FOREWORD

In the history of religion in India the period between the end of the Gupta empire and the coming of the Turks, which may broadly be called the early Medieval period, was a most significant one. It witnessed the decline and finally the almost complete disappearance of Buddhism in India, and the great development of what may loosely be called scholasticism, with the appearance of lengthy digests on Dharma and the composition of numerous philosophical commentaries, including the great works of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Madhva which have had tremendous influence on later Hinduism. This period saw the earliest stages of the popular emotional bhakti cults, which began in South India at this time and rapidly spread over northern India during the early centuries of Muslim dominance. It was a time when temple architecture developed greatly, and sacred buildings in stone became more numerous and larger. The art of sculpture, applied to religion, also developed, and some of the greatest works of art to be produced in India at any time belong to this period.

Some scholars have tended to look on the early Medieval period as one of decline, and this may be partially true in some respects. Side by side with the great developments mentioned above were others which, if we are to apply contemporary standards of value to them, are less easy to admire. Certain early and rather barbaric practices, little in evidence in the time of the Guptas, reappeared in greater strength. Such unattractive features of social life as the cremation of widows with their husbands, the marriage of small children, animal sacrifice, and the practice of repulsive and outlandish cults in secret or semi-secret conditions, also seem to have increased over the period with which this book is concerned. Every period in the history of every people has items of profit and of loss on its balance-sheet, and the historian who strives for impartiality should never emphasise the one at the expense of the other. In this detailed and valuable study Dr. V. B. Mishra has ransacked a very wide range of sources, to bring together a great body of material relevant to the religious life of the period. He has not been content to go over once more the well-trodden ground of religious philosophy, but has rather studied those aspects of the religious life of his country during the period which most strongly affected the lives of the ordinary people: the gods, their images and their temples, methods of worship, religious practices, popular beliefs, and ideas.
of the supernatural. He has concluded his study with a consideration of the heterodox religions of the time, Jainism and Buddhism, and of the religious toleration, qualified occasionally by outbursts of misdirected zeal against Buddhism by Śaivite kings, which characterized the period. His book forms a mine of information on the more popular aspects of the religious life of the period, and will be invaluable to all students of India’s past, and especially those who are particularly interested in her religious history. I wholeheartedly commend it to the world.

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A. L. Basham,
Professor of Asian Civilizations,
Australian National University.