臺大歷史學報第29期
2002年6月，頁169~180
本文2002.2.18收稿，2002.5.13通過刊登

BIBLID1012-8514(2002)29p.169-180

§綜合論述§

Time, Religion and History in India

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Abstract

The conventional Positivist division of historical time into linear (Western) and cyclical (Oriental) is based upon tearing the discussion, especially that of cyclical time, away from its religio-philosophical context and treating it entirely as an empirical given. In reality, in various strands of Indian philosophy time is perceived as a mosaic of patterns rather than a monochrome, and is fluid, open to varying interpretations, rather than frozen. Nor is time in India viewed exclusively as a mythical moment. This paper briefly seeks to trace the outlines of the mosaic. It goes on to discuss the altogether new concept of historical time introduced by Islam in India's medieval centuries and the Western concept by the British in the 19th and 20th. It concludes by touching upon the residual, pre-literate notion of time in India's tribal culture.

Keywords: Indian Philosophy, linear time, cyclical time, ancient India, medieval India, modern India.

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臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

I

Even as the Positivist notion of historical time as linear, premised on irreversible universal human progress through the instrumentality of scientific reasoning and technological means of realising it, has dominated the generation of historical knowledge around the world over the past two centuries, its inevitable consequence has been the subjugation of diverse conceptions of history. The linear concept of time becoming the reference point has also meant deriding all other notions of time, displacing them from the very process of accretion of universal knowledge. That this displacement has coincided with the relationship of hegemony and subjugation of vast regions of the world's economies and civilizations by Western Europe, home of the origin of Positivism, is clearly no accident.

One of the simplest and most prevalent distinctions between the Western and the Indian notions of time was the characterisation of the former as linear and the latter as cyclical. The linearity of one ensured the society's triumphal onward march, mediated through constant and irreversible change, often occurring as transformation – 'revolution' was the favoured term –, and the cyclicity of the other equally ensured endless repetition, changelessness and stagnation to infinity. Cyclical time in other words amounted to a denial of history.

James Mill, author of the very influential *The History of British India* (10 vols., first published 1817), contemptuously describes this notion as 'a boastful and turgid vanity [which] distinguishes remarkably the oriental nations'; these are indeed 'rude' nations.[1] The Asiatic social system, for him, was 'one in which all progress had ceased thousands of years ago'.[2] Montesquieu was among the earliest of modern thinkers to underline the denial of history in the Orient. 'The laws, customs and manners of the

1 James Mill, *The History of British India*, vol. 1, 5th ed. (London: J. Madden, 1858), 107.

2 Marian Sawer, *Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1977), 30.

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Orient – even the most trivial, such as mode of dress – remain the same as they were a thousand years ago'.[3] The image of an unchanging East remained pervasive in European thought. For Hegel, 'the Hindoos have no History in the form of annals [*Historia*]...they have no History in the form of transactions [*Regestrae*]; that is no growth expanding into a veritable political condition'.[4] Therefore, when Karl Marx announced in 1853 that 'Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history is but the history of successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society',[5] he was merely reiterating the well-established European cliché about the East. Nor was the cliché reconsidered even into the waning decades of the twentieth century. Arnold Toynbee considers the Hindu philosophical notion of *kalpa* – a notion of immense time – and cannot conceal his contempt for it, calling it 'an everlasting cosmic practical joke...a certain meaningless measure of time [which] cannot fail to stultify all our human exertions by reproducing the same situation again and again *ad infinitum*....'[6]

In modern Western perception then a single, undifferentiated notion of cyclical time characterised Indian civilization and, taken entirely as an empirical description, divorced from its religio-philosophical context, it signified the singular absence of any change in social, political and civilizational, i.e. material history. It drew very sharp demarcating lines between mythology and history. It defined the West and its other.

Returned to the contexts of Indian religio-philosophical systems, the notion of cyclical time emerges at best as one among several notions and even as cyclical time, it does not implicate closure of social change. Indeed one commentator puts his suspicion of the single notion of cyclical time

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3 Cited in Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: N.L.B. 1974), 464.

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Willey Book Co., 1944), 163.

5 Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India," in *The First Indian War of Independence, 1857-1859*, by Karl Marx and F. Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Pub. House, [1960]), 33-34.

6 Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, rev. and abridged in 1 vol. (New York: n.p., 1972), 487.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

rather forcefully:[7]

> It appears that the description of the Hindu notion of time as cyclical is so lop-sided as to be misleading. It overlooks the fact that the *Sruti* [lit. what has been heard; a form of sacred literature] is almost free of such a notion and it further overlooks the fact that *Smrti* [lit. memory, also a form of sacred] literature provides striking exceptions and limitations to this cyclical notion of time. The Hindu notion of time is not a monochrome but a mosaic; it is too complex to be described as merely cyclical.'

This questioning finds favour in another scholar's observation: '...[A]lthough the appellation of "cyclic time" features so often in the Western encounter with the Indian tradition, the idea can hardly be identified as the view of any particular school of Brahmanical philosophy or even as an issue for debate in polemical literature'. This scholar too emphasises the existence of 'the great diversity of views' within the fold of Hindu philosophical traditions and pleads that 'To ignore this variety of views and to reduce them under the single caption of "cyclic time" is to distort the image of a complex and a major tradition of world-religions.'[8]

The perception of cyclical time in Hinduism derives strength chiefly from the notion of four *Yugas* (ages) which move in several concentric cycles. Truth, perfection, long human life, plenitude of material comforts, absence of greed, etc., mark the first, *Krtā Yuga.* It lasts anywhere between 4,800 years and 4,000x360, i.e. 1,440,000 years according to different sources. The next *Tretā Yuga* witnesses some decline compared to the first and is also shorter, and so on, to the *Dwāpar Yuga* until the last, the *Kali Yuga*, the one of the present time. Human beings in this age will live up to a maximum of 100 years and this would be marked by a general decline of truth and rectitude. According to *Visnu Purāna*,[9] in this Yuga,

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7 Arvind Sharma, "The Notion of Cyclical Time in Hinduism," in *Time in Indian Philosophy: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Hari Shankar Prasad (Delhi: n.p., 1992), 210.

8 Anindita N Balslev, "Time and the Hindu Experience," in *Religion and Time*, ed. A. N. Balslev and J. N. Mohanty (Leiden: n.p., 1992), 177.

9 *Visnu Purāna*, IV, 24.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> property alone would confer social rank, wealth would become the sole criterion of virtue, passion and lewdness the sole bonds between mates, falsehood the condition of success in life, sexuality the sole means of enjoyment and an outward, purely ritualistic religion would get confounded with spirituality.

The declining duration of each Yuga corresponds to the declining ethical and moral standards, construed as *dharma* (literally religion, but more akin to a code of moral behaviour). Incidentally, the names of the Yugas are derived from the throws of dice.[10] The throw here does not suggest chance, but degrees of perfection: figure 4 is construed in Hinduism as signifying perfection, completeness; 3 is thus slightly less perfect and so forth.[11] The yugas move in a cycle, one complete cycle comprising a *mahā-yuga*, a 'grand age'.

The link between the rarefied conceptualisation of time in the Brahmanic tradition, with Vedic texts as its primary source,[12] and popular traditions too has been the subject of scrutiny. The notion of the Absolute Time *(Kālavāda)* is not only 'a very ancient concept... but above all, it is a widely held popular view, belonging probably to the less Brahmanic stratum of Indian tradition.'[13] Indeed, Mircea Eliade in a celebrated essay spatially and temporally expands the scope of the evolution of what is largely accepted as the specifically Hindu view and forcefully argues that 'The myth of cyclical Time – of the cosmic cycles that repeat themselves *ad*

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10 P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1946), vol. 3, 886-90.

11 Mircea Eliade, "Time and Eternity in Indian Thought," in *Time in Indian Philosophy*, 101-2.

12 The *Atharva Veda,* fourth in the series of earliest scriptural texts, is the first to encapsulate Time in various aspects, especially as the 'creator of the creator':

> Time engendered Heaven above
> Time (also) engendered the Earths we see
> Set in motion by Time, which were
> Are and shall be assigned their place

See Raimundo Panikkar, "Time and History in the Tradition of India: Kala and Karma," in *Time in Indian Philosophy*, 23.

13 Ibid.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

infinitum – is not an innovation of Indian speculation.'[14] As he has shown in his *The Myth of Eternal Return*, 'traditional societies conceive of man's temporal existence not only as an infinite repetition of certain archetypes and exemplary gestures but also as an *eternal renewal*. In symbols and rituals, the world is renewed periodically.'[15] Richard Lannoy too points to the tribal origins of the ideal of the *Krtā Yuga*: 'Hindu society was probably aware that the time sense of the surrounding tribal societies was even more consistently non-linear than their own.'[16]

The hegemonic Western view has perceived in cyclical time in Hindu thought the implication of inescapable destiny and therefore a disincentive to human intervention to seek to alter it. We have seen above the derisive references to the Orient's comfort in changelessness; there are too many others in the same genre to bear repetition. A second intuitive implication derived from inevitable destiny is one of the denial of the existence of reality, everything – life, world, time, wealth – being an illusion, *māyā*. This prevailing perception has of course no space for any change, no evolution, whatever. Timelessness of the object of analysis thus gets embedded in the subjective perception itself. This should have worried the commentators, for there are indeed numerous qualifications to this rather simplistic construction.

In one important strand of Hindu philosophy, time itself is defined not in its own terms but in terms of action. Even as time for the philosopher Bhartrhari is absolute inasmuch as there is no division of it into the past, the present and the future in its own terms, it is because of difference in action (*kryā bhed*) that differentiation and division occur and time gets crystallised in relation to an action which suggests a before and an after, speed or tardiness. The *Mahābhārata* already speaks of change (*parināma*) in beings that forces us to accept the reality of time.[17] Indeed the term for destiny,

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14 M. Eliade, "Time and Eternity in Indian Thought," 108.

15 M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York and London: Pantheon Books, 1954).

16 Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society,* (London: n.p., 1971), 288.

17 R. Panikkar, "Time and History," 28-9.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

gati also means motion.

If the metaphor of the wheel for time, a constant feature in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, has been understood to mean infinity and unbreakability of time, this meaning is restricted to a two dimensional phenomenon; this by itself is suggestive of the opposite context of multidimensionality of reality and the invitation to break free of the circumference of time. If time encloses, it also provides escape routes through the attainment of *jnān* (contemplation), *yoga* (union) and *karma* (action). *Moksa*, freedom from the binding of time is the ultimate aim of human existence. Life or the world as *māyā* (illusion, among many other meanings) is not unreal in the sense of not being in existence but being transitory in the context of time's eternity. Any event in history thus becomes illusory in the sense of being transitory, even as the occurrence of the event is a reality.

But then time itself is perceived in some strands of Indian philosophy as eternal and in some others as ephemeral. In the Buddhist philosophy in particular, even as the Buddha himself is the Absolute and timeless, having transcended the aeons, time comprises neither the past nor the future; it is constantly the present and therefore transitory, impermanent.[18] In one school of Yoga, time has no absolute, objective existence outside of human experience. *Yoga Vasistha* insists that instants and cosmic ages are non-existent as objective realities; depending upon the state of one's mind, an instant might appear as a *kalpa* (aeon), or a *kalpa* might be experienced as a single instant. In short, time *per se* does not exist.[19]

II

The arrival of Islam first to the periphery of India (in Sind, now the western region of Pakistan) in early 8th century and later to the heartland of

18 G. C. Pande, "Time in Buddhism," in *Time and Religion*, 183-9; M. Eliade, "Time and Eternity," 115-6.

19 R. Panikkar, "Time and History," 30.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

northern India from the beginning of the 11th century on, brought a new religion, a new conception of time and of history to the ancient land. A legatee to the Judaic-Christian monotheistic tradition, Islam also inherited the concept of linear time, from the Creation to the Day of Judgement. This was its only concept. There was a strong coincidence of eschatological and historical time within Islam. The debates on the notions of time were limited to the date of the creation of the world and the equivalence between human and divine time. Consensually, creation is located 14,000 years ago and the birth of Adam 7,000 years later, though there is divergence of opinion on both. The Quran itself establishes the equivalence of one eschatological day and 1,000 earthly years. It is on this basis that the historian al-Tabari calculates the age of the universe to be 14,000 earthly years, equally divided between Creation and the birth of Adam and from there to the Coming of the Hour.[20] The age of Adam, however, is subject to different estimates. The great medieval Indian historian, Abu'l Fazl, cites Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq and Ibn al-Arabi to the effect that there were thousands of Adams before Adam and one race of Adam was succeeded by another, some parts of their existence overlapping with one another.[21] On the origins of the universe too, Abu'l Fazl takes account of the evidence of astronomy, 'reliable ancient books of the Hindus and of Cathay and successive chronicles of the sages of those regions' and observes: '...[I]t appears that the beginning of the universe and its inhabitants and the source of the manifestation of attributes of divinity has not become visible. Either it is eternal or of such antiquity as to merge in eternity.'[22] After enumerating several notions of time and therefore of the origin of the universe, he eclectically remarks: 'Traditions and stories like these are current in the vast expanse of God's creation and it is not impossible that

20 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8, 120.

21 Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak, *Akbar Nāmā,* ed. I. Maulavi Abd al-Rahim (Calcutta, Susil Gupta: n.p., 1877), 52.

22 Ibid., 49-50.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

these may [all] be true.'[23]

Islam also brought a new vision of history to India. In the home of its origin, the Arab land, the birth of Islam drew a sharp dividing line in historical time: the age of the world before Islam, characterised by *jahiliyat*, ignorance, savagery, and after when ignorance was terminated. History became a narrative of events in actual time, very precisely measured in years, months and days, at times even in hours. Since Mohammad was the last of all prophets and God had revealed the ultimate truth through him in the Quran, this truth would in the end triumph in the entire world. All history is therefore world history, a feature that is an essential element in the Arab-Muslim historiographical tradition.[24] Most of the histories written during India's medieval centuries belong to this genre. They were written by courtiers, mostly Muslim, in the Persian language and in Arab-Muslim and Perso-Mongol tradition.[25]

However, within the Islamic world there were dissenting voices. If Islamic religious and historical scholarship operated with the temporal dividing line drawn around A.D. 622, the inaugural year of the *hijri* era, there were alternative constructions too which envisioned historical time as an uninterrupted flow either from the beginning of the universe or from the beginning of humanity with the birth of Adam. Abu'l Fazl is the most outstanding of such historians and posits an alternative to the hegemonic Islamic temporal vision, for embedded in that vision was legitimation of strife, conquest and subjugation of one religious sect of humanity by another. To this Abu'l Fazl posits the alternative of a universal religiosity deriving from one universal God in lieu of several religions each with its own sectarian god and all at war with one another. By eliminating the Islamic dividing line in historical time, Abu'l Fazl is fundamentally questioning all received wisdom from around his intellectual milieu.[26]

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23 Ibid., 52.

24 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 115.

25 See Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India* (London: Luzac, 1960); M. Hasan ed., *Historians of Medieval India* (Meerut: Meenakashi Prakashan, 1968); Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography during the Reign of Akbar* (New Delhi: Vikas Pub. House, 1976).

26 Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography*, 72-84; "Idem, 'Medieval India': An Alien

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Interestingly, the historian had complete support of the contemporary state in his endeavour. He was a courtier, friend and admirer of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), himself keen to distance the functioning of the state from Islamic moorings and seeking to establish a polity where the religious identity of a subject became neither a basis of privilege nor punishment.

Such however was not the fate of another contemporary scholar in neighbouring Iran where Azar Kayvan also sought to erase the Islamic dividing line in his country's political history by linking the lineage of the current rulers to pre-Adamite Adam, Mahābad. Unable to face persecution in his home, he had to seek refuge in Mughal India in the end. But, unlike Abu'l Fazl, Azar Kayvan was merely asserting Iran's pre-Islamic Sasanian identity and displacing the Islamic identity from centrestage; he did not envisage an alternative vision of universal history.[27] We might add that unlike Abu'l Fazl again, who was in his personal life a devout Muslim, Azar Kayvan was a Zoroastrian.

Even as time is visualised as linear in Islam, it is perceived as eternal and infinite in some strands[28] and a discontinuous juxtaposition of instants in others, each finite in the context of an infinite totality, until the day of judgement.[29]

In medieval India then, even as Sanskrit texts expounding the ambivalent old scholarship continued their course, the notion of time and history brought forth by the Muslim tradition became hegemonic, even when the historians themselves were Hindu. The two continued to be practiced as parallel streams.

Conceptual Hegemony?" *The Medieval History Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 91-105.

27 See for an excellent treatment of the intellectual movement inspired by Azar Kayvan's historical vision, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Contested Memories of Pre-Islamic Iran," *The Medieval History Journal* 2, no. 2 (1999): 245-75.

28 Paul E. Walker, "Eternal Cosmos and the Womb of History: Time in Early Ismaili Thought," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9 (1978): 357; L. E. Goodman, "Time in Islam," in *Time and Religion*, 138-62.

29 Louis Massignon, "Time in Islamic Thought," in *Man and Time*, vol. 3 of *Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, Bollingen Series, no. 30 ([New York]: Pantheon Books, 1957), 108-9; L. E. Goodman, "Time in Islam".

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III

The 'Modern' [i.e. Western] notion of time in history came to India steadily in two parallel strands: one of patronising approval of India's ancient wisdom and the other of strident denunciation of it. Either way, the Eastern and the Western were constituted as two ends of the spectrum. Since the idea of irreversible progress inhered in both linear historical time and in the tripartite division of history into Antiquity, Middle (or Dark) Ages and Modern Times, its introduction to India by James Mill in 1817 was heavily qualified by the utilitarian assumption that 'progress' was the end result of science and reason which were opposed to religion; hence all of India's pre-British past was one chunk of stasis and rigidity that are characteristic of societies with religion as the guiding force. Hence, the tripartite division was modified as the Hindu, the Muslim and the British periods of Indian history. The asymmetry between the three is quite well thought out and emphatic. In the beginning of the 20th century, in 1903 to be precise, 'Ancient, Medieval and Modern' were first used again by a British historian, Stanley Lane-Poole.[30] But the terms hid under them the old basis of division and these continued to remain interchangeable right into the 1960s. The growing influence of Marxism on Indian historiography during the mid-1950s until about three decades later also emphasised linear change and progress, sometimes going contrary to Marx's own evaluation of India's past.[31] With focus shifting to social, economic and technological change where the earlier preoccupation was with the history of ruling dynasties, the boundaries of ancient, medieval and modern got redefined, but the tripartite division remained in tact. It is in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first of the new century that ever newer problematiques of the history of time, space, habitat, cultural mores and interpersonal relations are coming centrestage and the conventional temporal divides are under a strain, for these problematiques defy easy placement within defined temporal boxes.

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30 Stanley Lane-Poole, *Mediaeval India under Mohammadan Rule: A.D. 712-1764* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903).

31 Harbans Mukhia, "Marx on Pre-Colonial India: An Evaluation," in *Marxian Theory and the Third World*, ed. Diptendra Banerjee (New Delhi: n.p., 1985), 173-84.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

IV

There is still the persistence of a certain notion of time and history to be considered: the one that appertains to nearly a quarter of India's population, i.e. the tribes. With no literate tradition surviving from the past, their myths – recorded by outsiders – are the only 'facts' available for retrieving their construction of time, with rarely an explicit elaboration. Their notions come nowhere near what is construed as history or time in high culture zones. Their time is independent of virtually any kind of measurement in aeons, millennia, centuries or years; there is no explicit logic, nor an elaborate and cogent construction of an argument; there is no conscious retrieval, nor denial of history as we understand it. Yet, there is a strongly implicit sense of the present and the past in their ever evolving myths. Usually, these myths relate to their origin which implicate their present status vis-à-vis other groups they come into contact with, either caste groups representing social power or others representing state power. In constructing their origin myths, which vary according to each situation, they either visualise a continuous flow of time since their origin, or fractured time, indicating consciousness of their own changed status and power.[32]

If several strands of Hindu thought have drawn upon some of these elements to weave their own conceptual mosaics, the autonomous being of these implicit and scattered notions of time and history, expressed in the medium of myths, still remains a strong presence across the length and breadth of the country and outside of, though related to the dominant Brahmanic Hindu ethos.

（責任編輯：查忻 校對：陳家齊 鄭博文）

32 Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Mythic Time and Historical Time" (unpublished, n.p., n.d.).

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