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Introduction

The contributions to this book address a series of ‘confrontations’ – for example, debates between intellectual communities, the interplay of texts and images, and texts and objects – and explore the ways in which the legacy of these encounters, and the human responses to them, inspired cultural production in early South Asia. The book employs the idea of ‘confrontation’ as a lens through which to examine historical moments in which individuals and communities were confronted with new ideas, ideologies, and material expressions. Some of these encounters could be qualified as agonistic, as expressions of community identity and practice vied for normative status. Yet this active term also describes occasions of dynamic exchange and interaction between historical agents and the social and material contexts that defined the lived and intellectual spaces in which they operated. While the legacy of cultural production in the Gupta Period is often categorized as canonical, and thus suggests a fixity of form and idea, the studies included in this volume draw attention to the processes and contexts in which the ‘classical’ took shape and the subsequent reception and revision of its cultural forms.

1 Intellectual and Lived Spaces

The confrontations that this book presents originated in intellectual and lived spaces that were mutually influential. The different chapters explore how the lived spaces of writers and artists influenced their ideas and creations, and how texts, objects, and images reflect the identities of their makers. Instead of studying the primary sources as ends in themselves, the authors use these sources as the means to investigate the lived context of their creators. By looking at the materials from this perspective, the sources reveal how philosophical, religious, and artistic activities contributed to processes of identity formation and the negotiation of boundaries between communities. In addition to contributing new perspectives on the development of intellectual communities and the ideological parameters of philosophical traditions, this volume works to situate these cultural developments in their social and historical contexts.

We use the term “lived space” to refer to the sociocultural worlds in which the authors, thinkers, and artists, whose works are discussed in the following
chapters, operated. Adopted from the work of Henri Lefebvre, \(^1\) “lived space” is part of a conceptual triad that also includes “conceived” and “perceived” space. Whereas the latter two operate in largely ideational realms, lived space is the locus of culture and social activity and provides a productive frame for the papers included in the first section of the book. While the highly theoretical world of philosophy may appear to map most closely on the similarly abstract category of “conceived space”, we have chosen the term ‘intellectual space’ instead. This term recognizes the notional spheres in which philosophical discourses work to locate themselves while, at the same time, it draws attention to the social embeddedness of the philosophers and schools that the authors examine. Even in the case of doctrinal differences and opposing philosophical traditions, the contributors show that individual thinkers occupied a shared ‘intellectual space’ in which they investigated a common set of questions concerning the formation and expression of authoritative knowledge and the manner in which that knowledge could be embodied by human (or more-than-human) agents. To begin to access these intellectual and lived spaces in the premodern world requires situating not only text, but other forms of religious media and cultural production in their shared contexts. Although addressed to discrete cases and places, each of the chapters that follow proceed from this shared perspective.

2 Sources and Boundaries

The individual contributions to the volume address a wide range of material and textual sources and cultural contexts – from Tibetan bells and Jaina teachers, to traditions of Sun worship and the poetics of argumentation. Given the variety represented, the question naturally arises regarding what ties these discussions productively together? The answer is the use of primary source materials to explore the shaping of cultural and intellectual communities. A close engagement with primary sources underpins each of the discussions in the book. Engaging with both textual and material evidence, in their work the contributors also trouble the persistent binary that often separates these bodies of historical evidence by showing how premodern cultural agents negotiated and synthesized their sources. Moreover, by tracing patterns of bi-directional influence it becomes evident that using one body of evidence to corroborate the claims of another (i.e. simply looking for a textual precedent for an image or vice-versa) is far

too simple and minimizes the innovative and imaginative ways in which cultural producers made use of the materials at their disposal.

In addition to questioning persistent binaries in the classification of source materials, the contributions included in the first section work to complicate the very categories of ‘text’ and ‘material’ by tracing the historical development of particular practices through different modes of cultural production. The practice of Sun worship, for example, is shown to have been shaped by a rich legacy of purānic narrative in conversation with traditions of ritual rules and prescriptions (i.e. śāstra) popularized by competing religious communities. Material production, too, is a multi-faceted category. By including monumental sculptures for worship, ritual objects, temple adornments, and the frame for inscriptions, the category of ‘material’ is shown to be as complex and varied as that of ‘text’.

The studies included in the second section trace the development of knowledge communities in ways that challenge the idea of fixed boundaries between intellectual traditions. These traditions, in fact, are shown to be the work of enterprising thinkers who borrowed, responded to, and refined the ideas of their interlocutors from across Brahmanical, Jain, and Buddhist lineages. In addition to recovering dialogue between communities often held to be distinct, established forms of argumentation, too, are not restricted to the category of śāstra as ‘knowledge system’, but worked across literary genres and were influenced by poetic works, prose ritual manuals, and epic exemplars.

3 Overview of Contents

The articles in the first half of the volume address the intersections of textual, material, and visual forms of cultural production. These contributions focus on three primary modes of confrontation: the relation of inscribed texts to material media, the visual articulation of literary images and, finally, the literary interpretation and reception of material religious media. Discussions of the relation of text and material culture have tended to privilege literary semantics and imagine a unidirectional pattern of interaction, whereby textual forms inspired images and guided material production. These articles aim to re-describe these interactions through focused case studies that incorporate a variety of media, ranging from individual objects and monuments, to sanctified spaces and religious landscapes.

The second part of the volume focuses on confrontations both within and between intellectual communities. The articles in this section address the dynamics between peripheral and dominant movements in the history of Indian
philosophy. Texts belonging to peripheral movements, such as the Jaina tradition, often apply creative strategies to position themselves in relation to their intellectual rivals. This process of boundary formation is a driving force behind philosophical developments and ideological changes. Instead of solely focusing on the philosophical merit of specific positions, the contributions in the second part of the book explore the relation between philosophical texts and the ideological and social realms in which these works evolved.

4 Text, Image & Lived Spaces

The articles of the first half of the volume are in dialogue with current works that examine religious centers and built landscapes as sites of community building and which emphasize the strategic use of images and inscriptions to materialize social affiliations. These essays are also influenced by studies that emphasize the effective agency of architecture, objects, and images in shaping South Asian history. Recent examples include F.B. Flood, Objects in Translation: Material Culture and Medieval ‘Hindu-Muslim’ Encounter (2009) and R. Eaton and P. Wagoner, Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India’s Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600 (2014). While working to situate and contextualize the creation of material religious media within the social and geographic contexts in which it was produced, the contributions are also attuned to the reception and legacy of particular objects and images. They consider how images may have been explained by later viewers, how objects were made meaningful, and the ways in which the memory of a historical moment could be received via material forms.

In “The Enigma of the Centauress and her Lover”, Laxshmi Greaves explores an enigmatic, yet important, iconographic topos found in the art of the Kuṣāṇas, Kṣatrapas and Guptas; namely, a centauress (that is, a figure with the torso of a woman and the lower half of a horse) bearing on her back a human male in regal attire. The pair are sometimes joined by a devotee or a celestial being such as a vidyādhara. This type of image has been found at several sites including Sāñci, Bādāmi, Rāighāṭ, Lakha-Dhora and Mathurā, with undoubtedly the most magnificent example hailing from the stepped pyramidal brick monument known as ACI, located at the heart of the ancient city of Ahichhatrā in Uttar Pradesh. Readings of this fantastic figure have tended to rely on the identification of a textual source to explain the unique image: ranging from it being simply an emblematic representation of a kinnara-mithuna dallying in the hills; to the celestial nymph Urvaśī, with her husband; or Manu Vaivasvata (Prajāpati) on the
back of the Earth Goddess who has temporarily assumed a half-mare/half-woman form. All of these interpretations are problematic in one way or another. By moving beyond a textual explanation for the identity and popularity of a visual form, Greaves considers how the image may have functioned within the structural contexts and broader visual programs of the monuments and landscapes in which it was encountered and viewed.

With her study, “Visual Story-Telling in Text and Image: The Nāga as Inhabitant of the Ocean and the Netherworld”, Sanne Dokter-Mersch address the intersections of narrative and image. As in the study of Greaves, Dokter-Mersch also works to explain the features of an iconographic form. But in this case, the image itself it not obscure; rather, it depicts one of the most widely known moments from early Vaiṣṇava mythology. From the Kuśaṇa period onwards, stone images of Viṣṇu in his boar manifestation (varāha) appear across India. Most elements in these material representations of the myth can be explained from an iconographic or textual point of view. One ubiquitous element of the images, however, cannot be explained by recourse to the textual sources that recount the manifestation of the boar avatāra: namely, the presence of one or two nāgas, or mythical serpents, coiling under Viṣṇu’s foot. Reading text and image together, Dokter-Mersch argues that the artists’ imaginings of the nāgas expresses a cosmological vision that, while also present in the literary narratives, takes on an innovative form in sculpture.

Both Greaves and Dokter-Mersch take as their respective foci the material and visual expression of narratives. For Greaves, the connection between text and image is not straightforward, and her analysis points to spaces of material production and uses of images without a clear literary parallel. For Dokter-Mersch, the early Indic literary and visual sources are rich sources for representations of the varāha myth. But popularity does not equate to uniformity. Even within the parameters of a well-known narrative, authors and artisans found space for innovative modes of expression.

This question about the possibility of innovation within established cultural parameters is addressed in an engaging way in the contribution of Peter Bisschop, “Vyoman: The Sky is the Limit. On the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa’s Reworking of the Liṅgodbhava Myth.” While the Liṅgodbhava myth is well known and tells of the origins of Śiva’s worship in material form, specifically the liṅga that serves as his emblem, Bisschop draws attention to a remarkable adaptation of this myth in the context of Sūrya worship recorded in the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa. The Bhaviṣyapurāṇa authors revised the Liṅgodbhava myth told in chapter 3 of the Śivadharmaśāstra and turned it into a myth about the manifestation and worship of Sūrya’s vyoman, a mysterious object presented as the supreme form of the Sun god. While the Liṅgodbhava narrative describes the origins of a
familiar object of devotion (i.e. the Śiva linḍa), the identity of the vyoman as an object of worship is more difficult to trace. Does the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa’s description of the Saura emblem represent a textual innovation, or does it describe an actual object? By reexamining these narratives alongside ritual objects typically known as saurapiṭhas in art-historical literature, Bisschop shows how the authors of the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa used a familiar narrative to reinterpret a comparatively abstract ritual object as an iconic form of the Sun.

Part one concludes with Lewis Doney’s work on “Temple Bells from the Tibetan Imperial Period: Buddhist Material Culture in Context.” This contribution outlines how the tradition of bells and gongs in monasteries along the Silk Road, focusing on Khotan, met Chinese bell-casting technology. Then what the design of extant imperial Tibetan bells and their epigraphy tell us about their form and function, their links with songs and praise, and their relation with Buddhism and power in Tibet. Like the contribution of Bisschop, Doney also takes as his focus the evolution of the visual and ritual functions of an object. He, too, considers the integration of text alongside the development of iconic bell ‘types’. But in this case, the materiality of text is expressed in a different way, since the bells themselves function as text bearing objects. And in ways that participate with the other three essays in this section, Doney offers some glimpses into how these bells were remembered in Tibetan Buddhist historiography and art of the post-imperial period. This consideration of ‘reception history’ is an aspect that parallels Bisschop’s study of textual reworking. In both cases, a formal template is adapted and reworked to develop a new mode of expression within the framework of ‘tradition’.

5 Philosophy & Intellectual Spaces

The articles in the second half of the volume address different sorts of philosophical confrontations. Even though the history of philosophy is often presented as a series of ideas that evolve independently from their wider socio-historical setting, scholars are becoming increasingly attuned to the ways in which philosophical developments have been influenced by the historical contexts of particular thinkers. Important recent studies in this respect are V. Eltschinger, Buddhist Epistemology as Apologetics: Studies on the History, Self-understanding and Dogmatic Foundations of Late Indian Buddhist Philosophy (2014) and J. Bronkhorst, How the Brahmins Won: From Alexander to the Guptas (2016). The authors in this part of the book explore how specific philosophical standpoints
can be situated in a wider temporal and cultural framework. Their work demonstrates the methodological value of analyzing philosophical views as elements within a multi-dimensional historical setting. On the one hand, this facilitates a better understanding of the historical texts. On the other, it turns the philosophical texts into relevant sources for an investigation of their socio-historical contexts.

In the chapter “Nonagonistic Discourse in the Early History of Indian Philosophical Debates: From Brahmodyas to the Mahābhāṣya” Evgeniya Desnitskaya investigates the continuity between the ancestral ritualistic verbal contests (brahmodya) as attested in the Vedas, and later forms of debate and dialogical textual structures. For this purpose, she focuses on the instances of nonagonistic argumentation in the brahmodyas, the Upaniṣads, and the Mahābhāṣya with the aim of revealing shared patterns and identifying possible affinities between ritual debates, the philosophical strategies of the Upaniṣadic thinkers, and those of the ancient grammarians. Desnitskaya’s study shows that discussions that predate the period of classical philosophical debate (vāda) do not fit the agonistic pattern that later became normative. In the first section of her article, she discusses the classical brahmodyas that are found in the Rgveda and the Brāhmaṇas. In the second section, the author analyses the development of the brahmodyas and the early philosophical debates in the Upaniṣads. The third part of her article deals with nonagonistic discussions in Patañjali’s Mahābhāṣya. The article offers several novel interpretations of the primary sources and provides a stimulating account of the early development of philosophical debates.

The two chapters by Marie-Hélène Gorisse and Ana Bajželj deal with Jaina philosophy. This topic is particularly relevant for an exploration of philosophical confrontations since the Jains have a long history of negotiating their space as a minority tradition within the wider cultural environment. Their well-known theory of ‘non-one-sidedness’ (anekāntavāda) is an important element in their attempt to distinguish themselves by creating a model that accommodates the views of others. This perspectivist model provided the Jains with a tool with which to incorporate aspects of rival views within their own theories while, at the same time, claiming intellectual superiority over their opponents. This dynamic is clearly visible in Marie-Hélène Gorisse’s study, “The Legitimation of an Authoritative Discourse in Jainism”. This chapter analyses the strategies employed by Jaina thinkers to establish the authority of the Jaina scriptural corpus. The first sections of her study provide an overview of seminal accounts on verbal or scriptural authority (āptatva), which is based on key passages in texts such as the Tattvārthasūtra and the Nyāyāvatāra. Gorisse shows how this debate was strongly influenced by the view on verbal testimony (āgama) that was upheld by the Naiyāyikas. After providing a general overview of the development of this debate, Gorisse provides an in-depth analysis of the discussion on authority
in Samantabhadra’s Āptamimāṃśā. This work establishes the superiority of the Jaina perspective by pointing out the inadequacy of the one-sided views of the rival movements. Gorisse’s study shows that the development of Jaina philosophy has to be studied in tandem with the developments in their wider intellectual environment and that the Jains represent a unique voice in the Indian philosophical landscape.

The chapter “Clay Pots, Golden Rings, and Clean Upper Garments: Causality in Jaina Philosophy” by Ana Bajželj investigates the philosophical merit of the Jaina view on causality. In previous studies, the Jaina view has been described as a middle ground between two rival theories. On the one hand, there is the view that an effect is pre-existent in its cause (satkāryavāda), which can be found in the Sāṃkhya tradition. On the other, there is the idea that the effect radically differs from the cause (asatkāryavāda), as defended by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition. Other scholars have labelled the Jaina view on causality as ‘sadasatkāryavāda’, since it combines aspects of both positions. Even though such a position might seem attractive at first sight, some scholars have questioned whether the Jaina solution provides a persuasive philosophical alternative or whether the Jains simply refuse to choose sides. In her study, Bajželj addresses this question by analysing important primary sources on the Jaina theory of knowledge. To this end, she focuses on Amṛtacandra Sūri’s Tattvadīpikā. The chapter contains a large number of translated passages from Amṛtacandra’s work and provides a rigorous analysis of his ideas on causality. The author demonstrates that the Jaina theory was not an ad hoc solution but that it offers a genuine philosophical alternative to the views of the other movements.

Gregory Forgues’ study, “Charting the Geographies of ’Ju Mi pham rNam rgyal rGya mtsho’s Perspectivist Approach to the Two Truths”, shows how an early medieval Buddhist debate continued in the writings of the 19th century Tibetan scholar Mi pham. In this chapter, Forgues focuses on Mi pham’s presentation of the relation between the concealing truth (kun rdzob, saṃvṛti) and the ultimate truth (don dam pa, paramārtha). Previous scholarship has characterised Mi pham’s views on this subject as ambiguous or even inconsistent. However, the author argues that Mi pham uses several models that relate to different stages of understanding and that his account as a whole provides a coherent theory. Based on a careful reading of the primary sources, Forgues analyses the different perspectives that can be distinguished in Mi pham’s work. This analysis reveals that Mi pham teaches Madhyamaka through a series of ascending views. These views correspond to (i.) the views of beginners who distinguish between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra, (ii.) Svātantrika Madhyamaka, and (iii.) Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. The corresponding goals of these three perspectives are (i.) to introduce beginners to two truths, (ii.) explain the nominal
ultimate, and (iii.) point to the actual ultimate. As such, Forgues demonstrates that Mi pham’s inclusivist account provides a hierarchical soteriology that skilfully combines several opposing views on the nature of the two truths.

The contributors to this volume address a wide range of historical confrontations that shaped intellectual and lived spaces in early South Asia. We hope that the topics and disciplinary approaches in this book offer a stimulating confrontation which will facilitate a fruitful dialogue across the different disciplinary boundaries in the field of South Asian studies.