This paper is partly substantive – I want to explore the major contours of the history of religions in ancient India – and partly methodological – I want to argue for a particular way to study this period of Indian history and especially to argue against some ways in which that history has been studied in the past by some scholars. I want to examine how we should research this period, how we should teach this period to our students, and how we should encourage the educated public to envisage this period of ancient Indian history.

When we deal with the religions of ancient India we have first of all to deal with the problem of labels. What do we call them? Two easy terms have become current: Hinduism and Buddhism. But such labels are not without their problems. They reflect to varying degrees modern and often scholarly classifications. Projecting them into the distant historical past, especially in reified form, can cause historical distortions and anachronistic conclusions. The dynamic nature of all human realities, including religion, is often hidden behind these essentialized designations.

The categories “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are, of course, extremely problematic. In their current usage with regard to the majority religion in India, they are categories invented within the colonial context with the need felt by colonial powers to classify the people they ruled. The term “Hindu” or a parallel indigenous category is absent in pre-colonial India. Some scholars have thrown up their hands in despair and advised us against using the term at all. But that is not feasible, given the ubiquity of this category not only in scholarship but also as a term of self-reference among millions of contemporary Hindus, and the practical need for a short-hand term. The term has also become part of Indian constitutional law, which defines “Hindu” negatively – anyone who is not a Moslem, Christian, Jew, or Parsi is a Hindu by definition, or rather by exclusion, thus making Sikhs, Bud-
dhists, and Jains legally Hindus. The fact that a colonial and scholarly term has become an emic term of self-reference should not blind us to the problems inherent in such a category. Once we go beyond the 19th century, the category “Hinduism” poses great difficulties, even though we continue to use it in scholarship as an umbrella concept or a shorthand. But it is clearly unwise to use this category as a tool of analysis for the period under discussion in this paper. People talk, for example, about the Buddha being a Hindu before he became a Buddhist!! Or say that the Buddha preached against Hinduism!! These statements make no historical sense. The problem with such a label is that it makes us assume that a sociologically and demographically identifiable group answering to that label existed at that time, an assumption that is clearly untenable. Such a category makes sense only within the mind of the scholar who looks at a large spectrum of data, demarcates some of them, and then gives them a label. Such category formation is quite legitimate as a scholarly enterprise, but the danger is that we often think that those categories were actual historical realities. Today we have a demography within India and the Indian diaspora that answers to the identification “Hindu”. But it did not exist even four hundred years ago, let alone two thousand.

“Buddhism” may seem a less problematic category, especially because it is what can be called a “founded religion”, and we are used to dealing with such religions that we think have definite historical contours and identities. Yet, if we are attempting to describe, much less analyze, the religious landscape of northern India in the middle of the first millennium BCE, we would be hard pressed to find “Buddhism” there in the way we conceive it as a category today. There were ascetics, often living in communities, who professed faith in the preachings of Siddhārtha Gautama; there may have been even some public monuments associated with him, and lay individuals who showed partiality toward this ascetic sect. But it was one among many ascetic groups vying for influence and patronage among rich and politically influential people. “Buddhism” has to be understood and analyzed within its on-the-ground historical context and its multi-faceted interactions with other religious and societal groups.

1 See The Constitution of India, Part III, Article 25: “the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina, or Buddhist religion”. See also The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956.