



HAL
open science

Upinder Singh, Political Violence in Ancient India.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 616 pages,
4 maps, €42.00. ISBN 978-0-67497-5279

Annette Schmiedchen

► **To cite this version:**

Annette Schmiedchen. Upinder Singh, Political Violence in Ancient India. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 616 pages, 4 maps, €42.00. ISBN 978-0-67497-5279. International Quarterly for Asian Studies, 2020, pp.120-122. 10.11588/iqas.2019.3-4.10711 . hal-03018993

HAL Id: hal-03018993

<https://hal.science/hal-03018993>

Submitted on 23 Nov 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

side of the spacious Chowringhee [...] there grew up an extensive slum zone where access was difficult except through one or two crooked lanes. [...] These were ineradicable slums and they persisted defying official frowning throughout the colonial rule” (p. 57).

Since the author, in his description of the urbanisation history of Calcutta, also follows the establishment of the British colonial rule, this book is of interest to scholars interested in British colonial strategies, postcolonial studies and Indian economic, social, cultural and, of course, political history alike. The book focuses on the period between 1757 and 1912, from when Calcutta was captured by Lord Clive in the Battle of Palasi to when the capital of India was moved from Calcutta to Delhi. The structure of the narrative is complex and Sen goes into much detail about several questions that he raises in the course of the book. This sometimes requires him to review information already covered elsewhere in the book. If, therefore, one is expecting a linear narrative, one might be disappointed. But the richness of the research and details provided about several historical events of Calcutta makes this book a must-have for one’s library. It would have been made even richer had maps of the various historical configurations been provided. Also, a list of the glossary of Bengali and Sanskrit terms would have been very helpful.

Mahua Bhattacharya

UPINDER SINGH, *Political Violence in Ancient India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 616 pages, 4 maps, €42.00. ISBN 978-0-67497-5279

Upinder Singh’s recent monograph on political violence in ancient India, from the 6th century BCE to the 6th century CE, consists of an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. Singh has chosen the very common (modern) misperception of a nonviolent Indian past as the starting point for her critical study. The first three chapters of her book are chronologically arranged, whereas the last two chapters follow a more thematic approach.

Chapter 1, entitled “Foundations”, covering the time from 600 to 200 BCE – and thus in terms of dynastic chronology, the pre-Maurya / Maurya period – is perhaps the most “traditional” of all chapters. Singh provides a systematic overview of the discourse on violence in textual sources usually related with this period, starting in the 6th/5th centuries BCE, “the most fertile period in the history of ancient Indian thought” (p. 25), which witnessed a great deal of prominent critique of violence and much discussion of ethical values. Referring to Buddhist and Jaina texts, the *dhamma* messages in the edicts of Maurya

king Aśoka and the ambiguous and often rather contradictory positions on violence in the epic literature, namely in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as other textual evidence, Singh writes of an “intense cultural conversation between different religious, philosophical, and intellectual traditions” (p. 56).

Chapter 2, entitled “Transition” and covering the time from 200 BCE to 300 CE – and thus in terms of dynastic chronology, the Sātavāhana-Kuṣāṇa period – starts in the same way as Chapter 1, i.e. with a discussion of relevant texts, such as the *Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra* and the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*. However, the inclusion of epigraphic, numismatic and art-historical source material far beyond the usual scope makes this and the next chapter stand out clearly when compared with other discussions of the ideology of Indian kingship. Upinder Singh shows that royal inscriptions, especially panegyrics (*praśasti*), but also coins and stone sculptures, played an important role in legitimising political power. The royal *praśastis* illustrate intra-dynastic conflicts, provide epigraphic images of kingship and prove the wide circulation of epigraphic models, as seen in a “striking similarity in the format and style of royal inscriptions across different parts of the subcontinent and the spread of Indic epigraphic practice to Southeast Asia” (p. 154). The author highlights the importance of royal patronage in the context of political ideology (p. 171) and rightly emphasises the specific “Indian” character of this patronage, with a widespread distribution of grants and endowments among beneficiaries of different religious affiliations.

“Maturity” is the chosen title for Chapter 3, which covers the time from 300 to 600 CE, the Gupta-Vākāṭaka period. This chapter focuses even further on epigraphic sources, mainly Sanskrit inscriptions. During these centuries, a “vocabulary of political hierarchy emerged” (p. 184), with “formulaic expressions of paramountcy and subordination” (p. 188), and a “solid core of political ideas had taken shape” (p. 238). In this context, Singh asks the crucial question (p. 239): “How did a certain level of consensus on the ideology and practice of kingship emerge and how did it spread across the subcontinent during these and the succeeding centuries?” In her attempt to answer this question, she points to the centrality of the relationship between rulers and Brahmins, from court to village levels. She also underlines the fact that inscriptions, predominantly copper-plate charters, introduce us to an increasingly important aspect of royal practice, namely kings’ granting of land to Brahmins (and religious institutions) on a large scale, which could be described – one would like to add – as a pan-Indian phenomenon, prevalent in many parts of the subcontinent.

The fourth chapter, “War”, focuses on military action against other “states” and the ideological background for this throughout the entire period from 600 BCE to 600 CE. Upinder Singh discusses the same sources as before, but also additional material, such as Greek accounts of India, or the so-called

hero and sati stone inscriptions. On the basis of Kṣatrapa, Sātavāhana, Vākāṭaka and Gupta epigraphs, she argues that from the early centuries CE onwards, “war became connected with the ceremonial aspect of royal grants” (p. 334). In Chapter 5, “Wilderness”, the last chapter, the author examines the same sources, focusing on tribal or “non-state” cultures, but also on aspects of forests, as for instance their relevance for concepts of renunciation as well as for hunting and protection of animals. The epilogue finally summarises the attestations for the circulation of influential political ideas, including the impact of Indian notions and practices on Southeast Asian traditions. The final remarks indirectly reveal the desiderata for future research: a similar study of political violence in early medieval India, i.e. the period from the 6th to the 13th centuries.

There are some inaccuracies in the book: for example, with reference to a famous cave inscription from Nasik in western India, Upinder Singh claims that “Rishabhadata” was the “son-in law of the Kshatrapa king Ushavadata” (p. 334). In fact, this inscription records activities of Uṣavadāta, the son-in-law of the Western Kṣatrapa king Nahapāna. And “Rṣabhadatta” is merely the Sanskritised form of the Prakrit name “Uṣavadāta”. But considering the large range of source material analysed by Singh, such shortcomings do not diminish the value of her book.

Annette Schmiedchen

AXEL MICHAELS, *Kultur und Geschichte Nepals*. Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 2018. 512 pages, €27.90. ISBN 978-3-520-21201-6

In his *Kultur und Geschichte Nepals*, Axel Michaels offers a general history of Nepal, spanning from the earliest extant material evidence dating to before the Common Era up to modern times. As professor emeritus of Classical Indology and Religious Studies at Heidelberg University and head of various research institutions and groups in both Germany and Nepal, Michaels has been one of the driving forces of the study of Nepal in Europe. The present volume constitutes an important contribution to the field by providing a high-level synthesis of up-to-date scholarship on Nepal’s history and its culture, both past and present, and reflects Michaels’s broad range of research expertise: grounded in a combination of text-based philological methods and ethnography, he has conducted numerous research projects related to Nepal on topics as wide-ranging as ritual studies, temple histories, chronicles, legal literature and documents.