sacrifice" is then close to Macdonell's translation as "divine worship." Given these meanings and qualifications, attempts to establish textual and historical connections between *vidatha* and *sabhā/samiti* should be tempered. The primary interpretive mistake has been the move to find historical continuities between such terms (presupposing they represent would-be political institutions) in order to claim that India possessed one of the earliest forms of deliberative, and perhaps democratic, assembly.⁵⁶ These motivations must be set aside so that more attention can be given to the broader terminological and conceptual context.

Problematically, scholars draw additional connections between the *vidatha*, *sabhā*, and *samiti*, arguing that they represent popular assemblies in the Atharva-Veda.⁵⁷ One of the most notable proponents of this interpretation is Jayaswal, who argues: "The *Samiti* and *Sabhā* were not the only popular institutions of the Vedic times ... the '*Vidatha*' ... seems to have been the parent folk-assembly from which the *Sabhā*, *Samiti* differentiated ... associated with civil, military and religious functions."⁵⁸ One problem with this claim is that Jayaswal makes a firm interpretive distinction between civil, military, and religious functions when it is not clear that such distinctions make sense in the

⁵³Arthur Anthony Macdonell, *A Vedic Reader for Students* (LaVergne: Kessinger, 2010 [1917]), 248.

⁵⁴Bloomfield, "Meaning and Etymology," 16.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 17. These passages relating to Agni are RV 3.1.18, 3.27.7.

⁵⁶See also J. P. Sharma and H. W. Bailey, "The Question of the Vidatha in Vedic India," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 1/2 (1965): 43–56. They also argue against the *vidatha* being interpreted as a political institution.

⁵⁷Most scholars' analyses of these assemblies extend from the Rg-Veda to the Atharva-Veda. A comprehensive list of these scholars would be quite long, but examples include Altekar, *State and Government*, 140–44; Bandyopadhyaya, *Development of Hindu Polity*, 58–65; Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community*, 19–20, 24; Jan Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 8, 49, 53; Prasad, *Theory of Government*, 17; Singh, *Political Thought in Ancient India*, 43–45; Spellman, *Political Theory*, 92–97; Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought*, 17–22.

⁵⁸Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 20.

text itself.⁵⁹ Regarding the *samiti*, Jayaswal claims that it “was the national assembly of the whole people or *Viśah* ... [who were] electing and re-electing the *Rājan* or ‘King.’ The whole people were supposed to be present in the assembly.”⁶⁰ In my translation, the passages he cites as evidence are as follows: “Let the people accept you for kingship, as well as these five divine regions (of the sky)” (AV 3.4.2); “Let all the people desire you: do not let the kingdom fall away from you” (AV 6.87.1); “Let all the cardinal directions be unanimous, pursuing the same goal: here let the *samiti* accommodate itself to you, the steadfast one” (AV 6.88.3). If one pays close attention to Jayaswal’s language and the context of these passages, the problems with his position become clear.

First, he draws upon the language of “national assembly” and “election” to interpret the *samiti*. He chooses to interpret the Sanskrit word *jana* as “nation,” failing to adequately qualify his usage of this term, which gives the word an overly modern interpretive connotation. A translation carrying less modern and contemporary baggage, such as “tribe” (which Jayaswal also mentions as a possible translation in a footnote), is more appropriate within this context. Second, the language and interpretation of human “election” is not convincingly substantiated in the passage he cites. In the first (AV 3.4.2) and third (AV 6.88.3) passages, if the people are interpreted as electing the king, then the divine regions of the sky and cardinal directions must also be considered electors. However, it is difficult to imagine how the cardinal directions can behave like people with a voice and a vote.⁶¹ The context is deeply cosmological, and Jayaswal’s attempt to bracket this context in order to privilege some sort of human-based election of a king is quite problematic. Rather confusingly, he also cites a particular Atharva-Veda passage (5.19.15) as evidence for the people (*viś*) electing the *rājan*. This passage states, “The rain, belonging to Mitra and Varuṇa, does not fall upon the person who oppresses the brahmin; the *samiti* is not fit for him, and he subjects no friend to his will.”⁶² No terminology for “election” in any modern sense exists in these Atharva-Vedic passages. Jayaswal chooses this terminology because he believes the people possess the sovereign ruling power, which he contends is channeled by, and exhibited in, the *samiti*.⁶³ However, there is no clear

⁵⁹Here, Jayaswal (ibid.) cites ṚV 2.1.4, 3.26.6, 3.38.5 as evidence for these distinctions.

⁶⁰Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 12; see AV 3.4.2, 6.87.1, 6.88.3.

⁶¹It is possible to read the regions and cardinal directions as metaphors for surrounding peoples, such as tribes and clans. However, this reading downplays the fact that the cardinal directions in Vedic thought had their own distinct, ontological existence as entities within the broader cosmology. It is the latter emphasis on a cosmological interpretation, I have argued, that is needed in the political theory literature.

⁶²The “oppressor” (*brahmajya*) is likely the *rājan* mentioned in an earlier verse of the same hymn (AV 5.19.6). The relationship referred to here is that between the king (*rājan*) and brahmin, not the people (*viś*) and the king, as Jayaswal seems to suggest.

⁶³Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, 12–16. See also Altekar, *State and Government*, 107, 143.

textual evidence supporting this claim. Altekar also helpfully points out how the term *rājakṛt* (literally, kingmaker) can misleadingly be interpreted as an elector.⁶⁴ These *rājakṛts* were not kingmakers in any modern electoral sense, with some underlying belief in political rights and free choice, but rather conductors of the necessary coronation rituals that were required for a king to become a king. *Rājakṛts* may help make a king or ruler by serving as part of the ceremony, but they do not elect him in any modern sense of the word.

The concept of election, in the sense that Jayaswal employs it, would be more appropriate if he could find evidence of the following: a belief in some sort of equality between members of the community (or at least a subset thereof), and a belief that this equality makes the freedom of choice possible within clearly expressed decision-making and ruling practices. However, no clear claims about equality, freedom of choice, or institutionalized ruling procedures can be found in the passages of the Atharva-Veda he cites.⁶⁵ Jayaswal believes he can identify such beliefs in statements such as “*tvām viśo vṛṇatām rājyāya*” (AV 3.4.2). This phrase should be translated, “let the people accept you for rulership.” Jayaswal’s problematic interpretation is based on a translation of the verb root *vṛ*, which he prefers to read as “choose” and subsequently interprets as “elect.” However, in this context I agree with Macdonell and Keith that it makes more sense to translate this verb as “accept.”⁶⁶ To translate it as “choose” in this context, and on this basis interpret free choice and an elective procedure, is both overly speculative and anachronistic. Jayaswal must be able to provide sufficient textual evidence that expresses a belief in something like free elections to make this interpretation work. I do not believe he provides this evidence, nor do I think it can be provided based on the available material. The Atharva-Veda and other Vedic works are not intended to be exclusive political treatises and thus should not be stripped from their cosmological, metaphysical, and ontological framework when examining rule. Taking a secularist approach to these passages, Jayaswal offers misleading, decontextualized interpretations that neglect a broader web of beliefs as well as central Vedic categories, concepts, and terminology.⁶⁷ Although Jayaswal appears to reject an Orientalist interpretation of Vedic thought as primitive, undeveloped, and

⁶⁴ Altekar, *State and Government*, 81–82.

⁶⁵ Jayaswal claims a “free right of discussion” existed in the *samiti* without explaining how a system or conception of rights could exist in the first place (*Hindu Polity*, 14). While he is more restrained in his interpretation of the *sabhā*, he does not refrain from claiming that, like the *samiti*, the *sabhā* included “free discussion” (*ibid.*, 18).

⁶⁶ Macdonell and Keith, *Vedic Index*, 2:211, citing von Richard Pischel and Karl F. Geldner, *Vedische Studien*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1889–1901), 2:303.

⁶⁷ I borrow the phrase “web of beliefs” from Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Jayaswal also claims *samitis* display popular representation (AV 3.4.2, 6.87.1, 6.88.3), deliberation (AV 2.27, 7.12.1, 12.1.56), and discussion of “state” matters (AV 6.64) (*Hindu Polity*, 12–16).

“mystical” in nature, his approach results in an equally problematic interpretation. Perhaps motivated to overcome Orientalist approaches and skeptical-rejectionist positions, he moves too far in the opposite direction and unreasonably adopts a modern-romanticist stance. It is also important to note that finding democratic practices in the Vedas would be attractive to Hindu nationalists because it would provide a potential source for ethnic and religious pride in a Vedic past.

While others are more restrained in their claims about popular forms of participation, representation, and sovereignty in these Vedic assemblies, their interpretations also present problems. Sharma, one of the most notable defenders of deliberative assemblies in the Vedic period, argues that the *vidatha* was the earliest “folk assembly,” which included women and performed deliberative, distributive, military, and religious functions.⁶⁸ His position in these debates is useful for pointing out the types of interpretive problems that consistently arise in the existing scholarship. For example, Sharma interprets a deliberative function in the following passage: “He who is the giver of life, the giver of strength, whose command all beings and the gods obey; he who rules over this two-footed and four-footed world” (AV 13.3.24). Extrapolating from this passage, he claims, “we learn that people aspired for talking big there.”⁶⁹

Three comments are in order here. First, this Atharva-Veda passage is taken directly from a creation hymn in the Ṛg-Veda (10.121.2–3). Therefore, this passage’s proper context is a cosmogonic narrative and has nothing to do with a *vidatha*, assemblies, or deliberation. Second, the passage does not actually contain the term *vidatha*. Finally, one could ask how “aspiring to talk big” has any relevance for ruling concerns and the meaning of kingly rule. Does bold talk necessarily indicate deliberation about who should rule, why, or what it means to rule? Kings are assumed to be the proper rulers in Vedic works, and references to the *sabhā* in the Atharva-Veda do not contradict this claim. One problem with interpreting the *sabhā* as relevant for ruling concerns is that statements made about it neither prove nor disprove anything distinctly relevant about kingly rule. That is, this assembly assumes an institutionalized king, and none of its functions overlap with or contradict the king’s apparent *varṇa* duties. In one example, Sharma cites a passage (AV 7.12.1–3) as evidence that the king considered the advice of the *sabhā* as “supremely important” on “hotly discussed proposals.”⁷⁰ These verses, however, emphasize agreement and harmony in the *sabhā* and not the type of disagreement or agonism that one observes, for example, in ancient Greek assemblies. Sharma translates one of these verses as stating, “We know thy name, oh, *sabhā*, thy name is interchange of talk; let all the company who join the

⁶⁸Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, 78–92.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 101.

sabhā agree with me” (AV 7.12.2). As Sharma himself suggests, this verse indicates that agreement, not disagreement, is valued.⁷¹ In addition, he admits that the subject of deliberations in the *sabhā* “can be known only vaguely.”⁷² This admission is one reason that treating *vidathas* and *sabhās* as ruling bodies is of limited use for understanding the nature of rule. In sum, not enough supplementary evidence exists to warrant an interpretation of *vidatha* as a term of political significance for our understanding of rule in the Atharva-Veda.

Sharma also argues that the *sabhā* carried out judicial functions, which included “influential men” being accountable to their peers.⁷³ He tellingly explains how “it seems that the richest men had to submit to the decisions of their peers,”⁷⁴ thus indicating the speculation involved when one attempts to make historical claims about whether or not “judicial functions” were carried out in this body. Additionally, Sharma speculates that the *samiti* was an assemblage of individuals who “transacted tribal business” and that busied itself with “religious ceremonies and prayers.”⁷⁵ His tentative discussion of the *samiti* indicates the uncertainty surrounding the *samiti*’s functions as well, much of which must simply be guessed at. In the end, scholars cannot know precisely who—that is, which *varṇas* (social groups) and those perhaps outside the *varṇa* system—constituted these assemblies or how they operated because the texts do not clarify such things. Owing to the lack of clear textual evidence showing that either of these assemblies shared ruling responsibilities with the king, I believe these scholars have generally overstated assemblies’ importance for understanding political ideas in the Atharva-Veda.

Drawing upon this critique, I want to summarize the most important qualifications and conclusions regarding these assemblies’ potential ruling functions. First, these gatherings or assemblies should not be interpreted as secular or purely “political” in nature. Insufficient evidence exists from which to argue that individuals in these assemblies made ruling decisions themselves or assisted the king/ruler in making particular ruling decisions. Second, this qualification should temper empirical-historical claims about these assemblies. Just as these texts are not intended to be overt political treatises, they are also not composed to present accurate historical accounts. Third, Jayaswal’s analysis displays the common yet problematic practice of employing modern (particularly Western) political terminology to interpret ancient brahmanical ideas about rule. In sum, the language of state, election, national assembly, popular representation, and accountability do not make

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., 82. While the specific subject matter of deliberation may not be discernible in textual evidence, as Sharma explains it is quite clear that a variety of activities are associated with the *sabhā*. Such activities include what we might consider today to be religious, military, gambling, administrative, and pastoral affairs.

⁷³Ibid., 99–100. See AV 7.12.3.

⁷⁴Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, 99. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁵Ibid., 102–3.

sense within this ancient brahmanical belief system. A more conceptually sensitive approach helps expose the misleading, and often anachronistic, interpretations that frequently arise in the secondary literature.

Contra democratic readings, which emphasize ideas such as political equality and elections, as well as liberal ideas concerning rights and free choice, the Atharva-Veda expresses a monarchical political picture. In the Atharva-Veda kingly rule is assumed to be the only proper form of rule, which further exemplifies a trajectory towards increasingly hierarchical conceptions of rule in the liturgical Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas. For example, N. C. Bandyopadhyaya aptly explains that Atharvan coronation hymns display how kingly rule was becoming consolidated and hierarchical.⁷⁶ In the Atharva-Veda hierarchical kingly rule was increasingly understood as the proper ruling structure, as coronation hymns express a more thoroughgoing set of ruling privileges and duties for human kings than are found in earlier works such as the Ṛg-Veda. Bandyopadhyaya highlights a passage in the fourth book where the human king is described as the “sole lord and friend of Indra who subsists on the people” (AV 4.22). This passage expresses the belief that the people must support the ruler, and that a ruler rightfully subsists (or “feeds”) on the people in a hierarchical manner. One also observes the association with Indra, an incredibly important divine *rājan* in Vedic cosmology who is partly responsible for maintaining the interconnected well-being of the human and nonhuman world.

In sum, textual evidence indicates belief in an established hierarchical form of kingly rule, not a democratic system. No systematic counterevidence arises in the Atharva-Veda challenging the idea that kings, as members of a specific social group (*kṣatriya*) with its attendant duties, are the rightful rulers in a community. Important passages for explicating kingly rule in this layer concern the king’s consecration and ruling attributes,⁷⁷ including a general desire for harmony between the king and people.⁷⁸ A good example of this desire for harmony and agreement with brahmanical speech in social gatherings can be found in book 7:

Let the *sabhā* and *samiti*, the two daughters of Prajāpati, who together know, assist me. Whomever I shall meet, may he be helpful to me. (Let my) words be esteemed in the gatherings, O Fathers. We know your name, O *Sabhā*: indeed, your name is “playfulness” [*nariṣṭhā*]. And let all

⁷⁶Bandyopadhyaya, *Development of Hindu Polity*, 53.

⁷⁷For example, see AV 3.3.1–6 (restoring an exiled king); 3.4.1–7 (prayer at the acceptance of a king); 3.5.1–8 (praise of an amulet derived from the *parṇa* tree, designed to strengthen royal/kingly power); 4.8.1–7 (prayer at the consecration of a king); 4.22.1–7 (charm to secure the superiority of a king); 6.38.1–4 (prayer for kingly brilliance and power).

⁷⁸For example, see AV 2.27.1–7 (charm against opponents in debate, undertaken with the *pātā* plant); 3.30.1–7 (charm to secure harmony); 6.64.1–3, 6.73.1–3, 6.74.1–3 (charms to alleviate discord); 7.52.1–2 (charm against disagreement and violence).

those who are sitting in the *sabhā* employ similar speech to my own. I have won splendor and knowledge from those seated together here. O Indra, make me prosperous among this entire group seated together. Whether your mind [i.e., those sitting in the *sabhā*] has gone elsewhere, or whether it is caught up here or there, we bring this, your mind, back: let your mind come to rest on me. (AV 7.12.1–4)

In this passage the *sabhā* and *samiti* are invoked as the two daughters of Prajāpati (the cosmic “lord of creatures”) and the speaker makes no claims about ruling matters, although the king is presumably present in the gathering. Rather, the brahmin speaker emphasizes something more general, which is indicative of most passages involving gatherings or assemblies: desire for agreement and wish that those assembled delight in what the brahmin says. From this passage one also gleanes the following points.

First, the assembly does not appear to be a place where argument and reason giving are highly valued, nor is it agonistic in familiar Western senses.⁷⁹ Second, the above invocation highlights the fact that Vedic texts express a distinctly brahmanical viewpoint. Here it is important to note that brahmins perceive themselves as crucial for maintaining both social and cosmic order, and because of this privilege, many Atharva-Vedic charms are aimed at preserving and protecting the interests of brahmins.⁸⁰ This inclusive belief in the need to protect brahmins invokes a concept of stewardship because the ruler is responsible for protecting the power of various sacrificial rituals, some of which possess important cosmo-genetic effects.⁸¹ In turn, such rituals are believed to integrate and maintain the interconnected well-being of an extensive human-nonhuman community. Owing to the increased centrality of sacrificial ritual in the liturgical Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas, rule by *kṣatriyas* becomes a tertiary activity: a means (protection and promotion) to a means (sacrificial ritual) to an end (maintenance and construction of the cosmos, reality, and interconnected well-being). The idea of stewardship, I suggest, captures this indirect or tertiary aspect and duty of kingly rule. Through knowledge of the Vedas and sacrificial rituals maintained by brahmins, a king is then able to protect his kingdom: “Through study of the Veda [*brahmacarya*: studenthood, discipleship] and fervent practice, the king [*rājan*] protects the kingdom” (AV 11.5.17). While the trajectory

⁷⁹For a study of agonistic elements in Vedic thought, especially as they concern the topic of masculinity, see Jarrod Whitaker, *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸⁰For example, see AV 5.18.1–15, 5.19.1–15 (imprecations against oppressors of brahmins) and 11.1.1–37, 12.3.1–60 (the preparation of the *brahmaudana*, the porridge given as a fee to brahmins).

⁸¹For a detailed study of these ritual effects, see Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

of ruling ideas points toward hierarchical kingship in earlier layers of Vedic works, it appears more fully instantiated by the time of the Atharva-Veda.

The Rajanical Tradition: Cases of Eco-Cosmology and *Swaraj*

Building on this critique, I propose alternative grounds for contemporary engagement with Vedic thought by defending the category of “rajanical” thought as an alternative to more familiar Western idioms and interpretive frameworks. To start, rajanical is a more appropriate designation than political (which hearkens the Greek term *polis*) because it better captures a core set of concerns that extend back to the early Vedic tradition: the meaning of rule, its relation to cosmological beliefs involving sacrifice and ritual, and questions of *with* and *for whom* rulers rule within both human and human-nonhuman contexts. In contrast to those such as Proferes, I argue that we need not suppose ancient Indian thought revolved around the *anthrōpos* and more species-specific concerns about political sovereignty and unification. That is, scholars should not necessarily assume the same basic beliefs about rule can be found in ancient India as in any other time and place, or that rule means roughly the same thing across varying historical and cultural contexts. Different webs of belief create different perceptions of phenomena and human concerns, and identifying these differences can provide leverage for critical, creative thinking about important political dilemmas. For example, ruling in the Vedic context should not be understood as anthropocentric in nature but rather deeply cosmological, and to appreciate this one must attend closely to this tradition’s own conceptual apparatus. In turn, Vedic rajanical thought displays an inherently sacrificial and ritualistic modality involving both human relations and meaningful, interdependent connections to the nonhuman world. The uniqueness of this understanding of rule lies in the idea that proper rule entails sacrifice and ritual(s) that embed and *bind* human beings to a deeply interconnected world, within which a human community’s well-being cannot be parsed or bracketed from nonhuman well-being. As one aspect of a longer rajanical tradition, this conception suggests how the idea of stewardship could be critically revived and applied to ecological issues and debates about contemporary *swaraj* (self-rule).⁸²

Before I explain this point, two caveats are in order. First, as an initial inroad to greater intercultural understanding of the history of Indian political thought, we can begin by using the term “politics” or phrase “political thought” in a colloquial sense. But when delving more carefully into premodern Indian thought (especially orthodox brahmanical and a variety of heterodox traditions), an important concept and vocabulary we should employ is

⁸²Proferes also suggests that ruling entails some type of stewardship. See, e.g., Proferes, *Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty*, chap. 3.

that of rule and the rajanical, including any nonbrahmanical terms or concepts that capture indigenous conceptions of rule. Contra predominant Western conceptions of rule, Vedic rajanical thought maintains that ruling decisions are made *in* and *for* a cosmologically situated, human-nonhuman community extending beyond polis or state boundaries, and therefore, not merely polis-centric. This alternative conception also suggests that sacrifice and ritual play a pivotal role in ruling beliefs and practices. That is, various sacrificial and ritual practices connect individual citizens to one another at city, state, national, and ecological levels, holding the potential to enhance flourishing at each level. Second, in adopting alternative categories and concepts one should also note their discursive contestability within a diversity of historical, religious, and philosophical contexts. After all, many vernacular categories and native traditions are not rooted in the early rajanical-brahmanic tradition or remain completely unrelated. Rajanical thought should therefore be understood as an open and contestable category.

So, what do we gain by also shifting from categories such as liberalism and democracy to a rajanical register in *contemporary* Indian political theory and practice, and what concrete issues might this tradition help evaluate and address? Shifting to the category of rajanical not only enhances historical and conceptual intelligibility but also provides evaluative purchase in contemporary Indian politics. In particular, this category provides a different perspective and thus novel understanding of what *swaraj* (self-rule) might mean and entail in Indian politics. It does so by explaining how various human-nonhuman relations—often viewed as less political or even apolitical within a liberal or democratic framework—in rajanical thought can alternatively be viewed as exposing primordial relations of rule within a broader eco-cosmology. Since numerous Indian activists and thinkers during the past century have advanced critical-revivalist sorts of arguments and participated in causes that exhibit and extend a rajanical strand of thought, I will first explain how some of their ideas fit within a broader rajanical tradition, and then comment on particular ways in which these ideas can be productively linked to conversations about *swaraj*. My argument thus contains both a descriptive and normative component: descriptively, I contend that aspects of the Vedic conception of rule are identifiable in the thought and practice of various thinkers and activists; normatively, I suggest that locating creative translations and applications of Vedic ideas in contemporary politics—which often face serious challenges when confronting modern liberal and democratic ideas within a postcolonial context—helps us better understand ways in which these ideas can and *should* be employed.⁸³

⁸³For example, the overtly hierarchical elements of Vedic rule and metaphysics should *not* be defended or developed, and such aspects of the Vedic-rajanical tradition have been justifiably challenged by liberal-democratic ideas of political and socioeconomic equality. These cross-cultural encounters between traditions, as I explain in the conclusion, have resulted in both hybridity and a laudable leveling of the rajanical tradition in India.

Along these lines, Ranchor Prime's *Vedic Ecology* revives and draws upon a wide variety of Vedic ideas and Hindu traditions to defend a native Indian approach to pressing ecological issues.⁸⁴ He explains how a number of these ideas and traditions exhibit valuable principles such as reverence, compassion, and devotion extended towards the nonhuman world and how various Vedic concepts cultivate greater awareness of human connectedness with the natural world, including animals such as cows, forest communities of trees and plants, and rivers such as the Yamuna and Ganges. Prime lucidly describes how numerous figures exhibit positions that critically revive what one might call "eco-cosmological" principles of stewardship: Mahatma Gandhi, whose notion of *swaraj* entails greater simplicity in living, increased reliance on village-level economics, nonviolence towards animals, personal self-restraint, and potential sacrifices such as fasting;⁸⁵ Satish Kumar, who explains how Vedic-Hindu traditions conceive *yajña* (sacrifice) as an ecological principle for inspiring reduced needs and consumptive habits;⁸⁶ Balbir Mathur, who is compassionately devoted to trees and believes they possess a fundamental dignity akin to that possessed by humans;⁸⁷ and Sunderlal Bahugana, who draws upon Vedic and Hindu ideas in addressing deforestation in the Himalayas and remains a dedicated spokesperson for the Chipko Andolan "tree-hugging" movement.⁸⁸ Finally, Prime interviews

⁸⁴Ranchor Prime, *Vedic Ecology: Practical Wisdom for Surviving the 21st Century* (Novato, CA: Mandala, 2002).

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 78–92. For an argument linking Gandhi's ecological political thought to the concept of *kṣatriya* (warrior and ruler), see Farah Godrej, "Ascetics, Warriors, and a Gandhian Ecological Citizenship," *Political Theory* 40, no. 4 (2012): 437–65. For the sake of balance, however, it should also be noted that Gandhi problematically held caste to be sacred. For example, see Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology* (London: Verso, 2013), and Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint," introduction to *The Annihilation of Caste*, by B. R. Ambedkar (London: Verso, 2014), 17–179. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

⁸⁶Prime, *Vedic Ecology*, 94–99.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 108–17. Importantly, Mathur's notion of dignity does not arise from a liberal framework. He does not see any fundamental ontological distinction between human beings and trees, citing how trees can offer some of the same services that humans can offer. He claims that trees offer services to both human and nonhuman beings such as plants and animals, and do it *so well* that trees are held up as normative exemplars of virtues such as tolerance and generosity. Drawing upon a story of Krishna that compares a tree to a humble devotee, Mathur explains: "For the Hindu, trees are to be respected as fellow living beings... . The tree lives to a great age standing upright in scorching heat, freezing cold, wind and rain, and is always prepared to give shelter to passers-by. It freely gives its fruits and flowers. Healing herbs grow among its roots. A host of creatures live in its branches. If someone cuts its limbs, it remains silent and does not complain. The tree is the very symbol of tolerance and generosity" (*ibid.*, 111).

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 118–27.

environmental activist Vandana Shiva, who explains her well-known seed-saving projects as drawing upon what she understands as a central Vedic principle of seeing divinity in all creation, including something as small as a seed. Accordingly, Shiva articulates what she takes to be three Vedic principles that can serve as a guide for a healthier ecological ethic: first, viewing the entire earth as our family, inspired by the refrain “*sarve bhavantu sukhinah*,” which means “Let all beings be happy”; second, not consuming more than is needed in our personal lives, which entails mitigating drastic socioeconomic inequality and not “stealing” from nonhuman beings by neglecting their needs; third, encouraging people to engage in self-reflective discipline, becoming one’s own teacher and leader, and not relying on external forms of coercion as sources of changing one’s behavior.⁸⁹

Now I can turn to the implications of these ideas and movements within the context of a broader rajanical tradition and for the concept of *swaraj*. My critique in the previous part of the essay and corresponding clarification of a distinct tradition of rajanical stewardship help demonstrate how aspects of this tradition inspire and have been inventively applied by thinkers, activists, and common citizens in contemporary Indian society. The examples above exhibit how various figures have been creatively reappropriating and developing this rajanical tradition in various practical ways. In turn, this shows how developing a native tradition of Indian political theory (or perhaps more accurately, a native tradition of Indian *rajanical* theory), *pace* Parekh, is not only a theoretical or scholarly exercise but also one grounded in praxis and attention to particular issues and circumstances. These ecological principles extend back to questions concerning the meaning of rule (*rāj-*) within a broader rajanical tradition of stewardship, which provides conceptual and cultural grounds for shifting our perspective and interpreting *swaraj* within the context of this broader tradition.

This move invokes a claim made at the outset of the essay regarding this tradition’s concern with the questions of *with* and *for whom* rulers rule within both human and nonhuman contexts. The answer found in both Vedic texts and the examples above is that human beings rule with and for a wide variety of nonhuman beings and phenomena such as gods, animals, trees, and rivers. Each of these entities possesses a distinct identity and plays a significant role within a broader cosmological context, and is therefore granted dignity, looked upon with compassion, and treated with reverence. Personal sacrifices and daily rituals are central to many of the projects mentioned above—for example, Gandhi’s self-restraint and fasting, Kumar’s reduced consumption, and Shiva’s ritualistic seed collection. In light of these examples, we gain a unique reading of *swaraj*. To start, the first part of the term, *swa-* (self, one’s own), should not be understood as strongly individualistic or human-centric. Within both the conceptual framework of Vedic-rajanical stewardship and the

⁸⁹Ibid., 130, 132.

contemporary examples provided above, ruling implicates deeply intertwined, human-nonhuman *communities* of interest. Because of this interconnectedness, *swaraj* would entail public officials and common citizens playing a central role as stewards of various communities' well-being, extending from the individual and village level outwards to the state and natural environment. This would also mean that *swaraj* is split along two distinct yet overlapping tracks—a human and nonhuman one. Along the human track, *swaraj* would entail more decentralized or localized notions of collective well-being and decision making. This conception lines up nicely with both Gandhi's understanding of *swaraj* as a village-centered activity and recent arguments for more localized governance by politician-activists such as Arvind Kejriwal.⁹⁰ Along the nonhuman track, as the analysis above suggests, *swaraj* would include a sense of embeddedness within and devoted commitment to maintaining the well-being of an interconnected community of nonhuman beings, with and for whom rule is properly exercised. *Swaraj*, as one potential understanding of what it means to rule, would therefore not be understood within an individualistic or human-centric vacuum.

Conclusion

In the introduction I suggested that premodern traditions are important sites for mutual intelligibility across cultures and potential resources for cross-cultural deliberation and theory building. As this essay has argued, a number of interpretive pitfalls hinder our understanding of premodern Indian thought, partly due to postcolonial anxieties and the idealization of democratic and liberal ideas. Consequently, one of the most significant issues in the literature is a faulty identification of democratic and liberal ideas in Vedic thought, which often romanticize the past to suit particular modern and contemporary sensibilities. A broader methodological problem is then exposed in approaches that presume South Asia's past should somehow contain cross-cultural equivalents to early Western political ideas. Whether conscious of this issue or not, scholars have applied particular Western cultural and historical frameworks they should set aside if they are to outline distinct *South Asian or Indian* traditions of political thought. Portraying South Asia as having some of the earliest democratic ideas and practices in the global history of political thought betrays an implicit arms race to find premodern democratic ideas in regions outside Greece. Presumably, this would temper claims about Western exceptionalism and help dispel concerns about the contemporary relevance of South Asia's premodern traditions. What this conceals, however, is the problematic assumption that Western traditions should somehow be *the* standard when identifying theoretical or practical insights in premodern traditions.

⁹⁰ Arvind Kejriwal, *Swaraj* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2012).

This critique is not meant to suggest that plausible cross-cultural comparisons can never or rarely ever be made. While the initial engagement with unfamiliar traditions and ideas often motivates the impulse to compare them with what is more familiar in order to get a conceptual or argumentative foothold, comparativists should pump the breaks and pay very close attention when locating and justifying appropriate hinges for cross-cultural analysis and comparison. Furthermore, this means scholars must be willing to admit when such hinges may not exist, or may be a bit “wobbly.” For such critical-revivalist projects to remain as rigorous as possible, they may need to move forward on a case-by-case basis because grounds for productive comparison often cannot be determined a priori. Cross-cultural and comparative political theory may be well-served to adopt an experimental ethos, whereby scholars begin with particular ideas or hypotheses about a productive connection or comparison and then rigorously examine whether, and to what extent, the comparison yields interesting or fruitful results.

In this essay, taking such an approach has exposed a rajanical tradition of stewardship, aspects of which have been critically revived and creatively developed in both thought and practice within India during the past century. Explicitly drawing upon aspects of this tradition, especially as they have been carried on or developed in various Hindu traditions and texts, thinkers and activists have constructed innovative approaches to contemporary environmental issues through appeals to indigenous categorical and conceptual frameworks. In turn, these developments and historical linkages can, as Williams and Warren explain, “provide some of the architecture of translation that enables self-constituting publics to form *across boundaries* of linguistic and cultural difference.”⁹¹ While clarifying premodern traditions and historical pathways in regions such as South Asia increases historical understanding and cross-cultural intelligibility, my analysis also builds on Williams and Warren’s argument by identifying points of engagement—sites or topics of communication—for action-oriented responses to ecological dilemmas shared across cultural boundaries. The implications for critical reflexivity, practical reasoning, and political change are thus local as well as global.

The local implications for the meaning of *swaraj* may entail a move toward more decentralized rule through institutions such as *gram sabhas* (local village councils). Importantly, this move blurs traditional hierarchical boundaries between rulers and ruled, thus exhibiting a distinct leveling trend in India’s rajanical tradition(s) over time. This idea undoubtedly transgresses role-based aspects of what Sudipta Kaviraj locates in a premodern Indian tradition of *rāja-dharma*, especially a “para-royal” attitude adopted by rulers and voluntary abjection on the part of citizens falling under their authority.⁹² In fact, many of these more traditional, paternalistic aspects of rule have been

⁹¹Williams and Warren, “A Democratic Case,” 28.

⁹²Kaviraj, “On the Historicity of ‘the Political,’” 24–39.

justifiably challenged by a host of contemporary grassroots movements seeking more responsive, decentralized ruling practices.⁹³ These contemporary developments transgress many orthodox brahmanical ideas about socio-political hierarchy, thus showing how broader traditions need not be understood as monolithic entities as they develop over long periods of time in response to a variety of changing historical circumstances. Such transgressive interpretations and deployments of brahmanical and early Hindu political thought also exemplify ways of resisting the sorts of essentialist claims that neo-Hindu nationalists make when they draw upon the same traditions.

Likewise, scholarly activities of concept formation and theory building should remain creative, flexible, and attentive not only to the historical past but also pressing contemporary issues. One example of this flexible approach to the historical past is exhibited in what one might call a “narrative” understanding of history. That is, many Vedic and Hindu traditions view history in a narrative fashion in which figures such as Kṛṣṇa are always “live” figures, and various hymns and stories are understood as depicting transhistorical realities stretching from past to present that can always be drawn upon for present concerns. The past is not over and done but always alive and kicking in the present, and historical narratives often serve as central sources of hope for change in current behavior and practices. As Vandana Shiva suggests, enhancing local control over community resources and viewing life in a more cyclical fashion may help increase the sense of responsibility one feels to act as a steward for the (human-nonhuman) community’s well-being.⁹⁴ Such critical-revivalist approaches to the past should aim to counteract fundamentalist impulses and political attitudes that might otherwise draw upon the Vedic tradition for dubious political purposes, such as the suppression of religious diversity and defense of a false cultural unity that neglects caste hierarchy and discrimination.

To conclude, it is important to note that scholars of Indian political thought need not automatically revert to the language of rights, sovereignty, legitimacy, or even democracy when addressing current dilemmas. Understanding *swaraj* within a trajectory of a larger rajanical tradition highlights ways in which Indian political theory might draw upon its own traditions to address present issues. In turn, this may push us to modify Parekh’s call and further develop an Indian tradition of *rajanical* theory. More specifically, reverting to a democratic idiom downplays an idea to which the category “rajanical” draws greater attention: *swaraj* is not centered merely on questions of *who* rules (e.g., the *dēmos* or people), but on questions of *with* and *for* whom elected representatives, bureaucrats, and common citizens rule. Moreover,

⁹³Such movements would include a variety of citizen advocacy groups such as “Citizens Fighting Corruption,” and nonprofit organizations such as the Public Affairs Centre (PAC).

⁹⁴Shiva, “Let All Beings Be Happy,” in *Vedic Ecology*, 131.

ruling as a form of stewardship entails the ability to consider—within and across diverse local *and* global communities of interest—what constitutes the well-being of interconnected, “shared communities of fate.” Appealing to a long-standing rajanical tradition to interpret *swaraj* and the contemporary environmental efforts mentioned above, one can glean that the quality of rule in India may be enhanced by further developing a leveled conception of *swaraj* that cultivates the stewardship capacities of average citizens, which, for example, would include a greater degree of equality between high caste Hindus and Dalits. This move would then help clarify a conceptual frame for viewing Indian citizens as corulers who possess the ability to address a variety of contemporary rajanical, social, and economic dilemmas. In sum, a rajanical politics would be crucially concerned with ecological issues and with cultivating widespread socioeconomic equality as grounds for exercising a greater degree of local governance and rajanical stewardship. Enhancing cross-cultural intelligibility and shifting categories not only helps scholars of Indian political thought address various postcolonial anxieties, neo-Hindu nationalism, and their problematic interpretive manifestations, but also provides a better understanding of how India’s own traditions may have unique resources for imagining alternative political—or rajanical—futures.