



Aryavarta, Land of the Noble Ones

Citation

Alexandrova, Marina. "Aryavarta, Land of the Noble Ones". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2026. © License: CC BY NC.

Link

<https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/42741163>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

Aryavarta, Land of the Noble Ones

Marina Alexandrova

Edited by Aaron Michael Ullrey

Published in June 2026

The following Research Reflection is part of an ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

In 1891, readers of a small American journal called *The Path* encountered an article by a Jodhpur pandit titled “Some Customs of Aryavarta.” In idyllic terms, the author and Theosophist Swami Bhaskara Nand Saraswati describes the religious festivals and culture of a place called Aryavarta. But Aryavarta did not appear on any map.

In ancient Hindu literature, specifically in the Vedas, the word Aryavarta denoted a geographical zone in northern India—the heartland between the Himalaya and the Vindhya mountains. Aryavarta acquired a new life in the nineteenth century, signifying a Golden Age of spirituality and culture against which the degraded present could be measured.

Meaning “Land of the Noble Ones (*arya*)” in Sanskrit, Aryavarta existed for Indians only as a sacred name in cultural memory, but that name was revived by groups seeking to restore India to its Vedic greatness, including the Theosophical Society and its occultist co-founders Helena “Madame” Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, whose choice to foreground this “non-existent” geographical location was not accidental. My forthcoming book *Madame Blavatsky’s India: In Search of Aryavarta* (under contract with Oxford University Press) explores the Theosophical Society’s vision of India as centered on this obscure Sanskrit geographical term. The ways in which the Society’s vision contributes to a broader story about how “India” became a modern global spiritual category.

Friedrich Max Müller, the German-born Oxford philologist who did more than anyone to popularize Sanskrit learning in the English-speaking world, urged Colonial officers to study the “true India” of the Vedic scriptures and ancient village communities, rather than the millennia of post-Vedic texts and India’s crowded modern cities. Vedic texts, he contended, would morally elevate Europeans. When asked how Western inner life might become “more truly human,” Müller wrote that “again I should point to India.”

Müller’s ambitions were generous, and his scholarship, conducted entirely from a desk in England, was immense. That he never set foot on Indian soil was a central grievance for Theosophists. Whereas Müller and other Orientalists worked entirely from texts, the Theosophists insisted on the authority of wisdom transmitted through human lineages of initiated and practicing local pandits and yogis, relocating their headquarters to India in 1879 to better engage Indian spiritual wisdom.

Madame Blavatsky’s critique of Müller was pointed, arguing that he had “rolled in mud” those researchers who spent decades in India while himself producing hard-to-access, expensive

translations without enlisting Indian experts to guide and correct his output. By contrast, the Theosophical Society and its authors extensively worked with Indian experts, created a network for circulating Indian expertise, and published affordable editions available worldwide.

The Society's most significant early alliance in India was with Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), founder of the Arya Samaj, meaning a "Society of Nobles"—a Hindu reform movement sharing the Theosophists' reverence for the Vedas and Aryavarta and a contempt for British Colonialism. In 1878, Blavatsky and Olcott formally merged their organization with his, hailing Dayananda as their supreme guide for "the Wisdom-Religion of the Aryas." The collaboration lasted four years before it collapsed.

Dayananda's vision of Aryavarta was a practical program to restore Vedic society, teach Sanskrit on a mass scale, define Hindu identity against Islam and Christianity, and eventually, to reconvert the Subcontinent. His slogan was "Back to the Vedas," and he meant it literally: Dayananda wanted to make India Hindu again. For Theosophists, his vision was too narrow. Their declared goal was the formation of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, a cosmopolitan community transcending race, caste, creed, and color. This distinction gives the Theosophical version of Aryavarta its peculiar character.

Where Hindu nationalists used the term to circumscribe religious and ethnic belonging, Theosophists invested Aryavarta with a spiritual meaning that was accessible, in principle, to anyone. Ancient India was the source of timeless wisdom belonging to all humanity. However, that source had been fragmented and forgotten, and it needed to be recovered to restore the Vedas' place alongside the sacred texts of Buddhism, Kabbalah, Hermetic traditions, and the teachings of Jesus.

Over the 1880s and into the 1890s, the resonance of Aryavarta in Theosophical writing shifted. Earlier Theosophical texts treated Aryavarta as a civilizational promise, casting it as a dormant nation awaiting spiritual reawakening. Later texts, including Blavatsky's own posthumous *Theosophical Glossary*, returned Aryavarta to being a historical and geographical reference between the Himalayas and the Vindhya.

What remained and proved durable, however, was an Aryavarta beyond geography, which was a repository of universal spiritual truths translatable across different cultural contexts, a shared spiritual heritage for the whole of humanity. This notion permeated Theosophical writings and entered popular culture, contributing to the New Age and what we call New Age religions that invoke this spiritual heritage tracing back to the profound wisdom of India and, therefore, Aryavarta.

Suggested Citation:

Alexandrova, Marina. "Aryavarta, Land of the Noble Ones". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2026. © License: CC BY NC.

Bio: Born and raised in Saratov, Russia, Marina Alexandrova received her MA in English from Saratov State University, and her PhD in Comparative Literature (Russian and Spanish American Literatures) from the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation analyzes [the formation of the literary public spheres in Russia and Argentina](#), focusing on the avant-garde literary groups and their complex interactions with the state.

Voted "[Texas 10](#)" most popular UT-Austin professors in 2019, Dr. Alexandrova teaches a variety of courses on Russian history, culture, and language. Her current research interests include international modernism and avant-garde (1870s-1920s), Russian radical and revolutionary movements, spirituality in Imperial Russia, and, most recently, cultural and spiritual ties between Russia and the United States. Her recent Signature Course, UGS 303 "Tsars and Mystics," examines (un)Orthodox spiritual practices and unusual confessors of Russian rulers from Ivan the Terrible to Nicholas II.

She has directed and produced two plays with her students of "Advanced Russian through Drama," Vladimir Mayakovsky's controversial comedy "Bedbug" (1928) in 2018 and Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull" (1895) in 2019, partly supported by a grant from [Experiential Learning Initiative](#). In 2018, Dr. Alexandrova worked with Austin Shakespeare Company on their innovative production of Anton Chekhov's play "[The Seagull](#)." In 2019, she was the dramaturg for Penfold Theatre's production of "[Crime and Punishment](#)." As part of her mission of fostering greater awareness of Russian literature and culture, she co-taught a course on Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground" at Travis County Correctional Complex for [Inside Literature](#). As a visiting professor at [Université Paris Nanterre](#) during spring 2020, Dr. Alexandrova taught two graduate seminars, "Russia through American Eyes" and "The International Avant-Garde in New York."

Recently, Dr. Alexandrova shared her expertise in Russian Imperial history as an onscreen expert for the acclaimed docudrama [The Last Czars](#) (streaming on Netflix) and [Royal Mob](#) (streaming on Sky History UK). Read her op-ed about the Romanovs and their fate in the 21st century in the magazine "[Life and Letters](#)." To hear more about Dr. Alexandrova's experiences and future plans, listen to her recent interview for [The Slavic Connexion](#) podcast. Dr. Alexandrova is currently working on a monograph about Helena Blavatsky's legacy in Russia. Read her commentary on the controversies surrounding the publication of Blavatsky's complete works, [The Unveiling of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky](#), part of the [German-Russian Research Project on New Age in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia](#). Dr. Alexandrova has given numerous talks and presentations in English and Russian about Helena Blavatsky's life and works, Theosophical movement in Russia and abroad, and Russian Imperial history. She has published on the influence of Eastern philosophies and Theosophy in [the works of Leo Tolstoy](#), and most recently penned an article about the worldwide celebration of [White Lotus Day on May 8th](#) for [The Conversation](#). As a recipient of [the Faculty Development Award](#) for Summer 2023, Dr. Alexandrova will continue working on her book titled *Madame Blavatsky's India: In Search of Aryāvarta* (under contract with Oxford University Press). Dr. Alexandrova's new article "[From Mushtra to Conscious Movement: Pyotr Lesgaft's](#)

[Science-Based Physical Education for the Russian Cadet Corps](#)" was recently published in *The Russian Review*.

As a [Provost's Teaching Fellow](#), Dr. Alexandrova is working on a project aiming at improving student well-being at UT-Austin. She is affiliated faculty with UT-Austin [Program in Comparative Literature](#) and [Center for Global Business](#).