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Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law
Avenida Universidad, 8 – Apdo. 28
20560 Oñati – Gipuzkoa – Spain
Tel. (+34) 943 783064 / opo@iisj.net / https://opo.iisj.net

Evolution of the figure of the Brahmin in early Muslim writings

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DUNKIN JALKI *

Abstract

When we talk about the caste system today, among other things, we talk about the wily, crafty, and ostentatious Brahmins who founded and maintained a set of self-serving rules that effectively took the form of the caste system. How do social scientists know about these Brahmins? As a set of new scholars are demonstrating today, the ancient Indian texts – such as the Vedas or the Mahabharata – do not talk about the caste system or the domineering priestly class of Brahmins. These texts do not even exhibit an impulse to put into place a system that even remotely resembles the so-called caste system. From where does this idea of the Brahmin emerge then? This paper sifts through the earliest available Islamic writings on India, from the early 8th century to Al-Biruni's time, to chart a genealogy of the figure of the law-making, crafty Brahmin that emerges in 11th-century Muslim writings.

Key words

Al-Biruni; Brahmin; Brahminism; Caste system; Indology; India; Islam; medieval India

Resumen

Cuando se habla hoy del sistema de castas, se habla, entre otras cosas, de los astutos, taimados y ostentosos brahmanes que fundaron y mantuvieron un conjunto de normas de interés propio que adoptaron efectivamente la forma del sistema de castas.

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* Dr. Dunkin Jalki is currently running a research centre in a rural college in India: SDM College, Ujire, Karnataka. Besides his recent co-edited volume, *The Western Foundations of the Caste System* (Palgrave 2020, II ed.), he has spent most of his time working on the issue of the caste system and the Bhakti traditions of India. His forthcoming work will deal with the Ancient Greek, Christian and the subsequent Muslim picture of the Brahmins. Contact details: SDM College, Ujire 574240, Karnataka (India). Email address: dunkinjalki@gmail.com

¿Qué saben las ciencias sociales sobre estos brahmanes? Como están demostrando hoy un conjunto de nuevos estudiosos, los antiguos textos indios –como los Vedas o el Mahabharata– no hablan del sistema de castas ni de la clase sacerdotal dominante de los brahmanes. Dichos textos ni siquiera muestran un impulso para poner en marcha un sistema que se asemeje siquiera remotamente al llamado sistema de castas. ¿De dónde surge, entonces, esta idea del brahmán? Este artículo examina los primeros escritos islámicos disponibles sobre la India, desde principios del siglo VIII hasta la época de Al-Biruni, para trazar una genealogía de la figura del brahmán legislador y astuto que surge en los escritos musulmanes del siglo XI.

Palabras clave

Al-Biruni; brahmán; brahmanismo; sistema de castas; indología; India; islam; India medieval

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1. Introduction

From the early formative days of Islam, Muslim and Jewish scholars spoke about an enigmatic Indian group of intellectuals called al-Barāhima. Although scholars have speculated much about their identity, traditionally they have been identified as the Brahmins of India. Writing in 1934, however, Paul Kraus raised some serious doubts about their identity as the Indian Brahmins. He made three important claims, which still elicit responses from scholars: (i) Characteristics attributed to al-Barahima in many early-Muslim texts do not match what we today know about the Brahmins; (ii) Much of our information about al-Barahima comes from the works of one infamous heretic Muslim scholar called Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. in 860 or 910); (iii) and that al-Rawandi invented the dissenting sect called al-Barahima to put forward his heretical ideas (Abrahamov 1987b, Calder 1994). These three claims went on to set the agenda for the research around al-Barahima after Kraus. In the subsequent decades, disputing his second and third claims, scholars went on to unearth resources on al-Barahima which precede and are independent of al-Rawandi's writings. More than al-Rawandi, they found, it was Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq (fl. mid-ninth century) who used al-Barahima as his "mouthpiece for his own ideas" (Calder 1994, p. 41). In response to Kraus' first claim – which is, to raise it as a question, "Do the views that are stated in the name of the Barahima in Islamic and Jewish literature truly reflect Indian views?" (Abrahamov 1987b, p. 72) – scholars went on to find several distinct *Indian elements* in the views attributed to the Barahima to prove that they are indeed Indian Brahmins: from knowledge about different Buddhist groups (Stroumsa 1985a, Van Ess 2018a) and the Hindu "principle of *ahimsa*" (Van Ess 2018a, 2018b) to Manu's doctrines (Pines 1980).

This article proposes to chalk out a macrohistory of the figure of al-Barahima by combining the results of multiple scientific studies in the domain with a fresh analysis of the primary texts in their English translations. Who were they? Scholars accept today that al-Barahima first appeared in the works of al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (c. 785-860 CE), a late-eighth century Muslim scholar. However, it is difficult to identify al-Qasim's al-Barahima as *the Brahmins* that Indologists and scholars studying the caste system speak about today. For al-Qasim, they are a group of *heretical* but *scholarly people from India*, who hold human reason as self-sufficient and deny the necessity of prophecy and prophethood. About two hundred years after al-Qasim, coinciding with the end of al-Bīrūnī's (973-1048) illustrious career, Muslim scholars began to talk about them as boastful, ignorant, crafty, and even cruel people, much like the immoral and corrupt Brahmin priests that Indologists would describe a millennium later. Al-Biruni's descriptions of the Brahmins and the caste system, for instance, read much like a nineteenth-century European Indological text. The challenge is to comprehend this seemingly miraculous shift in the Muslim description of India and especially the transformation of the image of al-Barahima in about two hundred years. While trying to chart the trajectory of these developments, this article also intends to draw scholarly attention to the vast amount of literature that talks about al-Barahima and problems in the way that this literature has been understood until now.

For the sake of clarity, let me state at the very outset that I am neither a student of Islam nor of Arabic and Persian culture or language, but hail from the domain of India Studies and caste studies. New advancements in these fields, which may not be familiar in the

domain of early-Muslim literature studies, drive the concerns and questions raised here. Specifically, the advancements that have been made in the domain of India Studies from the work of S.N. Balagangadhara (e.g., 2005, 2012, 2021) and his research programme, the Comparative Science of Cultures, underlie the basic contentions of this article and provide the explanatory structure for the arguments presented here.

2. Al-Barahima as Heretic Intellectuals

Somewhere between the late eighth and the mid-ninth century, three scholars from the Muslim world, independent of each other, spoke about al-Barahima. The first one was al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (c. 785-860). He called them a monotheistic but "heretical Indian sect", who accepted Adam (and even Shith, his third son) as their prophet (Abrahamov 1987b, p. 73).

> The first who appropriated for themselves the wasiyya and laid a claim (idda'a) to the knowledge (possessed by) Adam are people called al-Ibrahimiyya. They considered that the wasiyya was a legacy from one ancestor to another. They are Indian (*hum min al-Hind*), who are called al-Ibrahimiyya and they are the lords of (that) country. They believe that Adam bequeathed the wasiyya to Shith, and Shith (in his turn) to his son. In this way they trace the wasiyya to themselves. And they believe that every prophet that after Shith has laid a claim (idda'a) to prophethood was a lying impostor, who had no knowledge of that which Adam knew. They say that God taught Adam the names and knowledge in its entirety, and that every man was made (to bequeath) the wasiyya of perfect knowledge. And they claim that the knowledge which came down (nazala) from heaven is in their (possession and is) perfect. They deny the claim [to] the children of Adam. (Abrahamov 1987a, p. 97, no. 77)[1]

The second scholar is Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, a controversial figure in the Muslim world. None of his works has survived, and one must reconstruct his views from the works of his interlocutors. Hence, the claim that he spoke about al-Barahima is based on the conjectures of recent scholarship. Scholars like Van Ess and others conjecture that "it was al-Warraq's well known heresiographical interest which brought him to collect and hand down the opinions of the Barahima, as he knew them" which his student al-Rawandi then made popular (Stroumsa 1985a, p. 240). (See further for more about these two controversial authors.)

The third scholar, Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammiṣ (d. c. 870), a prominent Jewish philosopher, has left identifiable writings that provide long descriptions of al-Barahima. He divides monotheists into two groups: one that accepts the necessity of prophets and another that denies it. Al-Barahima are those who deny it. They held, according to al-Muqammis, that human intellect renders revelation superfluous and thus denied the necessity of prophets and that the idea of prophetic mission is incompatible with divine justice (Stroumsa 1989). That is, here the Barahima are "a group of monotheists who

[1] I have removed Abrahamov's notes inserted inside the passage. Furthermore, throughout the article, outdated diacritical marks and, in some places, the original Arabic or Persian words from the cited texts and the italicisation of those words in English transliteration have been removed, to make the article uniform and readable. Dates and the conventions of writing proper names, with diacritical marks (given only at their first occurrence in the article), are as per the standards of *The Encyclopædia Iranica* (iranicaonline.org/) and *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2). All web-based texts cited in the article were last consulted in August 2021.

deny the necessity of prophets … on the basis of the potential equality of the intellectual and moral perfections of the prophet and those of ordinary human beings" (Price 2015, pp. 11–12).

Scholars today generally accept that *al-Ibrahimiyya,* to whom al-Qasim refers, are al-Barahima (Pines 1980). Subsequently, they further discovered that al-Qasim elsewhere refers to this group as al-Barahamiyya (Abrahamov 1987b, p. 73). Al-Warraq does not directly refer to them in any available sources. However, Al-Muqammis speaks about al-Barahima directly. This raises an important question. How do we know that al-Barahima are the Indian Brahmins? There is an additional problem here. The views that al-Qasim attributes to al-Barahima belong to Zoroastrianism and the Sabians, a group native to parts of modern-day Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Kuwait (Abrahamov 1987b). Given the situation, Paul Kraus's view that the doctrines of the Barahima "betray no link with the real Brahmins" sounds plausible (Calder 1994, p. 41). How do scholars tackle this problem? They often just assume that al-Barahima are Brahmins or do so by postulating a link between the views attributed to the Barahima in early Muslim writings and theological views attributed to Indians (including Buddhists) by modern scholars. Here are those suggestions from the three leading proponents of this view.

(a) Developing on a tentative suggestion made by Kraus, Pines (1980, pp. 222-23) notes that a "comparison (…) between the account of al-Qāsim (…) and that of Sa'adia, on one hand, and certain fundamental Indian beliefs" on the other hand shows the following: "Al-Qasim's and Sa'adia's Barahima (…) considered that Adam, the first man and the first prophet, had promulgated a Law, whose authority was not and would not be superseded by subsequent legislation. And if we turn to India, we find that, according to the religious tradition, Manu the first Man is the author of a code of law, the Manusmruti, which is supposed still to be in force". The similarity between these two doctrines "is unmistakable", which gives "some reason to suppose" that the accounts given of the Barahima in al-Rawandi are "based on a correct piece of information concerning Indian beliefs".

(b) Writing in the 1980s, Van Ess (2018a, pp. 1374, 1375) notes that Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq "in a fragment preserved in al-Māturīdī's K. al-Tawḥīd which is attributed to the Brahmins in other sources" criticises the Muslim practice of blood sacrifice. This criticism, in its nuance, corresponds "very well with the Hindu doctrine of ahimsa". Based on this resemblance, Van Ess surmises that Abu Isa must have borrowed this argument from the Brahmins, and thus, al-Barahima are the Brahmins. Van Ess provides another support for his conjecture: since Abu Isa "came from a region where Manicheans and Buddhists were not just rare birds or bookish non-entities, but a living reality" he must have understood and borrowed the Hindu doctrine of *ahimsa*.

(c) While reflecting on al-Muqammis' views as to why the prophet, despite "having achieved human perfection (…) lingers in this world for the benefit of others", Stroumsa suggests that "this very argument constitutes a topic of theological discussion between Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. For the Mahayana, in opposition to the Hinayana, an essential feature of the Boddhisattvas is their undertaking to remain in this world for the benefit of Mankind". And in support of her claim, she offers two sentences from a certain fourth-century Sanskrit text, *Abhidharmakosa*, cited by Edward Conze. (Note that this text is now available only in its Chinese and Tibetan translations.) This is

sufficient for her to claim that al-Muqammis (a tenth-century Jewish scholar) must be using Buddhist conceptions in his arguments. She then gathers additional support for her conjecture: "it should be mentioned that al-Muqammis is also the author of a no longer extant work" which possibly refuted an Indian monotheistic group. "[T]hus", she concludes, al-Muqammis "seems to reflect authentic knowledge of Indian religious groups, generically referred to as Barahima" (Stroumsa 1985a, pp. 238, 239, 240; see also her 2007, pp. 147-48).

If it is not already evident that the above points, which try to prove that the Barahima are the Brahmins, are weak and conjectural, one may read Calder (1994) who has demonstrated why they lack credibility. His criticism comes mostly from the domain of Islamic studies. We may add a problem or two from the domain of India Studies. The concerted attempts to postulate an identity relationship between al-Barahima and the Brahmins, listed above, assume outdated colonial views about India. Pines' claims are the best example. How does he know that the ninth-century Indians thought of Manu as the first man and the lawgiver? Since *Manusmṛiti*'s pre-eminent position among the ancient Indian treatises on *dharma* was established only around the 5th century C.E. (Olivelle 2005, p. 3), to know this text and refer to it, al-Qasim and Sa'adia's al-Barahima must have been well-read scholars in their field. It is difficult to presume that such scholars would consider Manu as the first Man and the author of *Manusmṛiti*. The first chapter of the Manusmṛiti indeed begins with a *creation story*. Did the Barahima or Indians simply accept the divine origin of this text? Did it not occur to them to ask what Georg Bühler, who translated Manusmriti into English in 1886, asked: Why would a treatise on *dharma* (understood as *law*) begin with the story of creation? (cited in Olivelle 2005, p. 52). One may argue that this is how growth in knowledge appears in hindsight. One may also suggest that Indians have an analogue to the way the Jewish tradition explicitly ascribes authorship to Moses, as many Christian authors also do, or that al-Barahima were just ignorant. Before we make a choice, here is a ninth-century Kashmir scholar called Medhātithi, who is commenting on the creation story in *Manusmṛiti*:

> Where did we start? And where have we ended? He [Manu] was asked [about] the *dharmas* prescribed in the *sastras,* and he indeed promised to explain them. To then describe the world in its unmanifest state is both irrelevant and serves no human purpose. … With regard to this matter, there is neither an authoritative basis nor does it serve any purpose. Therefore, this entire chapter should not be studied. (Cited in Olivelle 2005, p. 52)[2]

2.1. Initial Observations

The above criticism notwithstanding, these writings of the last hundred years on the group called the al-Barahima stand to give us some crucial insights into (and raise fruitful questions about) the Indian past if we can delineate them from the orientalist assumptions that have so often distorted this information. Here are a few examples.

(i) It can be inferred from al-Qasim's works that al-Barahima are Indians (*hum min al-Hind*).

[2] In the context of this article, it is immaterial whether Medhatithi does justice to *Manusmruti* or not.

(ii) In the earliest extant references to the Barahima, they do not look dumb, cunning, or like priests. They are Indian intellectuals.

(iii) The discrepancy in the first three extant descriptions of the Barahima, scholars note, shows that their sources must have been different (Stroumsa 1985a, Calder 1994). This indicates that the Muslim world might have borrowed stories, attitudes, and arguments about Indian scholars from classical Greek, Roman, Jewish, and later Christian writings about them. The writings of classical authors like Megasthenes, Pliny, and Strabo, portray Indian philosophers, mostly called gymnosophistai and Brachmane, as people devoted to learning and ascetic life. A claim attributed to Alexander that the Jews had descended from the Indian philosophers, may have drawn Jewish interest toward India and its philosophers (Schmidt 1994, p. 52). In the first centuries of the Common Era, Jewish and Christian scholars began to write about the Indian philosophers. For instance, Philo of Alexandria (around 50 CE), a Jewish thinker, compares them with Abraham for their philosophy and virtuous living. While noting that all people of the world have a philosophy, Clement of Alexandria (c. 215), a Christian thinker, criticises Brahmins for their vain asceticism (Hahn 1978, p. 216). As Hahn notes, during this period Brahmins supplied both a good and a bad example, depending upon the needs of the author. Saint Hippolytus (c. 236), for instance, saw them as heretics. Such hostility towards Indian philosophers grew among the apologists of the early Church, culminating in Saint Augustine (c. 432). In the post-Augustinian period, the tone began to mellow down, and the West began to show a favourable attitude towards Indian philosophers (ibid. pp. 217-18).[3]

(iv) The link that al-Qasim draws between al-Barahima, al-Hind, and the revelation received by Adam should indicate that around this time, the received story about al-Barahima was placed within the Muslim religious context for the first time. This must have placed al-Barahima in a unique position in that world. To the extent that they were linked with the *knowledge of the Biblical God*, they were like Muslims.[4] However, by refusing to acknowledge any prophets after Adam and by criticising those who do acknowledge other prophets, they were not only unlike Muslims, but also their religious rivals.

(v) A few more words about this ambiguous position of the Barahima in the Muslim world are required here. By the time al-Qasim was writing about al-Barahima, Islamic scholars had classified the world into four divisions.

> (1) Muslims, (2) Believers in a revealed book (*Ahlu'l-kitab* i.e., those persons who believe in the Sacred Books mentioned in the Qur'an), (3) people who are similar to the believers in a revealed Book … (people who claim to believe a divine Book not mentioned in the Qur'an; so that it cannot be definitely said that they are *ahlu'l-kitab*, but it may be guessed that they are so) and (4) Infidels who do not believe in any divine message.

[3] These historical facts, however, raise more questions than they answer. So far, the issue of the sources of Muslim knowledge about al-Barahima has not drawn much attention from scholars in the field. Hence, pending a better understanding of the Greek, Christian, and Jewish writings on Indian scholars, and their influence on Muslim scholars, the discussion here should restrict itself to the figure of the Barahima as presented in the Islamic world.

[4] This is a matter of writing religious universal history (more about it later in the article), a pattern one can see repeated across the world when the Christian or Muslim world 'discovered' a new people and placed them in their 'order' of the world.

> Islam has laid down that all Muslims, without distinction of nationality, are all alike in their rights and privileges. Regarding *Ahlu'l-kitab* it is laid down that after paying the *Jizya* they can enjoy equal rights with Muslims. The Muslims can eat the flesh of animals slaughtered by them; they can take their daughters as wives. (...) The people of the third order can enjoy equal privileges of citizenship with numbers 1 and 2, except that the Muslims cannot eat the flesh of animals slaughtered by them and cannot marry their daughters. (…) Up to the time of 'Alau'ddin Khilji (…) [1296 C.E.] it could not be decided in which of the four divisions the Hindus should be placed. (Nadvi 1934, pp. 123–24; see also, Papaconstantinou 2008, p. 129)

For centuries to come, Muslim scholars were uncertain about where to place the Barahima: in the second, third, or the last category? Around late-eighth or early-ninth century, an acclaimed Arab Muslim theologian and a major figure in Islamic jurisprudence, Abū ʿAbdillāh Muhammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820), wrote an entire work titled *Isbat al-nubuwwa wa raddi 'ala barahima*, or in English, *The Establishment of Prophecy and Refutation of the Barahima* (Leaman 2006, p. 584). Even though this work is not extant, one should get a glimpse of his views about al-Barahima from his followers' views on the issue, as recorded in a text from the eleventh century. In his well-known work on schisms and sects amongst Muslims, Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 1038) notes that,

> As regards the Barahima (…) the followers of al-Shafi'i are agreed that, although they conform to the Muslims in their belief in the creation of the Universe and the unity of its Maker, their meats may not be eaten nor may their women be taken as wives. The controversy about taking tribute from them follows the same lines as in the case of idol-worshippers. (Halkin 1935, p. 222)

Thus, we can surmise that the Barahima entered Muslim literature as a group of controversial scholars, some of whom even believed in one of the early Muslim prophets.

2.2. Al-Barahima and Idolatry

A link between Adam and India is older than al-Qasim. Writing towards the end of the ninth century, al-Ṭabarī (839–923) notes that according to several Muslim scholars who predate al-Qasim, when God expelled Adam from Paradise, he fell to a place in India. He also notes that "the people of the Torah and the Gospel" also hold this belief (Rosenthal 1989, p. 292). Even though this may seem to give a positive significance to the link between al-Barahima and the divine knowledge they received through Adam, there is an underlying negative implication here. According to a Muslim tradition, after Adam's death, the sons of Shith (the third son of Adam) worshipped his body, which led to the emergence of idolatry. According to this tradition, "India was the first country in which idolatry was practised and the ancient Arabian idols were of Indian origin" (Friedmann 1975, p. 214). Moreover, since the Barahima did not possess a written revelation, like Christians and Jews, their claim to have received a revelation from Adam was not tenable, as he had not received a written revelation according to the Semitic literature. Furthermore, the point that the Barahima knew about or had access to divine knowledge, and yet they drifted away from the true religion made their monotheism even more inadequate. That is, Islam of the time saw their beliefs or practices as incompatible with monotheism and as amounting to polytheism or idolatry. Even though Jews and Christians too fit into this category, the word "idolaters" (*mushrikūn)*

in the Koran and the Muslim traditional literature *often* picks out monotheists other than Jews and Christians (Hawting 2006, chaps. 2-3).

What did living life as *idolaters* mean for the Barahima? We know some aspects of their social life: restrictions on the exchange of food, marital relationships, payment of jizya and so on. But we know little about the (socio-)intellectual aspects of their life. Questions are aplenty, but answers are elusive. Who was seen as *al-Barahima*? Were they all scholars of some kind or even priests from small temples and village accountants from some Brahmin caste too included in this category? Why? Were they (all) involved in theological fights and controversies? Did this have an impact on their social life? Were accountants and priests made to answer serious intellectual questions? Today many scholars maintain that during this formative period of Islam, the eighth century that is, Islamic theology or *kalam* literature did not function "as polemics against unbelievers", but as "an inner-Islamic discussion" (Van Ess 1975, p. 101). Or as Stroumsa (1985a, p. 241) puts it, in its early phase, a rule of the *kalam* debates was that "the participants had to restrict themselves to common logical-intellectual ground, and avoid reliance on the particulars of their respective religions, especially holy writs". Shlomo Pines, however, has shown that the early Abbasid movement, in the middle of the eight-century, used the common Arabic term for a theologian *mutakallim* (plural: mutakallimūn) to denote a spokesman for one camp who tries to win his opponents over through argumentation in debate. Noting the close identification of the *mutakallimun* with the *masters of controversy*, he concludes that the early mutakallimun were controversialists (Pines 1971). A recent work notes that "[a]mong Arabic-speaking philosophers, known as the *falāsifa* (…) the theologians' polemical skill was viewed with disdain" (Stroumsa 2020, p. 185).

These observations raise further questions about the Barahima. Although we cannot answer any of them today, they are important, nonetheless. Whether the Barahima were real or merely an imaginary group of people, where did they stand in this religious society? Were they maligned and attacked, frequently, like the Muʿtazilites? If the Barahima were indeed present in these debates and were talking about their positions on the issues that mattered to Muslims – like God, prophets, and so on – without referring to their "holy writs" and "the particulars of their respective religions", how did they formulate their ideas? What questions were they asked? To put it more concretely, consider the characteristics attributed to Vishnu in, say, the Bhagavad Gita, or to Shiva in some Shaiva Agamas. How does one formulate this notion of *deva* without the stories of their *celestial life* or their physical appearance to cater to Muslim and Jewish theological demands? Would such formulations look incomprehensible and even unethical to Indians who were part of these debates? And to others? Let us assume that at least in some Muslim intellectual circles of the time, debates followed the rules of kalam. Does it follow then, that Indians, as it were, had two lives: one within the Muslim circles or their literature, speaking in an obscure tongue, and one in the world outside, deeply immersed in their daily practices? If this was the case, what happened as travel reports with ethnographical and textual references to India and Indians accumulated and the kalam literature eroded gradually?

3. Prophecy Denying Intellectuals: Plot Thickens and Fame Spreads

As Calder (1994, p. 46) notes, discussions about the Barahima of this period were obscure and they do not answer any significant questions about them: Are they a large or a small

group, a group of intellectuals, with or without a long historical pedigree, still extant in the tenth and eleventh centuries? There are some tantalizing clues scattered in the sources, but they hardly promise knowledge, he notes. But he makes one pertinent observation: "al-Barahima" refers to a theological construct in this period, which he terms "the Islamic Barahima". From the mid-tenth century onwards, when they acquire a resemblance with Indians, they become "the Indian Barahima". In the words of another scholar, around this time, the term al-Barahima was probably "a generic term referring to Indian religions (rather than only to Brahmans)" (Stroumsa 2007, pp. 147–48). Or it was a category of classification designed within *kalam* to provide a reference in the world, imaginary or otherwise, to a heretic idea (Waardenburg 1999, p. 34).

The suggestion here is that this early image of the Barahima was inaccurate and once the Muslim scholars had access to growing anthropological data, the Barahima began to reflect the "the correct Indian attributes of superior caste" (Calder 1994, p. 46). The suggestion that this article makes is different. The changing image of the Indian intellectuals has to be located within the theological developments within Islam and the related shift within their experience of India and Indians. For instance, many crucial theological developments within Islam regarding the notion and the institution of the caliphate, imamate, ulema, law, and so on dovetail with the development of the Brahmin figure. Scholars talk about a crisis in the doctrine of the imamate in the ninth century, linked precisely to the relationship between imams and knowledge (Louër 2020, chap. 1). It is feasible that this shift could account for, or at least have a bearing on, the transformation of al-Barahima from being controversial intellectuals to failed priests. The focus of this article, however, is not these theological shifts, but their consequences: the broad changes in the image of the Barahima and the ensuant shift in Muslim attitude towards them.

Between the late-ninth and mid-tenth centuries, the early descriptions of al-Barahima as deniers of prophecy consolidated and developed. In the writings of a contemporary of al-Muqammis and a student of al-Warraq, Ibn al-Rawandi (d. 860 or 910), a controversial figure in the history of early Islamic thought, the image of the Barahima as those who deny prophecy became their prominent characteristic. In his writings, "a biting criticism of prophecy in general and of the prophecy of Muhammad in particular", and a series of claims about how "religious dogmas are not acceptable to reason and must, therefore, be rejected; [and that] the miracles attributed to the Prophets … are pure invention" was attributed to the Barahima (Kraus and Vajda 1971, p. 905). Much has been said about the actual source of this image of the Barahima, and the consensus goes that its source was not al-Rawandi but his teacher Abu ʿIsa al-Warraq (Lawrence 1976a, Abrahamov 1987b, Stroumsa 1999, Lindstedt 2011, Van Ess 2018b). Whatever the merits of these conclusions are, what matters to the discussion here is that al-Barahima came to represent a set of ideas blatantly antithetical to Islamic ideals as early as the mid-ninth century and that this process was both a continuation of and a small departure from the early references to this group. Departing from the way al-Qasim speaks about al-Barahima, as a monotheistic group in possession of the revelation granted to Adam, al-Rawandi presents the Barahima primarily as a group that gave pre-eminence to human reason and denied prophecy. Even though he was not the first one to link the Barahima to this anti-prophecy idea, his portrayal seems to have been influential in shaping Muslim views of the Barahima (Lindstedt 2011, p. 136, no. 25).

Two further points need to be made here. First, as Van Ess points out, "in Ibn al-Rawandi's eyes, as well as in the eyes of many of his contemporaries, his views concerning prophecy were still acceptable for a Muslim. (…) Some ideas, about the legitimacy of which later Muslim orthodoxy had a definite opinion, were probably still open for debate in the" ninth and tenth centuries (cited in Stroumsa 1994, p. 163). By implication then, despite their heretical views, the Barahima too *were still acceptable as scholars of some kind* in the ninth-century Muslim world. They resembled a way of thinking present in the peripheries of Muslim theological debate, like the controversial scholars al-Warraq and al-Rawandi or the controversial groups, like Muʿtazilites and Ṣābians. By the ninth century, notes Stroumsa, the discussions about who is a true prophet and who is not had become a common theme in the writings of scholars from all three religions: Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Scholars were developing criteria to reach the *truth*. In this context, Van Ess writes, there was a "shift in the polemical accent" and Mu'tazilites turned against non-Muslims, instead of attacking the group of Islamic scholars called "traditionists" (cited in Stroumsa 1985b, p. 108). And when "Arabic-speaking theologians, both Jews and Muslims, set out to establish the legitimacy of prophecy in general, the polemical edge of their writings is directed against the *Barāhima*" amongst others (*ibid*., p. 104).

Second, even if we accept that *al-Barahima* was a theological construct created for the purpose of debate, there are indications to suggest that there was a subtle but crucial difference between the ideas attributed to them on the one hand, and Christians and Jews (the *Ahlu'l-kitab* groups), on the other. While the Muʿtazilites (a Muslim group) and Jewish scholars, for instance, questioned the "meaningfulness of sacrifices", or "merely wondered why blood and grease should be agreeable food for God", the Barahima questioned the rightfulness of the very act of sacrifice (Van Ess 2018a, pp. 1374–75). While the former ideas were a rationalist position to take within the Muslim world of the time, which did not question the truth of their religion, the latter were downright antithetical to Islam.

3.1. At the Turn of the 10th Century

Until the tenth century, the Muslim world treated the Barahima as intellectuals; unorthodox and increasingly controversial, but intellectuals, nonetheless. References to India were largely restricted to a discussion around al-Barahima. The horizon gradually expanded in the tenth century. A proliferation of writings on India, which gave importance to its geographical, ethnographic, political, or sociological aspects, marks this period. These writings did not mention the Barahima or when they did, the Barahima were not portrayed negatively. Sulaymān al-Tajir (c. 850), for instance, talks about India and many of its odd-looking practices, but not about the Barahima. Similarly, Ibn Khurdādhbih (d. c. 912) also has much to say about the political and administrative aspects in Sindh, but very little about the Barahima. He divides Indian society into seven groups, and the al-Barahima, who do not drink any fermented liquors, occupy second place in the list. He notes that Indians have forty-two religious sects: "there are some amongst them who believe in the Creator, the Glorious and Powerful, and in the Prophets; again, there are some who reject the Prophets; and there are some who reject all" (Ahmad 1989, p. 7). Curiously, despite discussions about prophecy,

prophets, and related issues, he does not talk about al-Barahima and their anti-prophecy views.

In Abu Ishaq al-Iṣṭakhrī (d. 957), for instance, we come across a description of actual Indian cities where infidels and Muslims lived. He also speaks about al-Budha, a desert-dwelling people. Ibn Ḥawḳal's (d. c. 978) descriptions of India look much like the classical Greek descriptions, with some comments on Indian geography, clothing habits, Indian aversion to alcohol, and so on, with the addition of religious matters. In his descriptions of the temple at Multan, we can have a glimpse of the Muslim attitude toward Indian *devas*/gods (Jafri 1960, pp. 9-10). With the proliferation of such travel accounts, vituperative remarks about Indian temples, the wealth they hoard, and idolatrous rituals they host also proliferated. A few pertinent examples are the writings of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995) (Dodge 1970, 829 ff.), and al-Maqdisī's (c. 946–c. 1000) lengthy descriptions of Indians (Marlow 1995, p. 10; see also, Jafri 1960, pp. 59, 63).

However, when theological writings of the tenth century spoke about the Barahima, they continued the trend that had emerged in the previous century. These writings placed an added emphasis on the characterisation of al-Barahima as controversial intellectuals who deny prophecy. By the mid-tenth century, "[t]he usual chapter heading for the doctrine of prophethood", in the kalam literature used to be "The Reply to the Brahmins". However, the "same arguments directed against the so-called Brahmins were in other contexts leveled against dissident voices in Islam, usually termed pejoratively 'apostates' or 'atheists' (mulhidun)" (Martin 1980, p. 178). It was "a well known device in the Kalam way of disputation" of this time to put the already available arguments, such as the anti-prophecy views, "in the mouth of the Barahima" (Abrahamov 1987b, p. 90).[5]

3.2. An Islamic Universal History Emerges

An important aspect of the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries is the development of Islamic universal history. The earliest surviving example of this history comes from Ahmad al-Ya'qūbī (d. 897), which begins with the Creation and ends in 872 (Robinson 2003, p. 136). And al-Ya'qubi's works accord al-Barahima with a space of their own in Muslim history. In this story, the progeny of Japheth, a son of Noah, were allotted China, India, and Sind among other territories. The first king to unite India was Barahman (Brahma). Indians received knowledge and their first book from him (see also, Hayes 2017, p. 95, fn. 19, Gordon *et al.* 2018, pp. 275, 346). The story continues and we hear about how the problems of India surface as the primordial kingdom of Brahma disintegrated. They reunite under king Zārih, who later gets killed by God when he tries to conquer the monotheistic Israelites. The story continues, and at some point, we hear about "the religion of the people of Hind [which] is *al-Brahmiyya* and it includes the worship of idols" (cited in Hayes 2017, p. 97).

[5] Less than a century later, "Persian adopted the word 'Hindu' for everything black", and thus began a "long list of possible comparisons". A "black 'Hindu' can be compared [to] tresses, mole, down, eye or eyelashes, pen, night, bad luck. (…) From the eleventh century onward Hindus appear in poetical language as highway robbers, thieves, and moneylenders (contrary to the praise of the Hindus' sincerity in some earlier Arabic sources). In general, the word becomes a synonym for 'slave'" (Schimmel 1975, pp. 109, 110). Schimmel's article provides several examples from the literature and more information on these developments.

Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), writing in the mid-tenth century, returns to this story of Brahma, and his descendants called al-Barahima. Al-Masʿudi was aware of the debates around this issue during his time. He notes that a "disputation exists regarding Brahman. Some of them claim that he is Adam (AS), and that he was a Prophet (rasūl) sent by God (AJ) to India. And some of them say that he was a king as we have mentioned, and the latter opinion is more widespread" (cited in Hayes 2017, p. 98). When Al-Masʿudi reformulates this story, he does something interesting: he turns Brahman into both a prophet and a king of Indians. The Barahima are in high respect amongst Indians and form their nobility, he says. They abstain from all animal food, and men and women wear a yellow thread on their necks. During the rule of this king, the highest *Barahman*, seven ḥakīms (sages) appeared, and the entire nation looked up to them. Gradually, with the death of king Barahman, Indians "disagreed in point of religion" and "divided themselves into parties, and formed distinct states", and "split into seventy distinct sects" (Sprenger 1841, pp. 153–75).

Various elements of this history became a standard feature of the literature hereafter. The story of the *Mahabharata* translated into Persian through Arabic around 1026, for instance, begins by talking about how Sindh had two tribes, Meyd and Zath. Zath descended from Cham, son of Noah. Soon we hear, Zath are the Pandavas of the *Mahabharata*, and Kauravas are the Meyd. Curiously, the story talks about the absence of distinguished Brahmin personalities in the Sindh region. Therefore, Duryodhana (a prominent king in the Mahabharata) brings "together thousand Brahmanas, from different parts of India" to Sindh (Harshe 1941, p. 316). Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064), an Andalusian polymath, notes that the Barahima are "a tribe in India among whom are (included) the noblest of the people of India. They assert that they are descendants of Brahma [Barahmi or Barhami (Rahman 1986, p. 1031)], an ancient king of theirs, and they possess a sign by which they are distinguished, viz., red- and yellow-colored threads which they wear like swords" (Lawrence 1976b, p. 96).

Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) divides the Barahima based on their opinions or beliefs: some of them hold that God never sent messengers, others talk about Adam as the only messenger. He devotes an entire chapter in his *Kitab at-tamhid* to the falsification of these beliefs attributed to the Barahima and their denial of prophecy. More importantly, al-Baqillani systematised and united different beliefs attributed to the Barahima: their belief in Adam, in Abraham or Ibrahim, and a total rejection of prophecy (Abrahamov 1987b, pp. 75, 90). Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Khwārizmī (d. 997), a Persian scholar known for his encyclopaedia, makes a list of five Indian groups, where the Barahima, "the religious devotees of India (…) [who] deny the possibility of prophethood" occupy the first place (Bosworth 1977, p. 93). The monotheist and the deniers of prophecy and prophethood, the Barahima, are now part of a five-fold division of Indian society. His *Kitab al-Fihrist*, al-Nadīm (d. c. 990) has an entire section dedicated to "sects and religions of India", which describes India in terms of its wealth, temples, blood-shedding sacrifices, idols, pilgrimages, and so on (Dodge 1970, p. 826 ff.). This work has a passage on Buddha, which reminds us of the views attributed to the Barahima: here Indians speak about Buddha the way the Barahima speak about God and the prophets. Al-Nadim's Indians have differences about who the Buddha is: the creator, a prophet, angel, demon, or even whether he is a human being. And al-Nadim resolves this issue by noting, "Some

truthful persons from among them have related that each one of their sects has an image which they worship and exalt" (Haque 1987, p. 67).

4. Al-Barahima as the Crafty Priest: The Century of Al-Biruni

The entry of Abū al-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (973–1050) on the scene towards the end of the tenth century coincides with a substantial change in the description of the Barahima and Indians. Future research must answer how much of it is because of al-Biruni himself. For now, let us note two things: the developments up to al-Biruni's entry on the scene and the progress one can see within his writings.

As we saw in the previous section, much was set in motion by this time. Al-Biruni did not diverge from this tradition but strengthened it. In the vast amount of writing that he has left behind, distinct lines of thought – with theological, historical, and ethnological material – about al-Barahima developed until his time come together. Through his division of society into *educated elite* and *lay masses*, the Barahima shed their old role as elite thinkers and emerge as a privileged section of Indian society, marked by a much larger role, power, and a different relationship with the lay masses.

More importantly, al-Biruni makes the al-Barahima undoubtedly an anthropological entity. His texts read as though he went around looking for al-Barahima during his travels in India. He had heard much about them and found them primarily in the Indian *religious* texts. For the first time in Muslim scholarship on India, he refers to several actual Indian texts: the Vedas, Puranas, the Ramayana and Mahabharatha, Dharamashstra works, texts of Gaudapada, Kapila, Patanjali, Jaimini, Lokayata, Manu, Varahamihira, Buddha, texts of grammar, astrology, metrics, texts of medicine, stories like the Panchatantra and many more (Shastri 1975). He picked texts from different domains, like Ayurveda, Jyotishya (astrology), and purana stories, and approached them as religious books that also provide sociological descriptions of India. And by linking the Barahima with the description of the Brahmana described in these Indian religious texts, al-Biruni built a hybrid entity: flesh-and-blood human beings (real and imaginary), a conceptual idea of the wise person (Brahmana as a way of referring to a jnāni), a sociological idea of a social class (say, Kshatriya or Brahmana varna) and so on. Amidst all these developments, we should see a gradual formation of the story of the so-called caste system, the story as we know it today.

4.1. Brahmins, Hierarchies, and Liberation

Ibn Khurdādhbih (d. c. 912) is the first extant author to offer a division or order of Indian society. Like the classical Greek writer, Megasthenes, he provided a seven-fold division of Indian society, where al-Barahima were placed second in the list. Except for a single line of description of some of these divisions, he said nothing more about the division. He also spoke about how Indians have forty-two religious sects: some of them believe in the Creator and Prophets, some reject the Prophets and others reject everything (Ahmad 1989, p. 7). Half a century later, al-Khwārizmī (d. 997), offered a five-fold division of Indian society, with a different order, where the Barahima (described as nobles and priests) were placed at the top of the list, followed by śūdras, vaiśyas, caṇḍālas and jāts (Marlow 1995, p. 12). Yet another half a century later came al-Biruni with his idea of quadripartite division of Indian society, with a bunch of outcaste groups. In al-Biruni, it

was a hierarchy more than a mere division and had two different groundings: a divine order in the world and a civil division of society. In each case, the Brahmins were atop the hierarchy. Muslim writers of this period were content with the top position of the Brahmins, because, as they saw it, God sends imāms for every period with numerous responsibilities, and the Brahmins are the imams of Indians.

To explain the "difficult" topic of "Different Classes of Created Beings", according to Indians, he offers to "combine statements" from Sankhya, Gita, Patanjali, and probably a few other traditions "with each other" (I, pp. 89, 90)[6] and suggests that, according to the most popular view, Hindu *devas* are angels, and they are at the top of the hierarchy (I, p. 91). Standing between devas at the top and the humanity below them are entities like "the *Pitaras*, the deceased ancestors, and after them the *Bhuta*, human beings who have attached themselves to the spiritual beings (Deva). (…) He who holds this degree, but without being free from the body, is called either *Rishi* or *Siddha* or *Muni*". The importance of Rishi in this order cannot be overstated: "though they are only human beings, [they] excel the angels on account of their knowledge. Therefore the angels learn from them, and above them there is none but Brahman" (I, p. 93). And who can hold this "degree"? Here comes al-Biruni's crucial contention: Indians maintain that only a Brahmin and a Kshatriya can attain this degree, and "[i]t is not possible for the lower classes to attain this degree" (ibid.). Al-Biruni has no doubts that these ideas are unreasonable and "incompatible with the dignity and nature of angels" in Islam (I, p. 95).

He then moves on to a description of the social divisions in India. When al-Biruni talks about the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, he is talking about an "order of things in political or social life" (I, p. 99), which was created for administrative purposes, in its origin. Such a civil arrangement existed even amongst Persians in the past, he says. It had a four-fold division of society, where the royal class occupied the top place, followed by the monks, the men of science, and the artisans, with further subdivisions amongst them. The difference between the Hindus and Muslims is this: "We Muslims, of course, stand entirely on the other side of the question, considering all men as equal, except in piety". That is, while the pre-Islamic Persia followed and India still follows a civil division of their society, Islam treats everyone as equals. Just as all man-made arrangements get corrupted over the years, the Indian social system too eventually degenerated. Indians forgot that the social division was merely an administrative arrangement and wrongly thought that it is "as it were, the stable property of the whole nation, nobody any more questioning its origin" (I, p. 100).

The class of Brahmins is part of this social division, which according to the "books of the Hindus (…) [was] created from the head of Brahman. (…) [Since] the head is the highest part of the animal body, the Brahmana are the choice part of the whole genus. Therefore the Hindus consider them as the very best of mankind" (I, pp. 100-101). In this setup, the Shudras, who are "servant[s] to the Brahman, taking care of his affairs and serving him" (II, p. 136; an idea he repeats many times, e.g., I, p. 380), come at the end, followed by

[6] In this article, all citations from al-Biruni's well-known work *Kitab al-Bīrūnī fī Taḥqīq mā li-al-Hind* – "a masterpiece centuries ahead of its time" (Hillenbrand 2016, p. 172) as a recent scholar admires it – are from its two-volume translations by Edward C. Sachau (1910a, 1910b). All citations from these two volumes in this section will only carry the volume number (I and II) and the respective page number/s (e.g., II, p. 20).

"the people called *Antyaja*". Al-Biruni's description of this social setup continues, and at some juncture, he notes how the "four castes do not live together with them", the *antyajas*, and that they undertake the "dirty work" (I, p. 101). "Every action which is considered as the privilege of a Brahman, such as saying prayers, the recitation of the Veda, and offering sacrifices to the fire, is forbidden to him, to such a degree that when, e.g. a Sudra or a Vaisya is proved to have recited the Veda, he is accused by the Brahmans before the ruler, and the latter will order his tongue to be cut off" (II, p. 136; also at I, p. 125).

Al-Biruni links this social setup to the Indian religion. According to him, Krishna says in the Gita, "[i]f each member of these castes adheres to his customs and usages, he will obtain the happiness he wishes for, *supposing that he is not negligent in the worship of God, not forgetting to remember him in his most important avocations*. But if anybody wants to quit the works and duties of his caste and adopt those of another caste, even if it would bring a certain honour to the latter, it is a sin, because it is a transgression of the rule" (I, p. 103, *italics* added). He also narrates the story of Shambuka Vadha from the Ramayana to make the same point: in India "[e]very man who takes to some occupation which is not allowed to his caste … commits a sin or crime, which they consider only a little less than the crime of theft" (II, p. 137). What al-Biruni does here is to link the conservation of this social division to the very possibility of "liberation" (see the *italicised* parts above). "According to the Hindus, liberation is union with God", which they call Moksha, and the liberated one "is equal to God" (I, pp. 70, 81). But then, he says, the "Hindus differ among themselves as to which of these castes is capable of attaining to liberation; for, according to some, only the Brahmana and Kshatriya are capable of it, since the others cannot learn the Veda" (I, p. 104).

Even though he cites the Gita and Ramayana to show that some people are barred from religious (and civil) activities, he also quotes from the same texts to assert that it is not religion that imposes these restrictions, but Indians. "All these things originate in the differences of the classes or castes, one set of people treating the others as fools. This apart, all men are equal to each other, equal as Vasudeva says [in the Gita] regarding him who seeks salvation" (II, p. 137). This point needs further clarification.

Abrogation (*naskh* in Arabic) is a crucial concept for Islam. The Koran, like the Bible of the Christians earlier, had abolished the earlier laws given by the Semitic God. Christians and Muslims understand it as how God Himself superseded his laws with a new set of laws or scripture through abrogation. Such abrogation of old laws in India can make way for laws relevant to the time. However, if that is not possible in India, it is not because of its religion. For, "in principle the abrogation of a law is allowable" in India too (I, p. 108). It is just that Indians "use the laws simply as they find them. Therefore they can dispense with prophets, as far as law and worship are concerned, though in other affairs of the creation they sometimes want them". (Note that rejection of prophecy implies the negation of the laws brought by a prophet.) For, Indians wrongly believe that their religious laws "derive their origin from Rishis, their sages, the pillars of their religion" and not from their god, namely, Narayana (I, p. 106-07).[7] Thus, while the

[7] Al-Biruni was aware that Narayana and Rama are the avatars of Vishnu (I, chap. 45). Thus, the Gita and Ramayana were not two distinct texts for him, but belonged to the *Hindu religion*.

Brahmins deny liberation to other castes, those other castes are dumb enough to accept this injunction as well.

In subsequent chapters, al-Biruni further elaborates on this. Uneducated minds often take to idol worship everywhere in the world. However, it is the responsibility of the learned scholars to help people to stay away from it. Did the Brahmins do that? Al-Biruni does not answer this question directly. Talking about some of them, he however notes how "the crowd is kept in thraldom by all kinds of priestly tricks and deceits" (I, p. 122). And how merely a few Brahmins learn "the contents of the Veda and their interpretation to such a degree as to be able to hold a theological disputation", while most others "recite the Veda without understanding its meaning" (I, p. 125).

Today this story of Indian Brahmins and caste would look obvious. But how did al-Biruni arrive at this story, which is not available in any Indian text he had seen? There is no evidence to show that he heard the entire story from a native or that he spent years observing Indians practice the caste system. Of course, some Indian texts talk about four varnas, as al-Biruni found out. But this does not amount to a story of social oppression, Brahmin despotism, and the depraved caste system. That is, if the characteristics of al-Barahima that he draws out are not from Indian texts or Indian society, where did he get them from?

4.2. Some Significant Shifts: From al-Barahima to the Brahmins

In the writings of al-Biruni, we can see several important shifts in the way the Muslim world spoke about al-Barahima. Through these interconnected shifts, the Barahima appeared increasingly like the Indological figure of *the-crafty-Brahmin*. Here are some of those shifts.

(a) *The Barahima as the Object of Study*: Until al-Biruni's period, Muslim and Jewish scholars were debating with Indian scholars called al-Barahima, real or imaginary. Gradually this practice changed, and we can see that al-Biruni has a new means of understanding India: studying the Barahima. As an attitude, it was new. The Barahima are now his objects of study, more than being his interlocutors. But do we understand what that means, or the modus operandi of this study? This is a question that demands research into the Muslim cultural world of the time. Here are some pointers for such a study.

Underlying al-Biruni's attitude is a belief that at some level of comparison, all cultures are alike (Lawrence 1976a, Ataman 2005, p. 142). Yet, the Indians are "totally differ[ent] from us" in one crucial issue, namely, "religion". As Muslims, "we believe in nothing in which they believe, and vice versa" (I, pp. 19, 20). That is, he proposes that India was like other great civilizations in the past but degenerated gradually. In his story of India's degeneration, the Brahmins played a crucial role. A study of the Brahmins then is a study of the degeneration of India.

However, if the Brahmins were either ignorant or untrustworthy or both, he could not have seen them as interlocutors. Then what did he study, when he studied Brahmins? Here is perhaps the most interesting shift in the study of the Barahima. Al-Biruni's study focuses on a study of the purported beliefs of the Barahima. "The main and most essential point of the Hindu world of thought is that which the Brahmans think and

believe, for they are specially trained for preserving and maintaining their religion. And this it is which we shall explain, viz. the belief of the Brahmans" (I, p. 39). Like an *electrocardiogram report* is often more accurate than what a person could say about the health of his/her heart, are the beliefs of Brahmins or Indians more trustworthy than their actions? Semitic religions think so. But this raises several questions. For instance, how does one unearth the beliefs of someone? If there is a discrepancy between beliefs and actions, what gets priority and why? Neither al-Biruni nor any other scholar has ever answered these questions.[8]

In his work *al-Hind* (Sachau 1910a, 1910b), there are only two instances when he explicitly mentions that he saw and spoke with the Brahmins. Interestingly, on both occasions, the actions (that is, the way Indians / Brahmins live) that he has seen or heard about "repeatedly" are juxtaposed with what Brahmins say when asked, and the latter is accepted as true (II, pp. 134). Consider an example (II, pp. 162-63). Speaking about the "purification" rituals through which an Indian slave[9] returning from the Muslim world must go through to be allowed back into the community, something that al-Biruni has "repeatedly been told", he says "I have asked the Brahmans if this is true, but they deny it, and maintain that there is no expiation possible for such an individual". How does al-Biruni choose between the two? His logic takes the following route: if "a Brahman eats in the house of a Sudra for sundry days, [and] he is expelled from his caste and can never regain it", or as he says elsewhere, if "they never desire that a thing which once has been polluted should be purified and thus recovered" (I, p. 20), it follows that expiation is not allowed. Al-Biruni not only chooses one piece of information (heard once) over the other (heard repeatedly) but also prioritises the one that confirms the Muslim notion of Indian religion, culture, and al-Barahima, which he then presents as the beliefs of Brahmins.

The early image of al-Barahima – quite likely a theological construct created for the purpose of debate – did go on to acquire anthropological references during al-Biruni's time. However, they remain what they were: a Muslim theological construct. It is this element that has been erased in the acceptance of al-Biruni as an Indologist and anthropologist.

(b) *Elite vs Lay People in India*: In al-Biruni's story, practices from non-Islamic cultures deteriorate into something abominable and immoral over time. According to al-Biruni, it is the elites of the land who are often responsible for such changes. Underlying this claim is his choice division of society into elites and laypeople, educated and uneducated, those who understand abstract ideas and general principles, and those who do not and slip into idolatry. These elites, in India and elsewhere, through their power of thought and reason, had arrived at the truth of the one God, which corresponds with the basic message brought by all prophets. The Indian elites are thus monotheists. While laypeople are ignorant and slip into idolatry and immorality across all cultures, including the Islamic culture. The difference between Islamic and non-Islamic cultures is the quality of their elite (I, pp. 27, 31, 111; see also, Lawrence 1976a, p. 41, Waardenburg

[8] For an illuminating discussion about how a religion postulates a link between action and belief (that beliefs are reasons for actions) and criticises actions by criticising beliefs, see Balagangadhara (2005).

[9] Scholars note that Ghaznavid court had several Indian *ġulām* (slave) soldiers, regularly brought from military campaigns. First Indians that al-Biruni may have encountered were probably these Indian slaves (Verdon 2015).

1999, p. 29). To borrow a few lines from another Muslim scholar, al-Qasim Ibn Ibrahim, the elites of the Muslim world called the imams are necessary because their absence would destroy a society: "every person would aspire to attain his goals without taking into consideration others' needs and feelings, and this would lead to robbery and killing", and "the religion would again become idolatrous" (Abrahamov 1987a, pp. 84, 88). Thus, a key role for imams, who are divinely empowered, is to correct the ignorant masses. Al-Biruni too emphasizes this role of the elites (Kozah 2015, p. 14).

Al-Biruni often criticises Indian elites, the Brahmins, for not leading their masses. For instance, he complains that they deliberately make their texts vague, precisely to keep "people in the dark" by "throwing an air of mystery about the subject" (I, p. 229). The "two theories, the vulgar and the scientific, have become intermingled in the course of time" in India because of all-around collusion. Indian astronomers admit the "popular notions [of the lay people] as truth, by conforming themselves to them, however far from truth most of them may be, and by presenting them with such spiritual stuff as they stand in need of". And laypeople return the favour through "much affection" and firmly holding "that all of them come into Paradise and none into hell". The astronomers also "follow the theologians in everything which does not encroach upon their science" (I, p. 265). This is a practice of "deceit", as we see in certain Balabhadra, who "despite [having] the correct knowledge of the laws of nature" deceitfully "declares the [wrong] theory of the theologians (…) to be true" (I, p. 273). For al-Biruni, "it is the object of the upper classes to be guided by the results of science, whilst the common crowd will always be inclined to plunge into wrong-headed wrangling, as long as they are not kept down by fear of punishment" (I, pp. 24–25). This assumes further importance in the Indian context where some castes "are not allowed to occupy themselves with science". Indian scholars should "decidedly disapprove" confusions prevalent among "uneducated people", as Muslim elites do (I, p. 32). However, the Brahmins have failed to provide this necessary correction.

(c) *The Barahima as deceitful tricksters*: Until now, according to Muslim and Jewish scholars, the Barahima refuted the necessity or rationality of sending a prophet, because human intellect and reasoning are sufficient for anyone to be like a prophet. Consider the way al-Muqammas, a mid-ninth century Jewish scholar, summarises al-Barahima's position on the issue (cited in Stroumsa 1989, pp. 254–56). The group of monotheists who deny that

> sending of prophets by God is necessary (…) are the Barahima. They argue that there are only two possibilities concerning the prophet sent by God: either he deserved to become a prophet, or he did not. If he deserved to become a prophet, then it is either by virtue of perfect knowledge, or of perfect conduct, or both. (…) Now, if it is by virtue of perfect knowledge and conduct, then there are only two possibilities (…): Either they are something which he perceived with his intellect and understood through his innate intelligence, or they are something that was announced to him by (another) prophet. Here, however, we are not concerned with a prophet who is preceded by another prophet, but only with the case of a prophet with no predecessor. Consequently, the perfect knowledge and conduct must be something that the prophet had perceived with his intellect and understood through his innate intelligence.
>
> This being the case, there are only two possibilities if we compare the prophet to other people: Either his constitution and nature are like theirs, or they are different. Now, no

> one can ever claim that one human being differs from another in humanity, since both belong to the same species; and since all humans belong to the same species, all of them and each one of them possesses the properties that pertain to the nature of this species, for just as they are identical in species, so, too, they are identical in possessing its properties. The properties of this species are intellect, cogitation, discernment, preference for truth over lying, for the morally beautiful over the morally ugly, and for righteous works over their contrary, wicked works. Given this, anyone can be like a prophet and achieve his status, deserve what he deserves, and, in fact, be a prophet himself.

This is how Muslim and Jewish scholars understood the Barahima until around the mid-tenth century. In al-Biruni, however, the Barahima look increasingly irrational. Their irrationality lies in their immorality, as we saw so far in the article. The old idea of a group of al-Barahima following a prophet like Adam, and another group denying the necessity of prophets, was until now mostly understood as the case of two different Indian sects. In al-Biruni this has become the story of the hypocrisy of the elites. They dispense with prophets in the matters of law and worship but keep them in some other matters when they want. In effect, what began as two different rationalist and religious positions of al-Barahima is now unified into one duplicitous and heretical Indian disposition.

4.3. Two Trends into the 12th Century

What al-Biruni achieved in his career is the creation of a unified image of the Brahmin, a story woven out of threads from different texts from various domains, conceptual ideas, his acquaintance with some actual flesh-and-blood people, and their practices. Other scholars of the time and those to come after him, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, added little to the story. However, two trends are important: extended theological discussions of the Brahmins and the conflation of anthropological and historical with doctrinal issues in discussions about the Brahmins. These long theological responses refuting the Barahima should give us a sense of how real the figure of al-Barahima had become by now.

Shifting slightly from al-Biruni's division of Indians into the elite and vulgar masses, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillāni (d. c. 1013), a contemporary of al-Biruni, grades them according to degrees of idol-worship (Waardenburg 1999, p. 34). He "was among the first to provide a full-scale refutation of the so-called Brahmanical theses", which he does by explicitly linking the Brahmins "to a non-orthodox group within the ranks of Islam", the Mu'tazila (Lawrence 1976b, pp. 85, 88). Like the Barahima, the Mu'tazilas too had almost fallen out of favour in the Muslim world by this time. Like al-Baqillani and al-Biruni, ʿAbd-al-Jabbār (d. 1025) also wrote a long response to the Barahima, refuting their claims and defending the necessity of revelation (Lawrence 1976b, p. 85; Price 2017). The works of ibn Tāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) and those of his student Abū Ṭālib al-Nāṭiq's (d. 1033) present the Barahima as those who deny prophecy and apostolic mediaries, despite their belief in the Unity of the Maker (Halkin 1935, p. 199, Price 2015, p. 23). The popular mystic philosopher Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) too spends much time discussing al-Barahima and concludes, in strong words:

> [They] disbelieve him [God] and disbelieve the rest of the prophets; hence they are more deserving of the charge of infidelity than the Christians and the Jews. (…) Whoever

> makes a statement that denies prophecy in principle or denies the prophethood of our Prophet, Muhammad, in particular is placed at this rank unless he withdraws his statement. (Yaqub 2013, pp. 243–44)

Continuing in this tradition, al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) presents the Barahima as infidels of a hugely different kind. They not only deny prophets based on human intellect, but even "ridicule" many Muslim practices, like "bowing in assuming the prayer posture, and falling over on one's face in prostration, and unveiling, and disrobing, and walking (at a quick gait), and going back and forth between two mountains and throwing pebbles at an object purposelessly" (Lawrence 1976b, pp. 97–98). Writing a few decades later, Abd al-Karīm ash-Shahrastānī (1086–1153), an influential Persian scholar, approaches India with purely theological intentions. All Indians are idol-worshippers, he declares, comparing them with pagan Arabs, and equally condemning them. He ranks Indian idolaters further into those who are slightly better (like the worshippers of Shiva and Vishnu) and those who are outright idolaters (like the worshippers of the moon and sun) (Lawrence 1973, pp. 70–72). However, when he "ranks each religion according to its proximity to Islam", Hinduism comes in the fourth and the last category (Lawrence 1976b, pp. 16–17).

It is fitting to close the discussion of the first of the two trends identified in this section with a reference to Ibn al-Jawzī (1116–1201), another well-known Muslim scholar and a prolific writer. In his story of al-Barahima and Indians, Satan plays a key role, deceiving them, taking away their intellects, and causing them to carve their gods with their own hands. Satan convinces Brahmins of six doubtful matters and tricks them into burning themselves to move closer to god, placing hot coal on their stomach until the intestines slip out and they die, or chopping pieces of their flesh and throwing them into the fire. "What is strange is that Indians were [once] considered sources of wisdom. (…) [And, because of their sins] Iblis became able to lead them this way" (Al-Jawzi 2014, pp. 118, 127, 132).

In Maḥmūd Gardīzī's (c. 1049-53) hugely ambitious history of the Eastern Islamic lands, we can see the other trend of offering an anthropological description of Indians and al-Barahima along with doctrinal discussions. He divides Indians into seven classes and often refers to their marriage practices as a community marker. "The Indians are very fastidious in maintaining (the rules of) relationship and will not take a wife from anywhere, or give a girl away unless the match suit[s] their origin." And talking about the Brahmins, who occupy second place in the seven-fold division of Indian society, he notes that they do not give their women to Kshatriya, the third in the order. Like al-Biruni, he too notes that the Brahmins have a rule of not teaching their religion to others (Minorsky 1948, pp. 627, 631).

Writing a few decades later, Tāhir Marvazī (1056-1120) repeats the ideas found in Ibn Khurdadhbih of the ninth century, though not without adding certain novel elements (Minorsky 1942, p. 123). His remark about the Barahima reminds us of the observations of Al-Qasim ibn Ibrahim (785-860) that this article began with.

> [Al-Barahima] believe in the Creator (…) [and] pretend that God's apostle unto them was an angel called Basdiw. He came to them in human shape as an envoy (of God) but without a Book. He has four hands … seated on a giant bird and has 12 heads, each resembling an animal. They give an interpretation of all this, but it would take too long

> to explain it. They say that (Vasudeva) ordered them to make an idol representing him, which they worship and circumambulate three times a day, with music and the burning of incense. He also told them to worship cows, and whenever they meet a cow they prostrate themselves before her. He also told them not to cross the Ganges, and a Brahman who has crossed it loses his religion. (Minorsky 1942, p. 41)

While the difference in tone between al-Qasim and Marvazi is obvious, we should not miss the way the portrayal of al-Barahima has changed. While al-Qasim's Barahima were heretic philosophers, in Marvazi they are pretentious liars who are busy promoting idolatry.

5. Conclusion

The developments charted in the article so far show that the Muslim world began by speaking about Indian intellectuals and by the eleventh century, the Barahima were transformed into failed-elites-cum-priests. In about a century, this story of al-Barahima and the story of India at large effectively stopped developing (Maclean 1984, Waardenburg 1999, p. 32). This was the period when the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) had just emerged. The "Muslim scholars who turned eastward" post-thirteenth century "concerned themselves with the fate of Muslim communities in the sub-continent rather than the nature of Indian" religions and their followers. And with that, the lines of inquiry opened by the scholars like al-Biruni and al-Shahrastānī (1086–1153) lost scholarly attention (Lawrence 1973, pp. 72–73). As the empirical knowledge about India and its religion developed, alongside political and theological developments within the Muslim world, the Muslim idea about Indian gods changed and along with that their attitude towards the Brahmins too changed. Yet, in the Muslim writings of the thirteenth century, the Brahmins were neither the informed rationalists nor the "perverse and wicked a set as can anywhere be found", as Saint Francis Xavier called them about three centuries later. It is tempting to ask if the Muslim image of the Brahmins had any bearing on the later Christian one. While the current article does not answer this question, its argument and evidence make it possible to raise it as a research question.

One thing, however, is evident. The contemporary story of the caste system does not seem to diverge much from its Muslim version. Over the centuries, it has certainly collected substantial amounts of anecdotes, and moral slogans, and has generated umpteen number of consequences when taken to the field, either as laws and policies or as attitudes and assumptions. But what is conspicuous by its absence is any fundamental growth in the-immoral-caste-system story. Al-Biruni, who was also a well-known astronomer of his time, may not even recognise the current astronomical advancements, say in the form of the LightSail spacecraft. However, he will have little difficulty in understanding the current discussions about Brahmanism and the caste system. Why did this story not progress further? If this story never grows, shouldn't one ask if it indeed refers to an actual phenomenon or not? *If it never gets old, it can't be real.*

The story of the caste system has clouded our thinking. Why have we not been able to say much about the Muslim influence on the general perception of the Brahmins, castes, or Indian traditions as a whole? The ideological nature of current research on the caste system seems to be the prime culprit here. Due to a depressing lack of resources to talk about the exponential growth of the Muslim population in Indian provinces at the turn of the second millennium, scholars have resorted to, unsurprisingly, the story of caste

oppression. According to Y. Friedman, "the explanation that gained the greatest currency [in this context] sees a close connection between the conversion to Islam and the social structure of the Indian population." While India has an ugly caste system, Islam is egalitarian. Based on this spurious explanation, modern scholars "have argued that members of the low castes needed little persuasion to embrace Islam, which saved them from the disabilities imposed upon them by the Hindu society and drastically enhanced their social status". This "entire theory seems to be a reflection of modern ideologies", and it is not only impressionistic but also "[t]here is no evidence to substantiate" it (Friedmann 1977, pp. 319, 320, 321). A large chunk of this narrative depends upon one major source, *Chachnama*, a thirteenth-century Persian text, which, as a recent scholar has shown, is a fictional work and not a historical document (Asif 2016). If this indeed is the case, much of the existing history of the pre-thirteenth century Muslim contacts with India needs to be re-examined. In short, the day we stop treating the Muslim description of the Brahmins as an accurate description of Indian society, we will see the larger picture of the way a religious culture understood and affected Indian traditions, as also the role that the Indian scholars have played in this saga. Similarly, if this article raises even an iota of doubt about the Brahmin figure, which the social sciences perpetuate today, then we must take stock of what the potential withdrawal of this element does to the overall story of the caste system.

This article may face many questions or objections from several quarters. Even though addressing them satisfactorily here is not possible, one of them needs to be mentioned. This article did not speak about Indian texts. It is possible that much was happening in this or preceding periods in India and that Indian texts reflect these developments. One may then suggest that Muslim writings merely mirrored those developments. Even if this is true, no research exists that demonstrates the overlap. Hence, this is an objection based more on matters that are ideological than academic. My research into Shaiva texts that are often attributed to a period that includes the period under consideration here (5th to 11th century, CE) or the Kannada Lingayat texts (post-11th century) neither portray a Brahmin nor speak about "caste" the way, say, al-Biruni does (for research on Lingayats, see, Jalki 2018). The contention is that irrespective of what was happening in India, the Brahmin figure that al-Biruni is talking about is absent in Indian literature and we must look elsewhere for its origin and development.

Finally, a cautionary remark is necessary to conclude this article. This article should not give the impression that the Brahmins and Indian religion were an important topic in early-Muslim literature; they were not. Yet, the discussion on this topic seems to have played a significant role in the way Indian traditions were subsequently understood. If that is so, we must now raise and answer multiple questions about its influence and dissemination. We should also not forget that the tone of Muslim writings on India has always been "vituperative and carping", often comparing Indian traditions to "pagan Arab idolatry" (Lawrence 1973, p. 63). The shift that this article tries to track is a shift within this general negative image of Indian religions at specific points. Overall, of special import is to chart the transformation of the figure of al-Barahima from being a rationalist but heretical group of Indian philosophers to their caricature as ignorant and crafty elites (pundits).

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