# TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES
## Premodern Cultural Transactions across Asia

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF OSMUND BOPEARACHCHI

EDITED BY
SUSMITA BASU MAJUMDAR
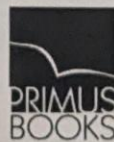
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PRIMUS
BOOKS

# Chapter 42

# *India, History and Comparativism*

## The Case of Dumézil's Para-Vedic Theory

### GUILLAUME DUCŒUR

Since antiquity, the civilisations, rites, and intellectual production of South Asia have frequently served as comparisons in the discourse of scholars residing to the west of the Indus banks. According to Herodotus,[1] did not Darius in his time compare the endocannibalistic practices of the Kirāta, a mountainous tribe of Tibeto-Burman origin, with those of the Greeks? After the arrival of Alexander the Great in the territories of north-west India, brāhmanic and śramanic India provided Westerners with a range of comparative elements in fields as diverse as philosophy, mythology, and cosmology, the art of politics and war, trade, ethnography, as well as botany and even zoology. Yet it was not until the late eighteenth century in Europe that Indo-Āryan languages finally entered the game of comparisons. The comparative grammar of Indo-European languages turned a new page in the history of languages, with unprecedented repercussions on the interpretation of Vedic and post-Vedic mythologies. Through a study of the structures of language, Saussurean linguistics gave mythologists the opportunity to reconsider their own methodological approach to myths. And in this respect, Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) was influenced by both sociology and comparative linguistics in his approach.

Yet, instead of developing a Frazerian comparativism based on the resolution of equations, as was still practised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in 1938 he reconstructed a hypothetical Indo-European ideology structured around a tripartite system. Although the Sanskrit language gave linguists 'a term of comparison' and 'a precision instrument',[2] to borrow the words of Michael Bréal (1832–1915), both lacking in the earlier studies of Nicolas Fréret (1688–1749) and Charles de Brosses (1709–77), the structured classification of the ideal brāhmanic society provided Dumézil with a fundamental comparative element, taken as the interpretative key to the underlying structure of the prehistory of the major flamens, and beyond the Roman world, the prehistory of an Indo-European trifunctional ideology. From a methodological point of view, comparative linguistics, founded on the morphophonological analysis of consonant changes and the apophonic processes characterising languages of the so-called Indo-European family, boasted other comparative elements that were much better attested and far more reliable than the ideologemes identified and selected by Dumézil in the mythological stories or normative texts produced by a group

of heterogeneous cultures, whose main common feature was their linguistic heritage. As a result, Dumézil's trifunctional theory was regarded as either the remnant of an archaic system of thought, which had somehow survived the ideological changes of these cultures throughout history, or its author's construction of a metamyth based on the rearrangement and restructuring of disparate elements, a metamyth entailing the cultural transference of the brāhmanic tripartite classification onto non-brāhmanic structures and eventually expanding to the realm of the Romans.[3]

In the domain of European Indianism, Dumézil's theory of Indo-European trifunctional ideology was poorly accepted and even refuted by certain Indologists of renown such as the Dutch Orientalist Jan Gonda (1905–91) of the University of Utrecht especially from the 1950s, or even German Indologist Paul Thieme (1905–2001) of the University of Tübingen. For Dumézil, the Sanskrit sources represented one of the most important comparisons in the formulation of his trifunctional theory. For this very reason, it is worth returning to Dumézil's treatment of the Indian texts. It has already been shown that his identification of the trifunctional ideology in the Buddhist sources[4] and his tripartite hypothesis of marriages in the normative brāhmanic texts[5] were both unfounded, as they depend on an analogical, decontextualized, and arbitrary form of comparativism. This approach ignores any consideration of the proximity or distance of the contexts comprising the system and especially any historic-critical examination of the sources, as it discounts their redactional history. Indeed, any system of thought should be compared with contemporaneous systems of thought. In this chapter, I therefore consider Dumézil's methodological approach to the Indian

sources—the Vedas and the *Mahābhārata*—in the structure of his theory. It is evident that this brief overview of his method and findings should be situated in the context in which they emerged, and in no way can they be compared to the philological and historical progress made over the past thirty years with regard to the Vedas and the *Mahābhārata*. Notwithstanding, much has already been written on the Indian material in Dumézil's trifunctional theory. Let us cite, among others, the works of his contemporaries such as the Indologists J. Gonda, P. Thieme, John Brough (1917–84), and Franciscus B.J. Kuiper (1907–2003), and even after his death in 1986, John Brockington and Éric Pirart. From a chronological perspective, it is firstly necessary to consider the identifications made in the Vedic compositions, as presented in his 1961 article entitled 'Les "trois fonctions" dans le *ṚgVeda* et les dieux indiens de Mitani'.[6] His research on the *Mahābhārata*, following his reading of the 1947 study of Stig Wikander,[7] was then elaborated in *Mythe et épopée I. L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*, with revised and expanded editions of this monograph being published between 1968 and 1986.

## Dumézil and the Vedas

India had been a primary source of comparison for Dumézil ever since his doctoral thesis on the beverage of immortality.[8] Yet any Indologist may query the India of Dumézil. After reading his entire corpus, it is striking to observe just how little his vision of India evolved over his intellectual career despite the significant progress made in Indian studies in the post-war era. He always draws on the same Sanskrit sources— albeit few in number—from the brāhmanic intellectual milieu; he always adopts the same

translations in European languages, some of which date from the nineteenth century; and he always cites the same studies that leave little room for new research, which would have certainly cast doubt on his theory and perhaps even led to its reassessment. The only acceptable 'discussions' relate to the works of Gonda[9] and Thieme. As to other scholars, he voluntarily remained silent.[10] What is more, the India of Dumézil is considerably dated. It is the product of the late nineteenth century, an epoch marked by German philologists who worked on the correlations between language and thought, by European Indologists who, for more ideological than historical reasons, liked to believe that India had, over the millennia, best preserved archaic Indo-European beliefs, by grammarians who gradually reconstructed a proto-Indo-European language, and finally, by mythologists who identified common mythemes and Indo-European mythological cycles. India was thus accorded a certain primacy of antiquity and conservatism. In the world of classics, historians and philologists had succeeded in warding off any attempts at intercultural comparativism. However, the same could not be said for Indologists, as many ignored any kind of historical approach to the textual sources, freely drawing on decontextualized passages to lend support to their ideas, thus turning India into a civilization without history, impervious to any historical process, and Sanskrit sources into a monolith without redactional history, making their composers and authors simple reciters of a millennium-old tradition who lacked the intellectual capacity for innovation, re-evaluation, or change. Dumézil partially shared this contemplation of India, and in terms of Indo-European comparativism, he considered the Indian mythological cycles to be the most complete and preserved examples. India is therefore like a nebula in which Indo-European social and ideological structures are best preserved, a nebula in which the Sanskrit textual sources, notoriously difficult to date, offer immense ahistorical freedom, and a nebula, which is an essential step in the study of other Indo-European cultural spheres. And the *Mahābhārata* is no exception. While Indologists strived to reconstruct its compositional history, as late as 1967 Dumézil still preferred to regard it as an 'immense text, without history and almost without context'.[11] In the field of Scandinavian studies, Jan de Vries, who opposed 'Wikander's explanation of the *Mahābhārata*',[12] warned Dumézil in March 1956 about his narrow and reductionist view of the history of cultures. He did not hesitate to point to the outmodedness of his conceptions of the history of the literary corpus:

It seems to me that your view of this Scandinavian tradition neglected too much of the considerable evolution that the Germanic religion underwent. By highlighting the Indo-European pattern, one runs the risk of diminishing the unique character of a purely Scandinavian tradition. You give it a label, which is obsolete and irrelevant to the Saga, as presented in its literary form.[13]

In 1938, this same India inspired Dumézil with the idea of a tripartition as a reflection of the social structure of the three varṇas, as advocated by certain brāhmanic schools. As early as 1930, he considered this tripartite structure to be older than the *Ṛgveda* itself and sought its origin in a common Indo-Iranian heritage.[14] In his view, the social classes of post-*Ṛgvedic* and post-Vedic India attest to a popular pre-Vedic tradition, despite the fact that marked divisions did not exist in Indo-Iranian society. In 1950, he returned to this historical vision of a tripartite ideology but without the 'real tripartite division'[15] of society. It should be noted that in his 1938 study, Dumézil uses the verses

on the *Puruṣasūkta* from *Ṛgveda* 10.90.12 and *Atharvaveda* 19.6.6 to substantiate his division of the social classes. However, he makes no attempt to justify his deliberate exclusion of the śūdra class, which, according to the poet, formed a quadripartite society along with the brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, and vaiśya classes, and even more so, comprised its own system in the compositional structure of the hymns.

Regardless of these beginnings of an oriented comparativism, the French mythologist consecrated his early research to the Vedas from 1938 onwards, since the Vedic texts were pre-eminent on account of their antiquity. Max Müller, who attempted to define a relative chronology of the Vedas stretching from 1200 BCE for the *Chandas* to 600 BCE for the *Sūtras*, confirmed in his own time that 'In so far as we are Aryans in speech, that is, in thought, so far the Ṛg Veda is our own oldest book'.[16] In 1952, Dumézil thus expressed:

Just as linguists proceed in their field, there must be an analytical and comparative observation of religious and mythical facts, observed as early as possible in the main provinces of the Indo-European family. And, as in linguistics, it is the India of the Vedas, on account of both the richness and the antiquity of its information, that provides the first and most pertinent elements for such an investigation.[17]

In the *Ṛgveda*, Dumézil tried to trace a tripartite structure comparable to the list of divinities found in a Hurrian-Hittite treaty from the fourteenth century BCE. In his studies published in 1941,[18] 1945,[19] and 1947,[20] he viewed the text as the archaic canonical list of trifunctional patron gods, notably Mitra-Varuṇa, Indra, and the Nāsatya.[21] However, his decision to consider only phonetically translated theonyms, while ignoring Ellat, a possible semantic translation of the river goddess Sarasvatī, is notorious.[22]

In his 1961 article that marks the completion of his Vedic research, the comparatist increasingly struggles to find three juxtaposed and hierarchical functions that would have ensured the 'classificatory intent of the poet' in the *Ṛgveda*.[23] Indeed, none of the identified structures finds parallel in the Mitanni treaty, and the meticulous studies of Indologists like Gonda[24] extensively demonstrate that no trifunctional ideology following the model of Dumézil ever existed in the Vedas. On the contrary, there is a diversity of thought structured according to principles of cosmology, arithmology, and grammatical numbers, among others. Triads are thus numerous, but they never correspond to a tripartite ideology based on a series of three divinities (Mitra-Varuṇa, Indra, the Nāsatya), three social groups (brāhmaṇa, rājanya or kṣatriya, vaiśya), three principles (*brahman, kṣatra, viś*), or other related notions. Vedic triads are not systematically linked to a specific social division, which results in an evident methodological problem. After locking himself into an incorrect reasoning, Dumézil was unable to consider the structures in all their diversity to be fully-fledged productions. In his view, any divergences were the result of voluntary modifications or the incompetency of the poets as custodians of an archaic tripartite ideology. As understood by Daniel Dubuisson,[25] the Vedas provided Dumézil with a group of elements, which were incorporated into his comparison with ancient Rome and formed the basis for establishing an archaic social and ideological tripartition, which he then sought again in the Vedas.

Neither the *Ṛgveda* nor the Vedas more generally allowed him to demonstrate the antiquity of his trifunctional theory in India, even though the *Ṛgvedic* hymns had always been regarded as the most archaic and conservative of Indo-European thought.

To confirm the survival of this trifunctional ideology, the French mythologist thus turned to the *Mahābhārata*, the epic poem of the post-Vedic Sanskrit corpus. His research, initiated in 1947 after reading Wikander's study, led to the publication of four articles[26] and concluded with *Mythe et épopée I.* in 1968.

## Dumézil and Para-Vedic Trifunctionality in the Mahābhārata

Dumézil began his study of the *Mahābhārata* while embarking on a definitive revision of the terms of his trifunctional theory. From 1938 to 1949, his initial theory was based on an historically attested social reality, at least in India, or, so he thought, in the Indo-Iranian world. This hypothesis was greatly influenced by the work on collective classifications undertaken by sociologists such as Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950).[27] To a large extent, the changes made to his theory ensued from the setbacks faced in 1941 when he showed in *Jupiter Mars Quirinus*[28] that the three legendary tribes of Rome (Ramnes, Luceres, Tities) were the mythical equivalents of real functional classes. The criticism levelled at this interpretation of the three legendary tribes of Rome compelled him to shift his trifunctional social theory to the domain of intellectual speculation. The theory was henceforth considered to be independent in each of the cultures derived from the proto-Indo-European language and—in his view—thought, which removed the need to trace a social reality. This theoretical development accorded greater liberty to Dumézil, as he could now work on the body of mythological texts without being constrained by historically attested social divisions:

The 'tripartite ideology' does not necessarily imply, in the life of a society, the real tripartite division of this society according to the Indian model; on the contrary, it may be (or no longer be, or perhaps never have been) only an ideal and simultaneously a means to analyse and interpret the forces that ensure the flux of the world and the life of humans. As the prestige of the Indian *varṇas* was now exorcised, many false problems vanished.[29]

Dumézil could now bypass and counter one of the main problems in the Indo-Āryan domain, notably the absence of the Indo-European trifunctional ideology in the *Ṛgveda.* In 1961, he confirmed that 'the mythical background of the *Mahābhārata*, as the expression of a para-Vedic mythology in archaic India, profoundly influenced the formulation of several aspects of Vedic mythology'.[30] In his view, the epic literature attested to the survival of the Indo-European trifunctionality, which was preserved in India by the oldest Indo-Āryan bards on the fringes of Vedic schools. This circumvention of the history of Sanskrit composition was forced to remain silent in light of the increasingly detailed studies on the redactional history of the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, *Mythe et épopée* opens with a deliberately scant overview of the Sanskrit poem. Its redactional history is merely summarized in a short passage taken from *L'Inde classique* by Louis Renou (1896–1966) in which the affirmation that 'certain mythical traits may be of Vedic or pre-Aryan date'[31] seems to have captured the mythologist's attention.

His research on the *Mahābhārata* shows the extent to which he was unable to liberate himself from an approach towards the Sanskrit sources that was neither historical nor chronological. Despite the new orientation of his theory from 1949 onwards, he could not prevent himself from drawing parallels between the *Mahābhārata* and the Vedas, establishing, as it were, the historical evolution of the Vedic pantheon

with regard to its state in the epic all the while applying a para-Vedic epic structure: 'This is a true pantheon—and as recognised for the Pāṇḍava, a very archaic or else pre-Vedic pantheon—which was transposed onto human personages by an operation as meticulous as it was ingenious'.[32] Yet it is one thing to conduct an internal analysis of a corpus in which the author(s) themselves draw attention to the relationship between the five Pāṇḍavas or other protagonists and the gods, and quite another to imagine the tradition of an Indo-European ideological trifunctionality in the epic. Madeleine Biardeau thus expressed:

In my view, the trifunction was not the essence of this innovation, but prior to this, the method of connecting personages with each other, a structuration of epic heroes that related not to psychology or literature but rather to their respective positions in the staging of action—this would constitute the thread of the poem and give it its meaning.[33]

From a methodological point of view, what is quite remarkable is how Dumézil transitions from a set of identifications and analogical comparisons—with absolutely no correspondence from a structural perspective except in the most elastic terms—to outright historical certainties. Thus, the superimposition of divinities/heroes suffices to reveal a 'remarkably archaic'[34] structure, and despite his reserves regarding the presence of Vāyu/Bhīma alongside Indra/Arjuna and the rejuvenation of Mitra in Dharma/Yudhiṣṭhira, he affirms that the epic list reproduces the formula of the Mitanni treaty and the Ṛgveda. Yet the three lists do not present the same elements, and their unique structures only emerge from a careful contextual study. The presence of Vāyu in the epic list and its absence from the Mitanni and Vedic lists, supposedly identical,

hardly stopped Dumézil. On the contrary, despite this absence, he used the epic Vāyu, identified with the Indo-Iranian Vāyu by S. Wikander, to confirm the ancientness of the epic pantheon. And better still, the 'list of the god fathers is recognised as prehistoric: the correspondence between the god fathers and the hero sons should also be prehistoric, with the transposition of the mythology onto the epic'.[35] By this same argument, the historical reconstruction was complete. The so-called tripartite structure identified in the Mahābhārata was pre-Vedic, as was the transposition of this archaic myth that the Indians subsequently historicized. With the exception of Dumézil, all the Indologists and historians of India let themselves be fooled:

To the question of history or myth: certainly myth, one should respond, a myth knowingly humanised or historicised that left no room for 'facts', or if there had initially been facts (a battle of Kurukṣetra, a victorious king Yudhiṣṭhira, etc.), then they were so well concealed and transformed that no identifiable trace remained; only later, by means of genealogies, did India negligently orient these events to the realm of history, thus providing European scholars with a deceptive hold that they eagerly grasped.[36]

For Dumézil, the compositional history of the Mahābhārata, or at least its mythical pantheon, dated back well before the time of the Ṛgveda and thus to an Indo-Iranian or—even better—an Indo-European heritage. However, the epic Vāyu had little in common with the Iranian Vāyu and, even more so, with its Indo-Iranian equivalent. He is the wind (vāta), as illustrated by the author in Mbh 1.61.84 (bhīmasenaṃ tu vātasya) as well as the many upamās used to embellish his tempestuous action throughout the entire poem. It is also notorious that Dumézil omitted the evident continuities between the Vedas and the Mahābhārata regarding the

structural links between divinities, notably Vāyu and Indra, and especially Viṣṇu— conspicuously absent from his studies—and Indra, as a reflection of the fundamental relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. Indeed, the patronym of Arjuna, the central hero of the epic, derives directly from the Vedas, since it is the secret name (*guhyaṃ nāma*[37]) of the god Indra himself. With respect to Draupadī, she cannot be easily identified with Sarasvatī, Ellat of the Mitanni treaty, or Vāc of *Ṛgveda* 10.125.1–2, even though she is said to be part of the goddess Śrī in the *Mahābhārata*. It is also important to question the very concept of the *devas'* partial incarnation (*aṃśāvataraṇa*[38]) in the *naraloka*, which forms the basis of the 'correspondence between god fathers and hero sons'. This notion is not pre-Vedic or even Vedic—the *devas* using their magical powers (*māyā*), Indra dressing up as a brāhman to visit the sacrificer (*yajamāna*) in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and the *bodhisattva* in the Buddhist *Jātakas* (the theme of disguises in the *Virāṭaparvan* is perhaps an ancient theme)—but it is rather post-Vedic and specific to Bhāgavatism. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* counts no less than 1,950 occurrences of the term *bhagavant*. The idea of the sacrificial part is specifically Vedic, but only in the allegorical sense of the battle opposing the Bhāratas and Kauravas, viewed as equivalent to a great sacrifice. Running counter to the advances made by Indologists in the redactional history of the *Mahābhārata*, the problems posed by the age of the first ('Ādiparvan') and fourth books ('Virāṭaparvan')—known since 1969 with Dieter Schlingloff's analysis of the Spitzer manuscript—and the possible later rewriting of the mythological transposition, not to mention the diversity of literary styles and metrics as well as the incoherent elements in the narrative thread, Dumézil did not hesitate to associate the mythological thread and its epic transposition to the pre-Vedic period.

Though by no means obliged by his 1949 theory, Dumézil persevered in his pursuit of correlations between the three functions, their patrons, and the historically attested brahmanic social classes. While the Indo-European tripartite ideology depended on an ideal imaginary construction of society, it is unclear why he still found it necessary to correlate the five Pāṇḍavas (Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva) and their respective divine fathers (Dharma, Vāyu, Indra, and the two Nāsatyas) with the three varṇas (brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya). In this respect, he was doubly influenced by his pre-1949 theory and Wikander's analysis of the 'Virāṭaparvan' in which Yudhiṣṭhira dresses up as a brāhman and Sahadeva calls himself a vaiśya. Let us note in passing that the protagonists appear in a different order to the so-called canonical and hierarchized list of divine patrons with three functions: Yudhisthira, Bhīma, Sahadeva, Arjuna, and finally, Nakula.

If the three-caste system had become fixed in India from an early date, as Dumézil had claimed since 1938,[39] then the brāhmanic sources would have provided many more examples of this trifunctional ideology. Yet this is not the case. In the *Mahābhārata*, society is clearly conceived according to a quadripartite structure. The compounds *trivarṇa*, *traivarṇa*, and *trivaṃśa* are completely absent from the text. While mention is once made of *trayovarṇās*,[40] this specific case regroups kṣatriya, vaiśya, and śūdra in opposition to brāhmaṇa, with a structure of the type 3 + 1. On the contrary, the terms *caturvarṇa* and *cāturvarṇya* are attested on seventy-eight occasions. In the 'Vanaparvan', during the arithmological debate between Bandin and Aṣṭāvakra, the number three is

associated with the three pressings, the three Vedas,[41] the three universes, and the three lights, while the number four is connected with the four stages of a brāhman's life, the four officiants of the sacrificial rite, the four regions, the four social classes (*caturaś ca varṇās*), and the four feet of a cow.[42] As Biardeau confirmed in relation to Dumézil's theory of three functions, 'Indian society has never been trifunctional'.[43]

Too confident that everything could be explained by his trifunctional system and classed in one of its categories, Dumézil turned to Kuntī and Mādrī in the *Mahābhārata* and their types of marriage, attempting to associate the mother of the twins Nakula and Sahadeva with the vaiśya class and thus with the mode of āsura union or marriage by purchase. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Among the eight normative brāhmanic treatises, only two, the *Baudhayanadharmaśāstra* and the *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, correlate the marriage type with a particular social class. The āsura marriage is thus related to the varṇa of the kṣatriyas in *Baudhayanadharmaśāstra*, while it is linked to all four varṇas in the *Mānavadharmaśāstra* before being prohibited, because its authors considered it to be adharmic. Regarding the *Mahābhārata*, the āsura type of union is possible for the kṣatriya, vaiśya, and śūdra. It is therefore impossible to associate Pāṇḍu and Mādrī's type of marriage with a specific form of union reserved for the vaiśyas, contrary to what is affirmed by Dumézil. Quite the reverse, it was rather a form of kṣatriya union linked to a local or familial law (*kuladharma*) practised by the people of Madra, a neighbouring region to Gandhāra. From an historical perspective, in 326 BCE, Aristobulus of Cassandreia witnessed the sale of nubile daughters by poor fathers in the marketplace of Taxila.[44] In their normative treatises, the brāhmans classed this form of union in the fifth or sixth place and qualified it with the adjective *āsura*.[45] Dumézil thus overinterpreted the epic text in the context of his trifunctional theory, perceiving therein the tradition of his third function. And to conclude: 'By inventing this abnormal and hybrid "family status", by attributing a *vaiśya* usage to the *kṣatriya* lineage of the twins' mother, the poem's authors saved the dignity and declared the orientation of the two heroes who were "*kṣatriyas* of the third function", as it were'.[46] By making such erroneous identifications, he only reinforced the construction of his metamyth.

The history of Indian society, or rather societies, is much more complex than Dumézil had conceived through the prism of a social tripartition extolled by certain brāhmanic circles. Since the *Ṛgvedic* hymn of *Puruṣasūkta*—probably composed at the crossroads of the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age (around 1200 BCE)—the societies of the Indo-Āryan language seem, at least for some of them, to have been divided into four hierarchical classes. This quadripartite social division can be traced in the compositions of the Vedic schools postdating the *Ṛksaṃhitā*. The White Yajurveda school, for example, acknowledges four hierarchical varṇas with their own liturgical formulae for ritual, as attested in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*[47] and the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*.[48] In India itself, however, this hierarchy was also thrown into question. Other systems of thought, just as well structured as the brāhmanic systems, expressed another conception of the quadripartite social hierarchy. In the Pāli and Sanskrit Buddhist sources, for example, the learned *bhikṣus*, who were in direct competition with the brāhmans, systematically listed the kṣatriya before the three other varṇas: khattiyo brāhmaṇo vesso suddo, or, kṣatriyā brāhmaṇā vaiśyā śūdrā.[49]

Under the reign of Aśoka, the Mauryan chancellery never employed the term varṇa in royal edicts, instead utilizing *jana* or *varga* and splitting society into two main groups, one religious comprised of brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas, and the other familial headed by fathers and mothers. The Indian tripartite society of Dumézil thus in no way mirrors the historical reality. Many other legal terms are found in the normative brāhmanic treatises[50] such as *kula*, *jāti*, *grāma*, *deśa*, and *saṃgha*, showing the extent to which the social structures were far more complex than a unique tripartite division presented diversely in the Vedic sacrificial system, which, aside from the cosmological representation, involved the opposition or complementarity between the bráhman and kṣatra classes in Indo-Āryan society (*viś*). By no means does the *Mahābhārata* reflect early Vedic, or even less so, pre-Vedic society. It is rather the expression of a plural society of a Mauryan type in which the author(s) use a highly elaborate—but non-tripartite—mythological construction to assert both a brāhmanic identity and a royal function based on brāhmanic dharma and opposed to any other dharmic conception, notably Buddhist. Although Pāṇini (fourth century BCE) attested to the existence of a narrative on the royal lineage of the Bhārata,[51] presumably dating back to the Vedic period,[52] its current form would have been composed at the turn of third and second centuries BCE, except for a few passages from the later 'Ādiparvan' and 'Virāṭaparvan', and then progressively fixed in the different regions of India towards the fourth and fifth centuries CE[53] during the Gupta period.

## Conclusion

In terms of ancient India, the only breakthrough attributable to Dumézil relates to the structural links that he highlighted between the protagonists of the *Mahābhārata* and the brāhmanic pantheon as known to the composer(s) in their time. As to the rest, his manner of equating these structural links to his 1938 theory, revised in 1949, is not at all convincing. The failings of the Dumézilian method are numerous: his overarching conception of everything through structures, his assumption that everything can be explained by structuralism, his confinement to a trifunctional scheme that he all too freely modified to suit each specific case, and his extreme focus on triads to the point of discarding the apparent elements and overlooking the ensemble. In the Indian milieu, the most notorious paradox in terms of historical methodology is the fact that not a single textual source is ever recontextualized, apart from the Hurrian-Hittite treaty of Mitanni[54]—the key to his research—while he affirms all too easily that at the time of their composition, the author(s) made changes to the three functions in line with historical factors that he never bothers to reconstruct.

In 1986, in an interview with Didier Éribon, Dumézil admitted that it was no longer possible for him to rethink his structural theory: 'Even if I were wrong, then at least [my theory] had a function— it amused me. Nowadays, it is too late to reformulate it; I can no longer avoid it'.[55] However, he was aware of the issue well before this date. In June 1964, prior to the publication of *Mythe et Épopée I*, he implicitly admitted in a letter addressed to Jan de Vries that the historical research of cultures belonging to the sphere of Indo-European linguistics made it increasingly difficult for him to explain the trifunctional ideology using a structuralist approach:

I have just finished reading your new *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* I with utmost pleasure—but

also with discouragement as is always aroused in me by such richly informed and deeply pondered research. I would like to thank you warmly. Now I do not think that I will speak much of Germanic or […] Indo-European things: I increasingly preserve the passion of my old age for the Caucasians, [specifically the Ubykhs, Circassians, Abkhazians. I'm leaving next week and will spend the summer in Anatolia.] If I were younger, I would consider returning to my Indo-European work after a period of silence and distance so as to reconsider it objectively, while detaching myself. But I am now too certain that I can only focus on one thing, and I have chosen the Caucasus.[56]

Ten years later, he was further discouraged by Gonda's exhaustive, meticulous, and well-argued studies on Indian dual deities and Vedic triads. The major flaw of Dumézil's comparativism was certainly its aspiration to systematically identify an archetypal structure in Sanskrit texts from different chronological periods, different historical contexts, and different geographical places. He predefined this structure using these very same sources and then took upon himself to enlarge and modify it in line with the studied cases, thus attributing any structural incoherency to prehistoric or historical evolutions and often losing his reader in the meandering of his repeatedly reformulated thought. To elude the terrible pitfall of comparativism and its 'mirages',[57] it would have been more fortunate if Dumézil had heeded his own methodological advice: 'In a mythological corpus, it is necessary to […] respect its richness, variety, and even contradictions'.[58] While Dumézil's trifunctional theory obliged the best Indologists of his time to work on Vedic and brāhmanic triads, it is now known that prior to any attempt at extra-Indian comparativism, it is crucial to respect this same richness of structures produced by India throughout its long history.

## Notes

1. Herodotus, *The Histories* 3.38.
2. Michel Bréal, *De la méthode comparative appliquée à l'étude des langues*, leçon d'ouverture du cours de grammaire comparée au Collège de France, Paris: Germer Baillière, 1864, p. 5.
3. Georges Dumézil, *Entretiens avec Didier Eribon*, Paris: Gallimard, 1987, p. 220.
4. Guillaume Ducœur 'Georges Dumézil et le Buddha hésitant', in *Le Myrte et la rose. Mélanges offerts à Françoise Dunand par ses élèves, collègues et amis*, ed. Gaëlle Tallet et Christiane Zivie-Coche, tome 2, Montpellier: CENiM 9, 2014, pp. 199–209.
5. Guillaume Ducœur, 'Les traités normatifs brāhmaniques dans le comparatisme des mariages indo-européens de G. Dumézil', in *Anabases, Traditions et Réceptions de l'Antiquité*, vol. 22, 2015, pp. 27–48.
6. Georges Dumézil, 'Les « trois fonctions » dans le *RgVeda* et les dieux indiens de Mitani', in *Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques*, tome 47, 1961, pp. 265–98.
7. Stig Wikander, 'Pāṇḍavasagan och *Mahābhāratas* mytiska förutsättningar', in *Religion och Bibel*, tome 6, 1947, pp. 27–39.
8. Georges Dumézil, *Le festin d'immortalité, étude de mythologie comparée indo-européenne*, Paris: P. Geuthner, 1924.
9. Georges Dumézil, 'Les trois fonctions vues par M. Gonda', in *Les dieux souverains des Indo-européens*, Paris: Gallimard, 1977, pp. 252–65.
10. Georges Dumézil, *Les dieux souverains des Indo-européens*, Paris: Gallimard, 1977, p. 14.
11. Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée I. L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, p. 25 [= *Mythe et épopée*, Paris: Gallimard, 1995, p. 55].
12. 'I am simply surprised that you oppose Wikander's explanation of the *Mahābhārata*; it is generally accepted; it even contributed to the favourable decision of G. Morgenstierne

(previously hostile to W.) as expert advisor on his application for the chair in Upsal. And Louis Renou, who has many reservations about me, was at least receptive to the demonstration of W., but of course it is always necessary to consider and reconsider the arguments'. Guillaume Ducœur, 'Nous avons combattu ensemble: correspondance de Georges Dumézil et Jan de Vries de 1949 à 1964', *Deshima, revue d'histoire globale des pays du Nord*, vol. 9, 2015, p. 163 [Letter 47].

13. Ibid., [Letter 23].

14. Georges Dumézil, 'La préhistoire indo-iranienne des castes', *Journal asiatique*, tome 216, 1930, pp. 109–30.

15. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée I*, p. 15 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 45].

16. Adolf Kaegi, *The Rigveda: the Oldest Literature of the Indians*, Boston: Ginn and Company, 1886, p. 25.

17. Georges Dumézil, *Les dieux des Indo-européens*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1952, p. 6.

18. Georges Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus. Essai sur la conception indo-européenne de la société et sur les origines de Rome*, Paris: Gallimard, 1941, p. 61.

19. Georges Dumézil, *Naissances d'archanges. Essai sur la formation de la théologie zoroastrienne. Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus III*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 15.

20. Georges Dumézil, *Tarpeia. Essais de philologie comparative indo-européenne*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947, p. 38.

21. Georges Dumézil, 'Mitra-Varuna, Indra, les Nâsatya, comme patrons des trois fonctions cosmiques et sociales', in *Studia Linguistica*, vol. I, 1947, pp. 121–9; and 'Les dieux patrons des trois fonctions dans le *Rg*-Veda et dans l'Atharva-Veda', in *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus IV*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948, pp. 13–35.

22. Linguistic studies have since shown that the names of the kings of Mitanni as well as the theonyms were not Indo-Iranian but rather Indo-Āryan. Consequently, this so-called canonical list is no more archaic than the other lists of theonyms present in the *Rgveda*.

23. Dumézil, 'Les « trois fonctions » dans le *RgVeda*', p. 266.

24. Jan Gonda, *The Dual Deities in the Religion of the Veda*, Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1974, and *Triads in the Veda*, Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1976.

25. 'In fact, India appears, given the definition of the dominant Indo-European criterion (the social and ideological tripartition that serves as reference for comparative studies), both initially and subsequently, due to its excellent documentation, throughout all specific studies. But knowing that these studies, in their turn, are used to confirm the validity of the original criterion, how can one escape feeling that, in terms of the Dumézilian axiomatic, India carries simultaneously the decisive "social" reference—the norm that lends it a favourable evaluation—and the best examples likely to illustrate it?'. Daniel Dubuisson, *Twentieth Century Mythologies*, tr. Martha Cunningham, Oxford: Routledge, 2014, p. 71 (= *Mythologies du xxᵉ siècle—Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss, Éliade*, Lille: Presses universitaire de Lille, 1993, pp. 90–1).

26. Georges Dumézil, 'Karṇa et les Pāṇḍava', *Mélanges H. S. Nyberg, Orientalia Suecana*, tome 3, 1954, pp. 60–6; 'Les pas de Kṛṣṇa et l'exploit d'Arjuna', *Orientalia Suecana*, tome 5, 1956, pp. 183–8; 'La transposition des dieux souverains mineurs en héros dans le *Mahābhārata*', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 3, 1959, pp. 1–16; and 'Remarques comparatives sur le dieu scandinave Heimdallr', *Études celtiques*, vol. 8, 1959, pp. 263–83.

27. 'Yet it is especially through mythologies that classification methods emerge in an almost ostensible manner, quite similar to those of the Australians or North American Indians. Each mythology is essentially a classification, which nevertheless borrows its principles from religious beliefs rather than scientific notions. Well-organised pantheons share the same nature, as elsewhere clans

share the universe. Thus, India distributes things, like their gods, to the three worlds of heaven, atmosphere, and earth, just as the Chinese categorise all beings according to the two fundamental principles of *yang* and *yin*. Attributing natural things to a god means grouping them in the same generic category, arranging them in the same class'. Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, 'De quelques formes de classification. Contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives', *Année sociologique*, vol. 6, 1901–2, p. 41.

28. Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus*.

29. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée I*, p. 15 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 45].

30. Dumézil, 'Les « trois fonctions » dans le *ṚgVeda*', p. 291.

31. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée I*, p. 33 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 61].

32. Ibid., p. 21 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 51].

33. Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata. Un récit fondateur du brahmanisme et son interprétation*, Tome I, Paris: Seuil, 2002, pp. 15–16.

34. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée I*, p. 57 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 85].

35. Ibid., p. 58 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 86].

36. Ibid., pp. 21–2 [= *Mythe et épopée*, pp. 51–2].

37. *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.1.2.11 and 5.4.3.7.

38. *Mahābhārata* 1.2.76; 1.61.99, 101, and 102; 1.62.1; 1.109.3; 2.33.12. See Christophe Vielle, 'L'exégèse théologique du *Mahābhārata*. Le système symbolique des aṃśāvataraṇa', in *Routes et parcours mythiques: des textes à l'archéologie*, ed. Alain Meurant, Bruxelles: Safran, 2011, pp. 295–302.

39. Georges Dumézil, 'La préhistoire des flamines majeurs', in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, tome 118, no. 2–3, 1938, p. 191, and *Mythe et épopée I*, p. 49 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 77].

40. *Mahābhārata* 5.81.62.

41. The most traditional ritualist denomination of the Vedas (*Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, Yajurveda*) excludes the *Atharvaveda*.

42. *Mahābhārata* 3.134.9–10.

43. Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata.*, p. 35.

44. Strabon, *Geography* 15.1.62.

45. Ducœur, 'Les traités normatifs brāhmaniques'.

46. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée I*, p. 75 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 103].

47. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 5.5.4.9; 1.1.4.12. The ideological structure opposes brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya and vaiśya-śūdra (*Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.4.4.13), just as it opposed brahman-kṣatra and viś in the *Ṛksaṃhitā*.

48. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.15.

49. The *Milindapañha* (second century BCE) adds the term *caṇḍālo* to *khattiyo brāhmaṇo vesso suddo*.

50. *Mānavadharmaśāstra* 8.41.

51. *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 6.2.38.

52. Michael Witzel, 'Early Sanskritization. Origins and Development of the Kuru State', in *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, vol. 1–4, 1995, pp. 1–26.

53. John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998.

54. Dumézil, *Les dieux souverains des Indo-européens*, pp. 23–6.

55. Dumézil, *Entretiens avec Didier Eribon*, p. 220.

56. Ducœur, 'Nous avons combattu ensemble', p. 170 [Letter 55].

57. Dumézil, *Entretiens avec Didier Eribon*, p. 182.

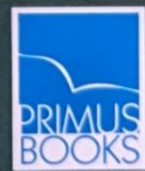58. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée I*, p. 11 [= *Mythe et épopée*, p. 41].