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The Idea of Madhyadeśa in Early India

History of a Region's Identity

In the premodern world, many communities believed that they were located in the center of the world. The Hindu community, too, invented the idea of Madhyadeśa (Middle Country) in the first millennium BCE. This space was as much a physical landscape as a set of cultural markers. The people of Madhyadeśa were believed to speak a "pure" language, follow the norms of a patriarchal caste order, and perform the right set of rituals. These cultural markers were contrasted with those of the people of Mlecchadeśa (Land of Barbarians). In the initial phase, the physical space identified with Madhyadeśa was fluid and malleable. The cultural markers, however, stayed the same or changed ever more slowly. Those cultural markers and ideologies continue to resonate in the lives of people. These ideas define the grammar of most marriages and political formations today. This can be demonstrated by comparing the performance of Madhyadeśa and Mlecchadeśa along a grid of indicators.

Keywords: Madhyadeśa—Mlecchadeśa—*dharmaśāstra*—caste system—marriage—Dalit

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Places are more than dots in a graticule and people much more than statistics illustrated on a graph. Places have their own power, which is reflected in the attachment or emotions of people. Meanings and values are attached to specific landscapes and define their distinctiveness. That is why connotations and symbolic meanings represent a cluster of ideas about a center (Bhardwaj 1973; Nizami and Khan 2013). Certain orthodox believers may proclaim that their god "gave" them pieces of real estate, whose ownership cannot therefore be a matter of earthly debate (Blij 2009, 52). Ideas of a village, town, region, or country are predicated upon definitions of space. Space, however, is not static and universal. It is produced by humans and is dynamic like the arrow of time. Spaces happen. They are constructed and they disintegrate.

Many South Asian scholars of the earlier generation described a region by demarcating a physical space and weaving into it a narrative of human adaptation.[1] This form of conceptualization relied upon the idea of the physical landscape—river valleys, mountains, and more—shaping humans and creating regions. These ideas of regions focused on something concrete, measurable, and visible. Such formulations missed the less tangible flows of ideas that are involved in the expansion, shrinkage, or disintegration of a region.

There has been a gradual shift to conceptualizing regions on the basis of non-physical cultural phenomena. Ideas of region are increasingly based on notions of historical memory, linguistic unity, shared culture, and on structural parallels based on caste and community. Such formulations were enhanced by the rise of nationalism and the making of nation-states. Yet, as much as they relied upon cultural norms, regions were themselves historically contingent and did not just reflect but also created coherent world views based on religious, cultural, social, and literary traditions. The fact that boundaries of a cultural region could be radically different from a linguistic or historical region shows that the idea of region is both objective and subjective (Cohn 1967, 5–37).

In this article, I address two interrelated fields of research into the idea of a region. First, I trace the history of a region called Madhyadeśa (Middle Country) in early India. Second, I show how the idea of region imagined more than two thousand years ago affects the modes of behavior of groups and communities in contemporary South Asia. The inquiry begins with a description of Madhyadeśa found in Brahmanical texts. It is followed by a discussion on how the boundary of Madhyadeśa was modified in the Buddhist tradition. Some of the early texts prescribe modes of behavior and patterns of habitation for the residents of Madhyadeśa. I discuss the implications of such prescriptions. This is followed by a brief discussion on the information about Madhyadeśa found in the texts and inscriptions of the second millennium. The rest of the article is an argument about the persistence of memory of Madhyadeśa in modern times in areas both inside Madhyadeśa and beyond. Few remember Madhyadeśa as a region today. Yet many of the prescriptions of the Madhyadeśa ideal continue to define the "grammar" of community lives in northern India.

Madhyadeśa

The earliest references to Madhyadeśa are found in later Vedic texts. The period of their composition is believed to be between 1000 and 600 BCE (Macdonell and Keith 1912, 1, 165–69). These texts, consisting of the *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*, the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads, were composed in the land of the Kuru-Pāñcālas in archaic Sanskrit. The Kurus and Pāñcālas were two powerful lineages of those times. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* provides one of the earliest references to territorial identities covering large areas. In the chapter on *Indramahābhiṣeka* (coronation of Indra) (VIII.14, in Haug 1863), the term "the middle fixed region" has been used.[2] This "fixed region," inhabited by the Kurus, Pāñcālas, Vaśas, and Uśīnaras, would correspond to modern Kurukshetra, Meerut, and some areas further east. Apart from mentioning the "middle fixed region," the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* also talks about regions of the north, south, east, and west. The use of the words "*asyām*" (on this) for the middle fixed region and "*etasyām*" (in this facing me) for other territories like south or west indicates that the composers of the texts were located in the middle fixed territory.

The idea that the middle region was "fixed" also hints at the possibility that other regions were more fluid and their boundaries could shift. The middle fixed region became the core of Madhyadeśa in the subsequent period. It is also significant that the idea of the middle fixed region emerges in the context of coronation of the chiefs or kings of the Kuru and Pāñcāla ruling lineages, who played a significant role in the *Mahābhārata*. The elaborate coronation rituals of powerful chiefs or kings show that the middle fixed region was not only a ritual assertion but a political one as well.

The prehistory of Madhyadeśa

Texts of the later period expanded the idea of the middle fixed region to include many other areas. They retain a memory of the earlier idea of a "pure region" by inventing terms like "Brahmāvarta" for the area between the rivers Saraswatī and Dṛṣadvatī, and "Brahmarṣideśa" for the areas of Kurukṣetra and the lands of the Matsyas, Pañcalas, and Śūrasenas (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* II.17–20, in Olivelle 2005; see figure 1).

How could the middle fixed region expand in size in this way? In this section I examine references to this process in the later Vedic texts. In the late portions of the *Ṛgveda*, areas to the south had a negative connotation. It was the land of banishment, of exile (Raychaudhuri 1923, 40; Witzel 1999, 14).[3] The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* points out

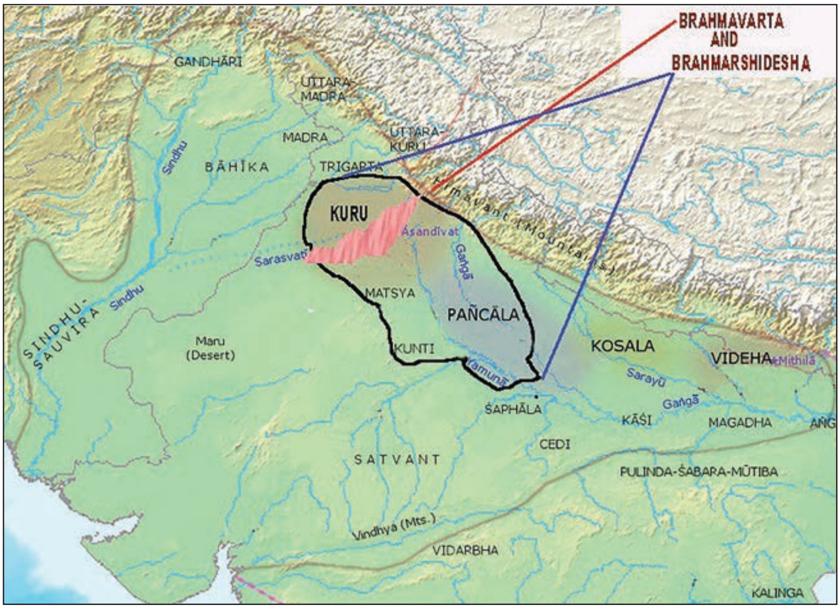

BRAHMAVARTA
AND
BRAHMARSHIDESHA
GANDHĀRI
UTTARA-MADRA
MADRA
UTTARA-KURU
BĀHĪKA
Sindhu
TRIGARTA
KURU
Āsandīvat
Sarasvatī
Gaṅgā
Himavant (Mountains)
MATSYA
PAÑCĀLA
SINDHU-SAUVIRA
Sindhu
Maru (Desert)
KUNTI
Yamunā
KOSALA
VIDEHA
Mithilā
Sarayū
Gaṅgā
ŚAPHĀLA
KĀŚI
MAGADHA
AṄG
CEDI
SATVANT
PULINDA-ŚABARA-MŪTIBA
Vindhya (Mts.)
VIDARBHA
KALINGA

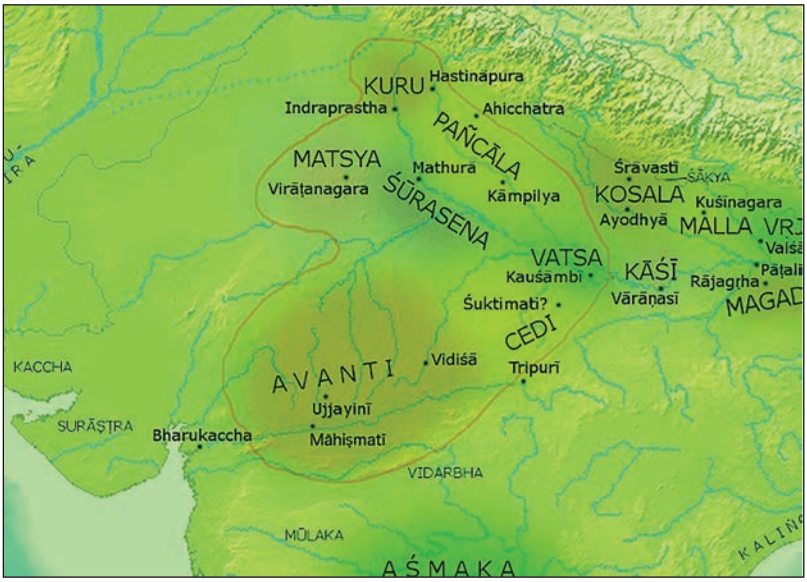
Figure 1. Late Vedic Culture (1100–500 BCE).
Source: Modified version of map of the same title is available through Wikimedia Commons, under a Creative Commons license. Creator: Avantiputra7, modified by P. K. Basant.

that Kurukṣetra was bounded on the south by the Khāṇḍava forest (Law 1976, 101).[4] The famous *Mahābhārata* story of the burning of the Khāṇḍavaprastha gives us some idea about the location of the Khāṇḍava forest that defined the southern limits of Kurukṣetra in the time of the composition of the Brāhmaṇas. It is mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* that the city of Indraprastha was established near the Khāṇḍava forest. Michael Witzel has pointed to the presence of retroflex consonants in the words "Khāṇḍava" and "Kīkaṭa" (Witzel 1999, 14). Such a cluster of consonants was alien to the Indo-Aryan languages in the early stages. The word "Khāṇḍava," its description as a place peopled by aborigines, the story of its burning by Arjuna, and its settlement by the Pāṇḍavas seem to indicate that the area around modern Delhi (Indraprastha) was alien territory for the Kurus.

The Kurus are also called "Bharatas" after an eponymous ancestor. The Brāhmaṇa texts locate the Bharatas in the area of the Saraswatī, Yamuna, and Ganga rivers (Raychaudhuri 1923, 42). In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, Bharata is said to have defeated the Sātvats and taken away the horse that had been prepared for an *aśvamedha* sacrifice. These Sātvats lived near Bharata's realm, namely near the Ganges and the Yamuna (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* XIII.5.4.11 and XIII.5.4.21, in Eggeling 1882–1900). The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (VIII.14) speaks of monarchs of the south called Bhojas, whose subjects were called Sātvats. Many stories narrated in the *Mahābhārata* suggest that the boundaries of the south touched Delhi. For example, at the end of the *Mūsala Parva*, Arjuna is shown as settling the aged men, women, and children of the Vṛṣṇis in Indraprastha. He also established a Yadu prince named Vajra in Indraprastha (*Mahābhārata* 16.8. 67–70, in Sukthankar 1966). Thus, the area around Delhi was believed to have some connection with the Yādavas. The terms "Bhoja," "Sātvat," "Vṛṣṇi," "Andhaka," and "Yādava" are used interchangeably in the later Vedic and post Vedic texts. References in the Brāhmaṇa texts seem to indicate that in the early centuries of the first millennium BCE, the "south" might refer to areas around Delhi.

It is well known that Yādava lineages were located in and around Mathura. In the Sabhā Parva of the Mahābhārata, Sahadeva set out to conquer the south, and his victory march began with a conquest of the land of the Śūrasenas (Mahābhārata 2.28.1), a clan of the Yādavas. The Mahābhārata calls the river Kali Sindh (in Malwa) by the name of Dakṣiṇa Sindhu (Indus River of the South; 3.80.72). It is thus obvious that the early composers of the Mahābhārata regarded the territories around this river as part of the south.

The gathered evidence indicates that the areas of Delhi and Mathura were considered alien territories in many early texts. However, at some point in later Vedic times, Delhi and Mathura were integrated into the middle fixed region. I can make this inference because the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, a text composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE, considers the Śūrasena territory as part of the Brahmarṣideśa (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* II.18), which was a shade less pure than Brahmāvarta (the area between the rivers Saraswatī and Dṛṣadvatī). The memory of the original middle fixed region is retained in the idea of Brahmāvarta. Madhyadeśa represented the third ring of purity (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* II.19) in this scheme of sacred spaces. The mention of names of many aboriginal groups who inhabited areas that were incorporated into Madhyadeśa suggests that there is a vertical component to the idea of a region too. Groups like the Nāgas and Rākṣasas who inhabited the forest of Khāṇḍava near Delhi were not considered part of the culture of Madhyadeśa. While Madhyadeśa expanded horizontally, it also subordinated communities vertically. The following discussion will try to examine the vertical as well as horizontal components of the idea of Madhyadeśa.



KURU
Hastināpura
Indraprastha
Ahicchatrā
PAÑCĀLA
MATSYA
Virāṭanagara
Mathurā
ŚŪRASENA
Kāmpilya
Śrāvastī
ŚĀKYA
KOSALA
Kuśinagara
Ayodhyā
MALLA
VRJ
Vaiśā
Pāṭali
VATSA
Kauśāmbī
KĀŚĪ
Vārāṇasī
Rājagṛha
MAGAD
Śuktimatī?
CEDI
Vidiśā
Tripurī
AVANTI
Ujjayinī
Māhiṣmatī
KACCHA
SURĀṢṬRA
Bharukaccha
VIDARBHA
MŪLAKA
AŚMAKA
KALIṄ
IRA

Figure 2. Mahajanapadas *c.* 500 BCE (Madhyadeśa acccording to Brahmanism).
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The Madhyadeśa of classical Brahmanism

> The land between the Himalaya and Vindhya ranges, to the east of Vinaśana and west of Prayāga, is known as the "Middle Region." (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 2.21)[5]

The *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* describes Madhyadeśa as lying to the east of the area where the river Saraswatī disappears, to the west of the Kālakavana (a forest near Allahabad), to the north of the Pāripātra (the Satpura ranges in Madhya Pradesh), and south of the Himalayas. This notion of the Madhyadeśa is found in the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, too (see figure 2). Many of the Purāṇas, believed to have been written around the fifth to sixth century, follow the division of space defined by the *dharmaśāstra*[6] literature. This definition of Madhyadeśa excluded places east of Allahabad from its ambit. This would mean that eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal were not considered part of Madhyadeśa. Thus, cities like Varanasi, Ayodhya, Vaisali, or Pataliputra were believed to be located beyond Madhyadeśa.

What is interesting, however, is that the boundaries of Madhyadeśa as mentioned in the Brahmanical and the Buddhist literature do not match. The Buddha lived and preached in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The four places of pilgrimage in the Buddhist tradition—Kapilavastu, Bodh Gaya, Sāranātha, and Kuśīnārā—were located beyond the Madhyadeśa of the Brahmanical tradition. So, the Buddhist tradition created a different notion of Madhyadeśa. The Majjhimadesa (Middle Country) of the Buddhist texts includes areas that were closely linked to the life of the Buddha. In the *Mahāvagga*, the eastern boundary of Madhyadeśa is said to extend up to the town of Kājangala (near Bhagalpur, Bihar; Law 1976, 12–13). The *mahājanapada*s of Kāsi, Kosala, Anga, Magadha, Vajji, Malla, Cetiya, and Vatsa, areas beyond the boundaries of the Brahmanical Madhyadeśa, were part of the Buddhist conception of Madhyadeśa (see figure 3).

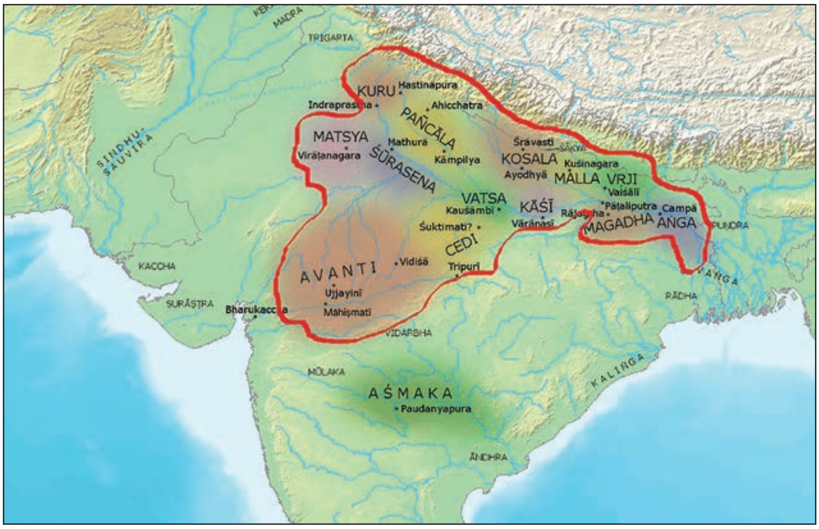
MADRA
TRIGARTA
KURU
Hastinapura
Indraprastha
Ahicchatra
PAÑCĀLA
MATSYA
Virāṭanagara
Mathurā
ŚŪRASENA
Kāmpilya
SINDHU-SAUVIRA
Śrāvasti
ŚĀKYA
KOSALA
Kuśinagara
Ayodhyā
MALLA
VṚJI
Vaiśālī
VATSA
Kauśāmbī
KĀŚĪ
Vārāṇasī
Rājagṛha
Pāṭaliputra
Campā
MAGADHA
AṄGA
PUṆḌRA
Śuktimati?
CEDI
Tripurī
Vidiśā
AVANTI
Ujjayinī
Māhiṣmati
KACCHA
SURĀṢṬRA
Bharukaccha
VAṄGA
RĀḌHA
VIDARBHA
MŪLAKA
AŚMAKA
Paudanyapura
KALIṄGA
ĀNDHRA

Figure 3. Mahajanapadas *c*. 500 BCE. (Middle Country, Brahmanical and Buddhist). Modified version of map of the same title is available through Wikimedia Commons, under a Creative Commons license. Creator: Avantiputra7, modified by P. K. Basant.

Madhyadeśa itself was located in Āryāvarta; the world beyond Āryāvarta, according to the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, was peopled by barbarians. Thus, the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* creates a fivefold division of space along a spectrum of the purest to the most polluted. The units of this division are Brahmāvarta, Brahmarṣideśa, Madhyadeśa, Āryāvarta, and Mlecchadeśa. This division is curiously similar to the fivefold division of the *varṇa* system. The *varṇa* system, generally translated as the "caste" system, assumes that Hindu society is divided into Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, Sūdra, and outcaste groups like the Mlecchas, Caṇḍālas, and Niṣādās.

What is special about Madhyadeśa?

The authors of the Brahmanical and Buddhist texts pictured themselves as cultured and civilized people who were located in the center of the world. Thus, they claimed that Madhyadeśa was the place where the conduct of people was in accordance with *dharma* (the code of conduct that ensures success in this life and the next one). It was the place where people spoke a "pure" language (Macdonell and Keith 1912, 2, 279). Paṇini, the Sanskrit grammarian of the fifth century BCE, called this language *devabhāṣā* (language of the gods). The Brahmanical tradition was very particular about the correct pronunciation of words. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (iii.2.1.23–24) mentions that the enemies of gods could not pronounce words properly. Barbarians are referred to as *mṛdhravācāh* or "those of hostile speech" (Macdonell and Keith 1912, 1, 348).

Brahmanical and Buddhist texts exhort people to follow the cultural practices of the people of the Middle Country. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* regards the language of the inhabitants of the Kuru-Pāñcāla area as the finest (Kane 1963, 107). So, the Middle Country was seen as different from other areas, because people spoke a "better" language. In Brahmāvarta, "the conduct of the four classes and the intermediary classes, handed down for generations, is called the conduct of good people" (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 2.17). What is interesting about the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*'s observation is that even the "purest" land was inhabited by people of all four *varṇa*s and also by impure outcastes like Caṇḍālas and Niṣādās. The conduct of all these castes was believed to be the model of "good conduct" in other parts of the world. For the Brahmarṣideśa, an area a shade less "pure" than Brahmāvarta, the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* believed that the conduct of Brāhmaṇas was a model of good conduct for the rest of the world (ibid., 2.21). In the age of the Brāhmaṇa texts, "good conduct" would probably have meant following the rules of caste and observation of various rituals. By the same logic, one can assume that those who did not live in the Middle Country spoke "crude" languages and did not follow the rules of hierarchy, separation, and endogamy mandated by the caste system or perform Brahmanical rituals.

One can get a better understanding of the idea of the Middle Country if one reviews the comments of Brahmanical texts on the people inhabiting the "south." The Yādava clans are associated with the territories to the south in the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas. Some of the practices of the Yādavas were censured in the Brahmanical tradition. They practiced cross-cousin marriage and marriage by bride-capture.

They did not have kings and took decisions in assemblies. So, their kinship system and political structure were different from those of the people of the Middle Country (Basant 2012, 228–36).

Dharmasūtra/śāstra construction of Madhyadeśa as ideal space

The *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* clearly states that Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas should not cross the boundaries of Āryāvarta. This was in line with the notion of ideal space articulated through the ideal of Madhyadeśa, which implied not only flexible demarcations of regional boundaries but also normative ideas about the form of an ideal settlement and household. In this way, religiously ordained and symbolically charged hierarchies were translated into spatial structures and defined patterns of behavior. Having defined Madhyadeśa, the *dharmasūtra/śāstra* texts shifted their focus to the idea of ideal individual settlements; we see this in the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, where it is said that outcastes like the

> Cāṇḍālas and Śvapacas, however, must live outside the village and they should be made Apapātras. Their property consists of dogs and donkeys, their garments are the clothes of the dead; they eat in broken vessels; their ornaments are of iron; and they constantly roam about. (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 10.51)

This quotation from the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* clearly indicates that outcastes were expected to live outside the main settlement. The *dharmasūtra/śāstra* injunction for creating an ideal space was based on the idea of high castes occupying the ritually pure section of the settlement. The fourfold *varṇa* system pushed out the fifth caste beyond the boundaries of the village. It is significant that many of the terms used for groups that were considered outcastes have a spatial connotation. Terms like "*pratyanta*" (frontier), "*antavāsāyin*" (one who lives at the border), "*anirvāsita*" (not banished), "*nirvāsita*" (banished), "*antyaja*" (born at the border), and "*āṭavika*" (wandering people of the forest) are connected with the idea of space. Whether space was invoked in a metaphorical sense or represented real spatial separation would need further research; this injunction, however, articulates a material form of exclusion. Imagined geographies functioned in this way as tools of power, as a means of controlling and subordinating people and places (Basant 2012, 271–72). That the *dharmasūtra/śāstra* injunction of the exclusion of outcastes worked in material terms, too, is proved by modern studies of settlement layout of villages. Scholars who have worked on settlement patterns in north India have pointed out that the households of Dalits are invariably located along the margins of the main settlement, to the south. This is because Yama, the god of death, is believed to live in the southerly direction. If he were to visit a village, it is the Dalit households he would encounter first (Singh and Khan 1999).[7]

The designation of ideal space in the *dharmasūtra/śāstra* texts had its locus in the individual household. The texts give a lot of importance to the act of establishing a "fire for the household." This ritual remains important in the minds of modern Indians, too. The centrality of the household in the scheme of things for the *dharmasūtra/śāstra* is related to the fact that most people in most societies live in households, in which membership is usually based on kinship. It is simultaneously a dwelling unit, a unit of economic cooperation, and the unit within which reproduction and early childhood socialization takes place (Netting 1984, xxi).

The *dharmasūtra/śāstra* literature indicates the presence of a variety of households. However, the ideal household is that of a *gṛhapati* (householder), who symbolizes control over the productive and reproductive functions of the household. The householder, after all, represents a stage of life in the larger scheme of the cosmopolis. Kumkum Roy (1992, 16) has pointed out that in later Vedic times the *gṛha* (household) came to be defined as the ideal household type, where the *gṛhapati* (householder) was projected as the controlling authority, and the roles of the wife and sons were subordinated.

Vedic literature is, among many other things, a narrative of the creation of patriarchy. A hierarchically ordered kinship structure under the authority of the *gṛhapati* marginalized other kinds of households. Moreover, household rituals marginalized women's role in reproduction (Roy 1994, 268). So, in a statement like, "a householder should marry a wife who comes from the same class as he, who has not been married before, and who is younger than he" (*Gautama Dharmasūtra* 4.1, in Olivelle 1999), the overwhelming concern with marriage practices and strictures against *pratiloma* (hypogamy) or mixed-caste marriages veered around the issue of controlling women. The ideal woman had to be quiet and submissive; we thus see the injunction: "A sharp tongued woman should be divorced immediately" (*Baudhāyana* 2.4.6, in Olivelle 1999). This idea is tattooed eternally afresh in text after text. For the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, the inferiority of women was natural, and the rules prescribed for controlling them were simply injunctions meant to preserve this natural order. We can see this in the following examples from the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*: "It is the very nature of women to corrupt men" (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 2.213); "The bed and the seat, jewelry, lust, anger, crookedness, a malicious nature and bad conduct are what Manu assigned to women" (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 9.17).

The *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* describes a variety of marriage practices along a descending grid of legitimacy. Such marriage practices include the tradition of *gandharva vivāha*, in which the girl and boy fall in love and marry without the intervention of kinsmen. But such marriage practices are low down in the hierarchy of approved forms of marriage. The *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* prescribes *Brahma vivāha* as the ideal form of marriage, wherein the head of a household hands over his daughter or granddaughter to another householder. In the *Brahma vivāha* form of marriage women have no agency. They are treated as items of exchange between male heads of households. Honor killings, riots, and murders over issues of marriage in India today are a replication of mindsets created in the early centuries of the Common Era. The Brāhmaṇa thinkers were willing a social order into existence by envisioning "ideal" households. The household was the crucible in which the hierarchies to be replicated in society were worked out (Tyagi 2008, 350). It was an attempt to create a pathology of normalcy.

Having invented an ideal space and designed an ideal household, the *dharmasūtra/śāstra* texts set out to monitor social behavior in the more visible arena of the larger settlement, moving out from the household into the domain of the social. It can be understood by prescriptions of different figures of speech for students of different castes. Āpastamba, a well-known *dharmasūtra* writer, says, "A Brāhmin should beg placing 'Madam' at the beginning, Kṣatriya placing 'Madam' in the middle and Vaiśya placing 'Madam' at the end" (*Āpastamba* 3, 28–30, in Olivelle 1999). The quotation shows that placement of the word "madam" automatically betrayed the caste status of a *brahmacārin* (pious student). There was an attempt to prescribe modes of behavior that would channel flows of power. This would define patterns of relationships between older and younger, high caste and low caste, and men and women.

The study of the visible spectrum of the social universe gives us an idea about the ways in which subordination was normalized. Political sociologists have shown that American children often confuse the president, policemen, and the father with the benign state (Abrams 1980). The *dharmasūtra*s/*śāstra*s as a body of texts sought to represent the "illusory common interest of society." Style connects to substance. The *dharmasūtra*s/*śāstra*s created a system of ideas that sought to regulate every aspect of life, covering themes like what to wear, how to talk, or what directions to face while urinating or defecating. This obsession with minutiae was an attempt to create a single moral universe. In this, society and power were cleverly compressed. They took for granted the existence of a single and morally centered world that was serviced and unified by Brāhmaṇas. For example, the following quote defines a high-caste person's circle of people, specifying those with whom he could talk:

> Let him not commune with every one; for he who is consecrated draws nigh to the gods, and becomes one of the deities. Now the gods do not commune with everyone, but only with a *brāhmaṇa*, or a *rājanya*, or a *vaiśya*; for these are able to sacrifice. Should there be occasion for him to converse with a *śūdra*, let him say to one of those, "Tell this one so and so! tell this one so and so!" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* III.I.I.10)
>
> Now there are four different forms of this call, viz. "come hither (*ehi*)!" in the case of a *brāhmaṇa*; "approach (*āgahi*)!" and "hasten hither (*ādrava*)!" in the case of a *vaiśya* and a member of the military caste (*rājanyabandhu*); and "run hither (*ādhāva*)!" in that of a *śūdra*. (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* I.I.IV.12)

The quotation from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* showing the banishment of Śūdras from the linguistic space is a statement about the creation of a new discourse of power. In the description of different forms of the imperative verb for calling, Vaiśyas are supposed to come quickly while Śūdras are expected to come running. So the pattern of physical movement is also defined by one's caste status. This process of marginalization becomes more visible in texts like the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, where people of different castes were expected to don different clothes and carry different kinds of staffs (II.41–47).

> The name of a priest should have (a word for) auspiciousness, of a ruler strength, of a commoner, property, and the name of a *śūdra* should breed disgust. (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 2.31)
>
> Chaste students of the Veda should wear (in descending order of class) the skins of black antelope, gazelle and male goat, and hemp, linen and wool. (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 2.42)

These quotations show that the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* was inventing distinctions that would easily identify members of the three upper castes. *Śūdras* do not feature in the list because they had already been banished from the linguistic and ritual space of the "pure." As the outcastes were meant to wear clothes discarded by the upper castes (*Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 10.51), there was no need for creating a distinctive clothing for them. Their mark of distinction was their deprivation. This was also visible in forms of greeting, "With joined hands, let a Brahmin greet by stretching his right-hand level with his ears, a Kṣatriya level with his chest, a Vaiśya level with his waist, and a Śūdra very low. When returning the greetings of a person belonging to one of the higher classes, the last syllable of his name should be lengthened to three morae" (*Āpastamba* 1.6.16–21). This meant that the status of an individual was defined by the mere pronouncement of his or her name.

It is remarkable that the prescriptions for the presentation of different castes in social space—the way a male person is to be greeted and the way his name is to be announced—are meant to automatically announce the status of the one who greets and the one who is greeted. "Homo hierarchicus" announces his presence not only by the dress he wears but also by the gestures of his body and by the intonations and emphases involved in articulating the words in a sentence.[8] Bodily gestures as messages of power and subordination are further illustrated in the following passage:

> When he meets the teacher after sunrise, however, he should clasp his feet; at all other times he should exchange greetings, although, according to some, he should embrace the teacher's feet even at other times. In the presence of his teacher, moreover, he should not speak while lying down. (*Āpastamba* 1.6.16–21)
>
> To his mother and father he should show the same obedience as to his teacher. A student who has returned home should clasp the feet of all his elders. (*Āpastamba* 1.14.6)
>
> He should also clasp the feet of his brothers and sisters according to seniority. He should rise up and greet an officiating priest, a father-in-law, or a paternal or maternal uncle who is younger than himself, or he may silently clasp his feet. In every case, however, he should rise up before offering his greetings. (*Āpastamba* 1.14.8–12)

These passages sought to create a grammar of gestures that defined proper conduct in social space. Who was to bow to whom and at what angle was meticulously defined. Who was to walk in front and who was to follow was worked out with the precision of a military drill. Inferiority in age and status was to be demonstrated over and over again in public and private spaces. This grammar defined the patterns of behavior in everyday life, and their repeated displays created the ideal Brahmanical individual. This ideal person had to observe rules of precedence in public spaces, too. People of the lower castes were supposed to give way to people of the higher castes (*Āpastamba* 2.11.5–9). So, the "self" presented in everyday life was constructed to the specification of the *dharmasūtra*/*śāstra* tradition. This is the homo hierarchicus who demands subservience in visible space, in the modes of traffic to be used by people of different castes in Indian villages, and in the right to precedence on roads.

Propagation of Madhyadeśa traditions beyond its borders

Mlecchadeśa (Land of Barbarians) was meant to be avoided by Aryans. How could the noble Aryan cross over to Mlecchadeśa? The empirical world of the subcontinent was radically different from the divisions established by the *dharmasūtra*/*śāstra* tradition. Literary sources refer to many *janapada*s (lands and people). These *janapada*s represented a range of different lifestyles. The *tinai* idea of *Tamilakam* is one such example. The Sangam literature produced in the early centuries of the Common Era in the Tamil-speaking areas of south India mentions the idea of the *tinai* (genre). It was a poetic convention that connected varying landscapes with different moods. The *tinai* idea shows that the Tamil region was divided into hilly regions, dry areas, pastoral tracts, agricultural lands, and coastal areas (Chattopadhyaya 2014, 8). Each of these subregions had different manners and customs. Thus, the propagation of the Madhyadeśa ideal would require a large range of interventions. The Brāhmaṇa thinkers came up with a variety of ideas about the issue of amalgamating Mlecchadeśa into Madhyadeśa tradition. The most startling suggestion was made by the eighth-century Kashmir scholar Medhātithi. In his commentary on the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, he says,

> if a certain well-behaved king of the *Kṣatriya* caste should happen to defeat the *mlecchas* and make that land inhabited by people of the four castes, relegating the indigenous *mlecchas* to the category of "*Cāṇḍāla*," as they are in *Āryāvarta*, then that which was a "country of the *mlecchas*" would become a "land fit for sacrifices". (Medhātithi 2.23, in Jha 1920)

It is remarkable that Medhātithi has done away with the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*'s idea of space as a tangible, demarcated physical object. A new trope had emerged that abolished space as a determinant of the construction of the sacred. Once sacred space is freed from physical geography, the possibilities of its expansion are endless. There were a variety of ways in which Mlecchadeśas were turned into sacred lands. One strategy for crossing over to Mlecchadeśa seems to have been the use of fire as a great ritual purifier. Lighting fires as part of household rituals was prescribed as a necessary act for a householder. Household rituals of fire and a variety of fire sacrifices helped Brahmanical communities cross over to territories hitherto regarded as Mlecchadeśas.

Another interesting strategy adopted by the Brahmanical tradition was that of the transfer of toponyms of the Madhyadeśa. Names of holy rivers or holy places saw a wholesale replication in different parts of the subcontinent. For example, one finds Mathura in the Madurai of the Tamil area. This effectively turned Mlecchadeśas into lands of the pure. To be able to accomplish the conquest of new spaces, the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* advocated the adoption of local practices as a part of state law. Local practices were accepted under the cosmopolitan Brahmanical order. No wonder texts like the *Yogini Tantra* were able to assert that the *dharma* in Yogini-Pīṭha (Assam) was of Kirāta (hill people) origin. What seems certain is that the enthronement of the Madhyadeśa tradition was achieved by marginalizing and subordinating numerous local traditions in the Indian subcontinent (Chattopadhyaya 2014, 11).

The reproduction of the *dharmaśāstra* ideology in time was achieved by continuous production of the *dharmaśāstra* texts that were named after great sages. For example, the *dharmaśāstra*s of Yājnavalkya, Viṣṇu, Nārada, and Kātyāyana were written much later than the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*.[9] While *dharmaśāstra*s continued to be composed in the later period, a tradition of commentaries on the *śāstra*s/*sūtra*s became popular after the eighth–ninth centuries. Commentaries were written in every area of the subcontinent. In fact, Pandurang Vaman Kane's monumental work on the history of the *dharmaśāstra*s lists a large number of such commentators who continued to write commentaries well into the nineteenth century (1992, 3–97). What they managed to do was to discover meanings that suited the historical and local context of the commentator.

Scholars have noticed the production of a very large number of copper plates and *praśasti*s (inscriptions in praise of kings) in early medieval India (Sharma 1983, 18). With proclamations like "as long as the sun and moon last" and the creation of *agrahāra*s (grants of land to Brāhmaṇas), the epigraphs were broadcasting an ideology of Brahmanical power. This process of construction of the Brahmanical order continued throughout the early medieval and medieval period. The process was further buttressed by the system of recitation during *pūjā* (prayers and rituals performed to please a deity), which became increasingly popular in the wake of the emergence of *bhakti* (devotion to a personal god or goddess) traditions.

Many *pūjā*s, some of which continue to be popular today, have been occasions for public celebration. Here, the performer is required to recite some incantations that locate them in a particular section of Jambudvīpa (one of the names of India in ancient texts). Those incantations mention the name, caste, *gotra*, village, region, country, and age. All this is placed in the larger cosmological context. Situating the individual in the local as well as cosmological context created powerful notions of individual and collective identity. A thirteenth-century *dharmaśāstra* text has the following prescription "[The sacrificer] should first recite the following: 'Om! Here on this earth, in *Jambudvipa*, in *Bhāratavarṣa*, in *Kumārikakhaṇḍa*, in the field of Prajāpati, in such-and-such a place and such-and-such a spot."[10]

Probably the most powerful instruments of the reproduction of the Madhyadeśa ideology in space and time were the two great epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Different versions of these stories have been found in almost every part of the subcontinent and beyond. The themes and variations in the *Rāmāyaṇa* stories have led scholars to talk about the tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* rather than versions (Ramanujan 2001, 133). It is equally important that many creators of these stories were purveyors of the Brahmanical order. Despite variations, most of the Rama stories try to create an ideal social order, namely the *Rāmarājya*. The *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* show very clearly that their authors had been actively talking to the *dharmaśāstra* tradition. So, the expansion of the epic traditions was an expansion of the *dharmaśāstra* ideology. The dissemination of manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata* in different languages and scripts is testimony to its popularity. Royal endowments for its continual recitation turned the ideal of the text into components of popular consciousness (Pollock 2006, 232). The *Rāmcharitmānas*'s description of Bharata carrying Rāma's sandals on his head represents Tulasīdās's notion of the ideal younger brother. Similarly, Lakṣmaṇa or Sītā walking behind Rāma rather than ahead of him encodes messages of the ideal Brahmanical order. There are examples of the performance of *Rāmlīlā*s in villages where the *Brāhmaṇa*s and upper-caste individuals played the role of Rāma and other noble characters, while the Dalits played the role of demons (Ram 2010, 46). So, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* turned into instruments of dissemination of ideologies of power and domination. As audiences heard the recitation of the text, they heard themselves being included in that narrated space of power (Pollock 2006, 237).

The process of the spread of ideologies related to the Madhyadeśa tradition was buttressed by a stream of migration of Brāhmaṇas from Madhyadeśa to Mlecchadeśa, as inscriptional and literary records of such migrations in both the first and second millennia show (Yadav 1973, 23; Datta 1989; Chakrabarti 2001, 118). The history of Bengal provides glimpses of this process. Bengal was clearly located outside Madhyadeśa. The *Kulaji* texts and Bengali *Upapurāṇas* give us an idea about the process of the spread of the Brahmanical tradition in Bengal. Composed between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the *Kulaji* texts follow a standard trope. The stories begin with king Ādisūra of Bengal requesting the king of Kannauj (or Kolāñca), a city in Madhyadeśa, to send five Brāhmaṇas versed in the Vedas and performance of Vedic sacrifices, for there were no such Brāhmaṇas in Bengal. These Brāhmaṇas from Kannauj are believed to be the ancestors of all the high-caste Brāhmaṇas in Bengal. The five Brāhmaṇas came with five *sat* (good) Śūdras. The *sat* Śūdras were the founding ancestors of the *sat* Śūdra groups, as contrasted with the *asat* (not good) Śūdras, who were local. The thirteenth-century king Lakṣmaṇasena is said to have put a seal of authority on the emergent system by organizing the entire society of Bengal in a caste order. The king prescribed rules of marriage, rituals of worship, and relations among various castes and communities (Inden 1976, 26–30, 54–55). It is interesting that the hierarchy of castes was defined by each caste's proximity to the Brāhmaṇa-centered ritual systems that had been invented in Madhyadeśa. What is equally interesting is that while the Brahmanical co-option of Bengal's traditions of mother goddess worship almost rendered invisible the Madhyadeśa's patriarchal religious traditions, the reworked social world continued to mimic the Madhyadeśa world of elaborate caste hierarchies.

The idea of Madhyadeśa today

Codes of behavior prescribed for the Madhyadeśa have translated into modes of behavior in present-day India. The power of the idea of Madhyadeśa matters, because it still determines the grammar of most marriages and deeply colors the shades of politics in India. Although it varied in time and space, the caste system remains one of the most visible structures of the Indian social world.[11] While it is true that the precepts of the *dharmasūtras*/*śāstras* were not practiced in the literal sense, they impacted the strengthening of hierarchies—with Brāhmaṇas somewhere near the top.[12] When Europeans began studying Indian society, they were struck by the correspondence between the description of the caste system in the *dharmasūtra*/*śāstra* literature and the structures of society in modern villages (Beteille 2011, 87).

Notions of purity and pollution articulated in various forms of hierarchy and elaborate rules of endogamy and exogamy are the most visible elements of the *varṇa* and *jāti* system.[13] Every *jāti* is a self-contained group whose reproduction is ensured by elaborate rules of marriage under the watchful eyes of patriarchs. Marriages across caste are rare. According to the India Human Development Survey, only about 5 percent of Indian marriages are intercaste (Rajagopalan 2020). Patriarchs control the economic resources and the sexuality of the young members of the household. They domesticate the females by controlling their bodies and minds. Males too, controlled by the laws of marriage and authority, are severely repressed. In turn, the younger members of the *jāti* access the cultural and physical resources of their group. Thus, their behavior pattern is shaped and controlled by the senior members.

Households headed by patriarchs are part of a larger network of patriarchal households of the same *jāti*. Each caste group in a village might have a distinct caste head. This hierarchical network extends over a large number of villages with heads of different standing. One of the reasons for the perpetuation of the *jāti* system is the sense of power and ownership it gives to the *jāti* chiefs. Howsoever oppressed they are, patriarchs can feel like lords within their tiny *jāti* clusters by harnessing the law of endogamy and social custom. Such formations exist in a world of parallel *jāti* groups. The cluster of parallel *jāti* groups forming pyramidal power structures act as bases for pyramids formed by higher *varṇa*s. While the Brāhmaṇa *varṇa* sits atop this pyramid, Dalits, shorn of dignity and power, populate the bottom. The Brāhmaṇa *varṇa* itself encompasses numerous *jati*s, while the category of Dalits encompasses the most fragmented set of *jati*s. As per the government list of 1950, there are 1,108 Scheduled Castes or *jāti*s among the Dalits (Government of India 1950). Trapped in small geographies, the local leadership of the Dalits is easy prey to manipulation by the upper-caste *jāti*s as they are spread over much larger geographical spaces.

The *dharmasūtra*/*śāstra* frame of legitimation seems to keep Indians in thrall even today. The *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*'s injunction that the names used for Śūdras should breed disgust can be seen operating to date. There is evidence of upper-caste villagers in north India forbidding people of lower castes from bearing names that were used by members of the upper castes, even in modern times (BBC 2011). This explains the names of Dalit characters like Dukhiyā (Sorrow), Ghisu (The One Who Scrubs), and Gobar (Cow Dung) in the stories of Premchand.[14] Even the popular Bollywood film *Lagaan* names its Dalit character Kacharā (Garbage). That explains atrocities against Dalits in modern times: according to a report on violence against Dalits, the core Madhyadeśa area had the highest incidence of attacks on Dalits (see table 1; Saaliq and Bose n.d.).

Ownership of land and access to water, commons, markets, education, and so on are severely curtailed for Dalits. They are forced to do the most backbreaking and toxic jobs like cleaning of excrement and handling dead bodies. Myths and legends depict them as polluted, lacking intellect, and as the seat of all vices. They are settled in penal ghettos for all to see. Laws of endogamy imprison them in their social ghettoes. Thus, the social, cultural, sexual, and economic aspects of Dalit identity exist in a toxic synergy. The evil architecture of the system ensures that all the castes connive in perpetuating this system.[15]

Caste-defined social networks influence the political behavior of Indians to a considerable degree. Universal franchise, introduced in post-independence India, was based on the idea of a citizen who has rights and responsibilities as an individual. It discounted the membership of caste and community. The caste system based on the idea of hierarchy is antithetical to ideas of equality and individuality. When modern politics entered the world of caste, caste entered politics. Both were transformed. It is said that people do not cast their vote, they vote their caste. The intensity of caste solidarity is proved by descriptions of people voting for candidates of their own caste irrespective of the party they belong to.[16] Almost all political parties calculate caste loyalties in selecting candidates for election. Psephologists routinely use caste categories in their analysis of election results. Such a system disadvantages numerically smaller dominant castes. This leads them to scramble for caste alliances and search for new strategies.

Serial No.	State	2018	2019	2020
1	Uttar Pradesh	11,924	11,829	12,714
2	Bihar	7,061	6,544	7,368
3	Rajasthan	4,607	6,794	7,017
4	Madhya Pradesh	4,753	5,300	6,899
5	Andhra Pradesh	1,836	2,071	1,950

Table 1. Top Five States Ranked by Number of Atrocities against Dalits
Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2021b, 517)

The *varṇa* system has ensured control by dominant castes in a variety of ways. The elections held in 2017 in Uttar Pradesh provide an interesting example of the way pyramidal structures ensure the control of the upper castes. Although the upper castes formed about 20 percent of the population of Uttar Pradesh, they still won elections. The upper castes voted overwhelmingly for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.[17] What mattered was that they managed to persuade leaders of various Backward Castes and Scheduled Castes (Dalits) to vote for them. Such attempts at mobilizing voters of different castes required persuading the state- and district-level leaders of subordinate caste groups. It was easier for the upper castes to persuade the Dalit leaders because they were heading isolated local groups. Once the leaders announced their support for candidates of the upper castes, minor leaders followed suit, and the rank and file of the caste group followed them in turn.

Curiously, Brahmāvarta, the purest region of the Middle Country, coinciding with parts of Punjab and Haryana, has the highest concentration of Dalit population in modern India (see figure 4).[18] This is probably connected with the fact that the caste system easily merges and meshes ideas of purity-pollution with the economic, political, and ritual deprivation of a large number of people.[19] Punjab and Haryana are the areas where the caste system was invented. The caste system's hegemony and long history in these areas led to the creation of larger groups of deprived Dalits.

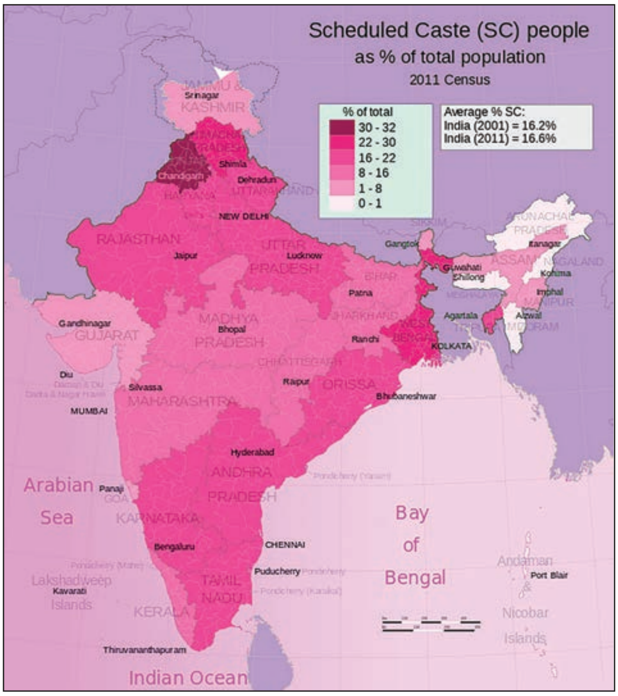
Scheduled Caste (SC) people
as % of total population
2011 Census
% of total
30 - 32
22 - 30
16 - 22
8 - 16
1 - 8
0 - 1
Average % SC:
India (2001) = 16.2%
India (2011) = 16.6%
JAMMU & KASHMIR
Srinagar
HIMACHAL PRADESH
Shimla
Chandigarh
Dehradun
UTTARAKHAND
HARYANA
NEW DELHI
RAJASTHAN
Jaipur
UTTAR PRADESH
Lucknow
SIKKIM
Gangtok
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
Itanagar
ASSAM
NAGALAND
Guwahati
Shillong
Kohima
MEGHALAYA
Imphal
MANIPUR
BIHAR
Patna
Agartala
Aizwal
TRIPURA
MIZORAM
JHARKHAND
Ranchi
WEST BENGAL
KOLKATA
Gandhinagar
GUJARAT
MADHYA PRADESH
Bhopal
CHHATTISGARH
Diu
Daman & Diu
Dadra & Nagar Haveli
Silvassa
Raipur
ORISSA
Bhubaneshwar
MUMBAI
MAHARASHTRA
Hyderabad
ANDHRA PRADESH
Pondicherry (Yanam)
Arabian Sea
Panaji
GOA
KARNATAKA
Bay of Bengal
Bengaluru
CHENNAI
Andaman
Port Blair
Pondicherry (Mahe)
Puducherry
Pondicherry
Lakshadweep
Kavarati
Islands
TAMIL NADU
Pondicherry (Karaikal)
KERALA
Nicobar Islands
Thiruvananthapuram
Indian Ocean

Figure 4. 2011 Census Scheduled Caste distribution map, by state and union territory. Source: Modified version of map of the same title is available through Wikimedia Commons, under a Creative Commons license. Creator: M. Tracy Hunter, modified by P. K. Basant. Data source: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner (2013).

These are areas where powerful egalitarian movements like Sikhism and Islam were very active. However, even Sikhism ended up creating the Dalit caste of Mazhabi Sikhs (Puri 2003, 2693–2701).

Among Muslims, too, groups that performed jobs considered impure in the Brāhmaṇa tradition have been called *kamīn* (deficient). They have shown caste-like characteristics and have been shunned by the rich and powerful Muslims. Persian sources from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries condemn the idolatry of the Hindus but never censure the caste system (Habib 1995, 161–77). It appears that while political power shifted into the hands of Turko-Islamic rulers, the social space continued to be dominated by the Brahmanical ideologies of Madhyadeśa. Such a state of affairs speaks of compromises among the stakeholders of political and social power.

The power of the Brahmanical ideology in the classical Madhyadeśa can be understood if we compare it with the social landscape of Mlecchadeśa. Analysis of excess deaths among females aged under five in the census of 2011 show that the Middle Country has a higher rate of female feticide and a higher rate of killings for dowry than those parts associated with Mlecchadeśa (Guilmoto et al. 2018). Table 2 and figure 5 also show that people located in the provinces identified with Madhyadeśa and surrounding areas witnessed the highest number of dowry deaths in the year 2020. It has been the pattern for a long time (National Crime Records Bureau 2021c).

Serial No.	State	Number of women killed for dowry
1	Uttar Pradesh	2,274
2	Bihar	1,046
3	Madhya Pradesh	608
4	West Bengal	522
5	Rajasthan	471

Table 2. States Ranked by Number of Dowry Deaths in 2020
Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2021a, 200)

The *dharmasūtra/śāstra* ideal created a society that worked out a system of distributing conflicts in a large range of situations. It is the Brahmanical tradition's influence that explains the fact that among the rural unorganized workers in India today, about 80 percent belong to the SC (Scheduled Caste), ST (Scheduled Tribe), and OBC (Other Backward Class) categories (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector 2007, 117).

Indeed, even in an unlikely place like a prison, caste distinctions carry weight. Some years back, a newspaper carried a piece on prison abuse in India, showing that a Brāhmaṇa was less likely to be tortured in prison than a Dalit.[20] In a place like a prison, some strange laws seem to be at work in the minds of prisoners and policemen alike.

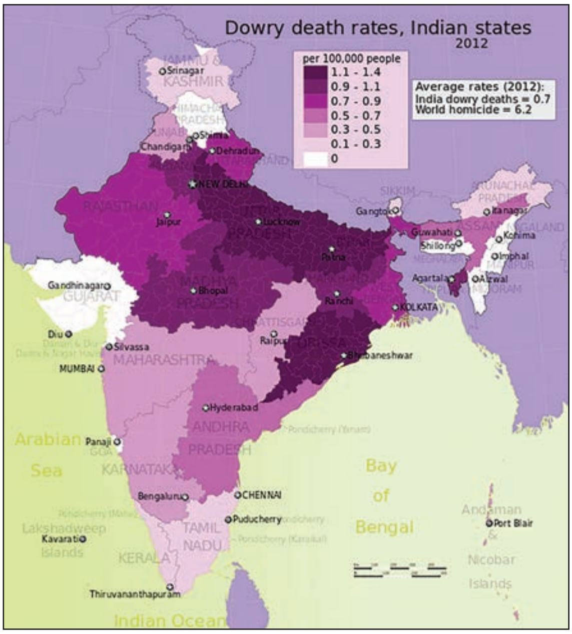
Dowry death rates, Indian states
2012
per 100,000 people
1.1 - 1.4
0.9 - 1.1
0.7 - 0.9
0.5 - 0.7
0.3 - 0.5
0.1 - 0.3
0
Average rates (2012):
India dowry deaths = 0.7
World homicide = 6.2
JAMMU & KASHMIR
Srinagar
HIMACHAL PRADESH
PUNJAB
Shimla
Chandigarh
Dehradun
NEW DELHI
RAJASTHAN
Jaipur
UTTAR PRADESH
Lucknow
SIKKIM
Gangtok
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
Itanagar
ASSAM
NAGALAND
Guwahati
Kohima
Shillong
Patna
Imphal
MANIPUR
Agartala
Aizwal
MIZORAM
Gandhinagar
GUJARAT
MADHYA PRADESH
Bhopal
Ranchi
KOLKATA
Diu
Silvassa
Raipur
ORISSA
Bhubaneshwar
MAHARASHTRA
MUMBAI
Hyderabad
ANDHRA PRADESH
Arabian Sea
Panaji
GOA
KARNATAKA
Bay of Bengal
Bengaluru
CHENNAI
Puducherry
Andaman & Nicobar Islands
Port Blair
Lakshadweep Islands
Kavarati
TAMIL NADU
KERALA
Thiruvananthapuram
Indian Ocean

Figure 5. 2012 India dowry death rate per 100,000 people, distribution map by state and union territory. Source: Modified version of map of the same title is available through Wikimedia Commons, under a Creative Commons license. Creator: M. Tracy Hunter, modified by P. K. Basant. Data Source: Crime in India 2012 Statistics, National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt of India (2013), Table 1.8, p. 216.

Those strange laws are the Brahmanical ideology that seems to be more powerful than the modern Indian legal system.

Journalistic investigations point out that prison manuals used in different provinces of India generally follow the prison manual published by the British in 1894. These manuals very clearly specify that the convicts and those under trial in prisons should be assigned various jobs in prisons based on their caste. This translates into a situation where the Dalits are made to clean toilets and drains, whereas Brāhmaṇas look after cooking or accounts. This pattern of caste-based discrimination has been documented in many provinces of India. In some cases, prisoners were allotted rooms based on their caste (Shantha 2020). Prison systems represent the most visible symbols of the monopoly of violence by the modern state system. Prisoners are believed to be cast into anonymity and isolation. They become numbers and categories in prison registers. In India, the Madhyadeśa ideology of caste has inserted itself into the capillaries of the modern prison system. Modern power system and a premodern ideology have gelled to create the habitus of the prison world.

The idea that Madhyadeśa represented the purest segment of space was used by people who argued that Hindi should be the national language of India. One of the arguments given in favor of Hindi (*Khari boli*) was that it was originally called "Kauravi", because it was the language of the Kuru area. As such it was the pure language of the Aryans (Ramprakash and Gupta 1997, 35). The famous Hindi writer Mahavira Prasad Dwivedi called Hindi the daughter of Sanskrit and the elder sister of Indo-Aryan languages (Orsini 2009, 5). The historical self-consciousness of Hindi as the language of the Aryans and the social model it implied became part of the Sanskritization package that spawned conservative ideologies in north India (Orsini 2009, 242).[21]

Ideas connected with Madhyadeśa crossed frontiers and became important elements of the culture of South Asia in a broader sense. These currents took grotesque forms in places like eighteenth to nineteenth century Bengal, where high-status Brāhmaṇas, believed to have migrated from Madhyadeśa, were permitted to, encouraged, and indeed did marry dozens of women of lower-status Brāhmaṇa families, because it would improve the status of the children of such marriages. These Brāhmaṇas continued to marry well into their old age. A high-caste Brāhmaṇa's death could produce hundreds of widows. Opposition to such marriages and widowhood is closely connected with the Bengal reform movement.[22] Echoes of the idea of Madhyadeśa can be heard even today in the Terai region of Nepal, where a group of people calling themselves "Madhesi" are fighting for recognition of their political identity. They claim that they have migrated from Madhyadeśa (International Crisis Group 2007).

Conclusion

My analysis suggests that Madhyadeśa began as an idea of space and developed into an ideology that gradually spread to different parts of the subcontinent. The *dharmasūtra/śāstra* literature is obsessed with the idea of what is good and proper, and it reinforces its solutions at the level of family, kinship, caste, and religion. The household, the street, the state, and the next life became part of a single web, in which plays of power were staged. It is important to visualize the idea of the region as a vertical phenomenon as well. The horizontal expansion of the Madhyadeśa idea was not a conquest of uninhabited spaces. The Bengal case shows that groups and communities that were integrated into the Madhyadeśa ideology had their own autonomous traditions. So, spatial expansion synchronized with vertical othering. The formation of Madhyadeśa produced exalted, knowledgeable Brāhmaṇas and degraded untouchables at the same time. The idea of the region hence needs to be viewed through the eyes of the Niṣādas (people of the forest), Dalits, women, and other marginalized communities. Differences in the definition of Madhyadeśa between the Buddhist and Brahmanical texts prove that Middle Country is a cultural construct with changing physical dimensions. Although there are variations in the accounts of the physical space covered by Madhyadeśa, the cultural definition remains the same.

Normative visualizations of space as a "natural entity" have been challenged in the social sciences. I have tried to map the ephemeral geography of ideas. It showed that the arc of imagined pure spaces expanded in the last two thousand years. Frontiers moved with the whims of history. Few consciously remember Madhyadeśa today. The evanescent geographies of Brahmāvarta are long forgotten. But the basic categories of self-identification created in Madhyadeśa thousands of years ago continue to animate the lives of most "cow-belt" Hindus and many others in South Asia. Descriptions of the attempt to bring Bengal within the fold of the Madhyadeśa ideology show that regions are not solid, finished entities. Regions are more like the flows of streams whose boundaries are liquid. Their flows consist of a constellation of human interactions and ideas that could flood new spaces. Their success would depend on the conjuncture of power and historical contingency.

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Notes

1. The much-celebrated book *India: A Regional Geography*, edited by R. L. Singh (1971), is a classic example of this kind of work. The authors carve out different provinces of India based on physical features or existing political boundaries. This is believed to provide the frame for explaining human activities.

2. tasmād asyāṃ dhruvāyām madhyamāyām pratiṣṭhāyāṃ disi ye keca
kurupañcālānāṃ rājānaḥ savaśośīnarāṇāṃ rājyāyaiva te 'bhiṣicyante

"Therefore, in this immovable middle region kings of the Kuru Pañcālas, with the Vaśas and Uśīnaras, are inaugurated to kingship, and called Kings" (Haug 1863, VIII.14).

The Kuru Pañcālas, Vaśas, and Uśīnaras were powerful lineages in the early first millennium BCE. They were among the earliest communities that made a transition to state society.

3. In the early Vedic literature, the south is expressis verbis excluded as the non-Indo-Aryan land of the Kikāṭa and of Pramaganda. In the later Vedic period, the south referred to the land south of the Yamuna and north of the Vindhyas. It was inhabited by Matsyas, Kuntis, and Sātvants (Witzel 1995, 1–18).

4. The forest of Khāṇḍava is shown as inhabited by Nāgas, Rākṣasas, and a large number of imaginary and real creatures (*Mahābhārata* 1.219.1.).

5. Quotations from *Manusmriti* are based on translations by Wendy Doniger and Brian Smith (1992), and Patrick Olivelle's (1999, 2005) translations of the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* and *dharmasūtra*s.

6. The *dharmasūtra*s and *dharmaśāstra*s refer to a large number of Sanskrit texts composed between the fourth century BCE and tenth century CE. They prescribed norms and rules for an ideal social order. The *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* is the most well-known text of this tradition.

7. Tulasi Ram (2010, 34–35), a Dalit writer, describes the location of his house in great detail in his autobiography entitled *Murdahiya*.

8. The term "homo hierarchicus" is taken from Dumont (1988). He argued that the idea of hierarchy is the foundational principle of the Hindu social order.

9. See the chronology of texts in Kane (1992, 14–16).

10. This quotation is from the thirteenth-century Maharashtrian *dharmaśāstra* of Hemadri, quoted in Pollock (2006, 190).

11. Historians have traced histories of the caste system to show that the *dharmaśāstra* vision of a fixed system is incorrect. Studies of the origin of Rajputs have traced the process of the creation of a new caste in the early medieval period (Chattopadhyaya 1976).

12. Scholars have debated the working of the caste system. While Dumont (1988) regarded the caste system as a seamless structure based on the purity-pollution principle that was invented in early India, Dirks (2001, 10) questioned its existence in premodern times. Modern studies have questioned the view that a single, all-encompassing hierarchy is the most enduring feature of the caste system. They tend to visualize it as discrete groups contesting and creating hierarchies (Gupta 2004, ix–xix). I believe that modern studies indicate the presence of the caste system, though not as neatly organized as our *dharmaśāstra*s would have us believe. However, everywhere its organizing principle is the creation of a hierarchy with the Brāhmaṇas near the top.

13. Two Sanskrit words, "*varṇa*" and "*jāti*," are translated as "caste." I am using the term "*varṇa*" for the four-caste formulation of the caste system used by the Sanskrit law books. I use the word "*jāti*" for the numerous endogamous groups found in India. Each *varṇa* space is populated by a cluster of *jāti*s who would not intermarry. There are a large number of Brāhmaṇa *jāti*s but one Brāhmaṇa *varṇa*. Similarly, according to the Government of India list of 1950, there are 1,108 Dalit *jāti*s (Government of India 1950).

14. In the Hindi stories of Premchand, a Dalit character Dukhiyā is the protagonist in *Salvation* (Asaduddin 2018), Ghisu figures in *The Shroud* (ibid.), and Gobar is a protagonist in *The Gift of a Cow* (Roadarmel 2002). That such names were not fictional inventions is proved by the fact that

Tulasi Ram (2010), a Dalit writer, mentions the names of his grandparents as Jooṭhan (Half-Eaten Impure Food) and Musariya (Mousy) in his autobiography.

15. There is a large body of literature on the caste system. I have used writings that touch upon issues of power and political mobilization. See Rajani Kothari (1970), Paul Brass (1984), Andre Beteille (1965, 2020), and Gail Omvedt (1982). Many of the ideas here are based upon the unpublished writings of an activist friend, Jogin Sengupta.

16. During one of the elections in Rajasthan a popular slogan was, "Do not give your daughter or your vote to anyone but a Meena" (Beteille 1970, 295, in Kothari 1970). Endogamy and elections have been effectively conjoined.

17. According to data from a Lokniti-CSDS survey, as many as 89 percent of Brāhmaṇas voted for the BJP-led alliance in Uttar Pradesh. For Rajputs the figure was 87 percent, while for Baniyas it was 83 percent. See Daniyal (2022) and Beg, Pandey, and Sardesai (2022).

18. Punjab, with 32 percent, has the highest concentration of Dalit population in India (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner 2013).

19. Ronki Ram (2007) has argued that the deprivation of Dalit Sikhs in Punjab emanates from their caste status, segregated neighborhoods, landlessness, and absence of political agency. His analyses give us insights into Dalit insurgency and conflict with the dominant Jat caste. His descriptions of the caste system match descriptions in other parts of the subcontinent. Social, economic, and ritual deprivation for the Dalits plays out in a variety of ways.

20. Pisharoty (2015) quotes Smita Chakravarty, "If you are a Brahman, say in a Bengal jail, it is most likely that you will not be tortured."

21. Alok Rai (2002, 103) makes this interesting comment about why the north Indian upper castes chose Hindi over literary languages like the *braja bhasha*: "Bhasha, heavy with tradition, rendered soft and pliable by the usage of time, was unsuitable for becoming a vehicle of identity politics for the emergent Hindu-savarna middle class."

22. Bengali novels like Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Those Days* (1997) capture the crisis of child widows and doddering old Kulin Brāhmaṇas making a living out of multiple marriages. Similarly, Saratchandra's novel *Brahman's Daughter* (2019) narrates the story of a high-status Brāhmaṇa making a living out of multiple fake marriages.

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