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Abstract

Sanskrit Law

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The absence of a single key word for 'law' in Sanskrit has given rise to misguided assumptions among some scholars of Indology as well as lawyers that ancient Indians were somehow deficient in legal theorising and/or lacked a clear conceptualisation of 'law'. In the light of currently developing global comparative legal analysis, the paper demonstrates that Sanskrit did in fact develop and distinguish a number of terms for 'law' and thus reflects a richly patterned and fluidly evolving understanding within ancient Indian societies and cultures of various interlinked legal phenomena.

Individually and taken together, the various Sanskrit terms match to a surprising extent the well-known manifestations of law that have been globally discussed, namely different forms of natural law, socio-legal norms and state-made positivist laws. Establishing a taxonomy of legal terminologies in Sanskrit, the paper examines in particular *rta* and *satya*, *dharmā*, *danda*, *vyavahāra*, *ācāra* and its various forms, and a number of other terms relevant to a deeper understanding of the richness of ancient India's conceptualisations of 'law'.