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Upinder Singh. *Political Violence in Ancient India.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 616 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-97527-9.

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Political Violence in Ancient India is a compelling study of ancient India that examines a wide array of source material, including literature, material culture, philosophies, and religions, to give its reader a comprehensive view of elite perspectives pertaining to the use of force, punishment, and war. *Political Violence* primarily focuses on 600 BCE-600 CE, a critical period that is further subdivided in its chapters, but it also makes forays as far back as the Harappan civilization (ca. 2600-1900 BCE) and into modernity with discussions of the founders of India, the nation-state, in order to show the centrality of state-sanctioned violence within political discourse in early Indian history and to undo attempts at whitewashing India's violent past from modern memory. Author Upinder Singh ably and nimbly guides the reader through millennia of material in a clear, engaging, and nuanced fashion.

Political Violence, a massive 598-page tome, is divided into five chapters with an introduction and conclusion and also includes helpful front and back matter like chronologies and a glossary, which makes the book accessible to a wide readership beyond scholars of ancient Indian political history. The first three chapters break the material into digestible chronological units in an attempt to show the overarching developments and debates about violence in their original historical context: "Foundations" (600-200 BCE), "Transition" (200 BCE-300 CE), and "Maturity" (300-600 CE). Chapter 4 focuses on "War," maneuvering from early Jain and Buddhist literature, Ashokan edicts to the Hindu epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana;* political treatises, primarily Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Science of Politics), and Sanskrit drama; and to material remains of hero and *sati* stone and royal inscriptions, including panegyrics and donative records of the Vakatakas and Guptas. The final chapter, "Wilderness," shifts the tone of the book to examine the spatial relationship of power as it looks at violence and the threat of violence at the peripheries of state control, the forest. Again, Singh examines a plethora of materials, including Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu texts alongside political science treatises, the *kavya* genre in poetry, and material culture, including numismatics. Together, the five major chapters give a comprehensive overview of political violence and the manifold ways that ancient Indian thinkers understood violence as inherent in the political process but debated its merits and the appropriate expiation of its personal ill effects. In Singh's attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject, the breadth of the materials covered is astounding, but as with any broad approach it does occasionally leave some material a little underanalyzed and lacking the full coverage

that such a delicate topic needs to truly be fleshed out in all its complexity.

The most convincing portions of the book are when Singh transitions from philosophical and theoretical discussions of kingship and violence in political treatises and in what one might call "religious" texts (e.g., jatakas, ***Mahabharata***, etc.) to discuss material remains of ancient Indian courts like sculpture, inscriptions, coins, and so on. I was absolutely spellbound by pp. 159-176 as Singh discussed the "earliest representations of royalty carved in stone" in which the authority, sovereignty, and kingship were displayed in images that embodied the transition to a religious royal ideology (p. 159). This momentum is carried into chapter 3 in which the maturity of the Vakataka and Gupta "new vision of political power" and royal ideology of "kingship and sectarian religion" is articulated through the royal sites of Mansar and Udayagiri (p. 180). This adept reading of royal ideology and rhetoric in material culture is the highlight of each chapter and where Singh's analytic mastery is on full display.

Political Violence in Ancient India, however, is not without its shortcomings. While most are relatively minor issues that do not detract from the overall goals of the book (e.g., anachronistic division of "secular" and "sacerdotal," p. 24), the most significant drawback of this is Singh's treatment of Ashoka and other early Buddhists materials. Indeed, in her introduction Singh directly addresses how India's Buddhist past was lauded by the founders of modern India, especially Nehru and Ambedkar, who pointed to the ethics of ***ahimsa*** (nonviolence) in the construction of a nonviolent imperial Indian history. But when the author discusses Ashoka she too upholds the ancient king as a paragon of virtue who forsook violence after seeing the suffering of the violence he inflicted on the battlefield at Kalinga (e.g., "But [Ashoka's] ambitions were very different from those of his near contemporaries. In his ostentatious rejection of war and his vigorous attempts to inculcate a universal culture of piety, Ashoka appears a misfit in the ancient world," p. 55). In an otherwise extremely thoughtful and critical book that reads between the lines of political rhetoric, Singh seemingly accepts that Ashoka turned from any use of force to promote a nonviolent ethic (e.g., Singh argues that "Ashoka sought to temper the violence inherent in capital punishment" as she rebuts those who claim that there were "serious limits to [Ashoka's] commitment to non-violence," p. 53, and suggests that "In Ashoka's post-Kalinga political philosophy, war and military victory are not considered essential parts or politics or empire," p. 272). While nonviolence was certainly part of the political discourse coming from the Mauryan court, to accept that this was not politically motivated (Singh emphasizes Ashoka's piety) or that the Mauryan empire under Ashoka ceased to use (or even greatly decreased) violent force seems naïve in light of all the other material presented in the book. Indeed, Ronald Davidson, though speaking of inscriptions from a later period, has pointed out the lacuna between Buddhist imperial rhetoric and the violent reality that also seems appropriate to Ashoka's context: "We should avoid the conclusion that these kinds of inscriptions represent actual reality....[I]t is by no means clear that Buddhist kings were necessarily less bloodthirsty than non-Buddhist kings. These inscriptions were rhetorical in principle for the purpose of public presentation and collectively have a tenuous relation to reality. Although Buddhist kings might hold up certain ideals associated with the Buddhadharma, that does not mean that they were capable of adhering to the precepts of nonviolence in an increasingly militaristic culture."[2]

The somewhat uncritical discussion of Ashoka and his ethic of nonviolence sets the stage for the author's presentation of Buddhism, which, at times, seems to be taken more at face value and comes under less critical scrutiny than Hindu and Jain materials (see pp. 253-54) despite texts like the fourth- to sixth-century ***Bodhisattvabhumi***

(Stage of the Buddha-soul) of Asanga that make clear that violence had a place in Buddhist practice in ancient India. It is possible that others might read Singh's portrayal of Buddhist material more generously than this reviewer, but, given the framing of the book in the introduction that emphasizes the ways that Ashoka and his "non-violent empire" have effectively skewed our vision of violence in India's past, I expected a much more critical approach to Ashoka and Buddhist imperial violence. I urge readers to examine the materials themselves.

Political Violence in Ancient India is an extremely absorbing excursion into the world of early Indian history and the discussion and debates about the ethics of violence within ancient courtly culture. Singh should be lauded for the breadth of materials that are presented in a captivating and readable manner. This book is certainly the most comprehensive study of political violence in India and is essential reading for scholars of ancient Indian history, courtly culture, and state-sanctioned violence.

Note

[1]. *Indian Esoteric Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 88.

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