

TIME AND THE LIMITS OF THE POLITICAL: ANTI-HISTORICAL EXCURSIONS FROM SOUTH ASIA

PRATHAMA BANERJEE,
CSDS, NEW DELHI, INDIA

[Death] is a subject which is lived rather than thought, or, better still, a subject which can hardly be thought without first unliving it.
Antonio Machado ¹

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.
Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships wrecked in the trackless water, death is aboard and children play.
On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.

Rabindranath Tagore²

Introduction³

That the modern nation-state rules by a temporal principle is well known. It is also well known that this temporal principle has the following aspects: a) an eschatological aspect, implying determined progress towards a final future of human freedom; b) a historical aspect, denoting the asymmetrical periodisation of the world into ancient, medieval and modern times, wherein modernity appears as an endless extension – every generation being modern, more modern and yet more modern *ad nauseam* (hence Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z etc.), with the end of modernity, unlike of antiquity or middle ages, imaginable only as the end of time itself in an apocalyptic event of planetary destruction; c) a spatialising aspect à la Kant and Newton, by which time is rendered into a mirror image of space, that is, as an a priori extension filled with bodies and events post-facto; d) a governmental aspect by which other lands and other

peoples are administered as non-contemporaries, that is, as primitives and backwards; and finally e) an epochal aspect by which the classical term 'epoch' is transformed from meaning a critical or originary event to meaning a temporal unity – a duration, such as modernity, antiquity etc., to which the whole world is seen to conform in spirit, in spite of the empirical diversity of temporal experiences (*Zeitgeist*).⁴

Progressivism and historicism, two sides of the modern temporal regime, have been much debated in the academy. However, what has not been adequately discussed are questions that appear prior to these – namely, what is the political salience of time as a category of thought? Is the political deployment of time a peculiarly modern phenomenon, in the way that Koselleck has described in his now classic book *Futures Past*?⁵ Or has time always been a political concept, and if so, what is its implication for how we conceptualise politics itself? In modern times, political power is commonly understood as a territorial rather than temporal principle. From the 18th to the 21st century, nationalism has made territorial boundaries constitutive of both national and popular sovereignty – sometimes in a paradoxical fashion. For instance, think of when the British denied 'imperial citizenship' to Indian subjects on the ground that citizenship could only be a national-territorial claim, even if India was not and indeed not to be a nation anytime soon; or much later during the time of globalisation, when security regimes prevent the movement of human bodies while routinely permitting the export of war and a seamless circulation of money and data across national borders.⁶ In all this concern about spatial rights

1 Antonio Machado, *Juan de Mairena*, 1936, cited in Juan López-Morillas, 'Antonio Machado's Temporal Interpretation of Poetry', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6(2), 1947, 161–171, 171.

2 Rabindranath Tagore, 'On the Seashore', in *The Crescent Moon*: dedicated to T. Sturge Moore, trans. R. Tagore, London: Macmillan & Co, 1913, <https://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/r/t/cmoon.htm#seashore>.

3 A different version of this paper is forthcoming in the *Journal of World Philosophy*.

4 I have discussed this elsewhere and hence avoid the modernity question in this paper. Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-writing in a Colonial Society*, Delhi: OUP, 2006.

5 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Thomas, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985.

6 Many in colonial India felt that they would be granted the citizenship of the British empire. They thought of political belonging outside the territorial framework of the nation-state. The British denied this right on the ground that only nations can grant citizenship. Sukanya

and territorial proprietorship, the question of time gets subsumed if not entirely lost. And this is why temporality (and death) returns to haunt modernism, both philosophically (Bergson, Benjamin, Heidegger) and poetically (Virginia Woolf, Maurice Blanchot, Hugo Ball), as its 'political unconscious'.⁷

In this essay therefore I want to return time to political thought while opening up the very concept of time to indeterminacy. I also want to mobilise non-European and non-modern traditions of thought and practice in order to argue that for the longest time in history, political regimes ruled (and subjects rebelled) in the name of temporal power, precisely because territoriality was perceived as both contingent and common, something that historians and ethnographers have noted repeatedly with respect to non-modern polities across the world.⁸ But then, I also argue that bringing the question of time centerstage destabilises our sense of the political, because it disrupts modern-day divisions between politics and religion, action and life, private and public.

Calendars and Chronology

The most obvious place to start is from the fact that rulers – from Julius Caesar in first century BCE Greece to Khubilai Khan in thirteenth century China to the Jacobin Council in late eighteenth century France – pitch new political regimes in terms of new calendars and chronologies. The political scientist Nomi Claire Lazar sees this practice – of resetting calendars and chronologies, adopting new time-measurement technologies such as sun dials and water-clocks and inventing new periodisation systems such as classical Mayan 'baktun' and modern historical 'periods' – as central to the exercise of political power across cultures and centuries. She calls this a 'temporal-rhetorical strategy' by which political power achieves 'legitimation' through the creation of a shared sensibility of 'the times', within which both political consensus and political opposition play out.⁹ I agree with Lazar's overall point regarding the political salience of calendars, chronologies and periodisation systems. But I differ with her seamless account of politics of time across cultures and histories just as I differ with what seems to be an overly

instrumentalist reading of politics of time as a purely strategic mechanism.

Let me restate here a fact that was well known in earlier times but gets overlooked today – namely, that chronology and temporality are not one and the same thing. Chronology is simply an imagination of succession in time, while time is the name for human experiences of change, and therefore subject to ontological debate regarding the materiality of the self, the other, the world and indeed the cosmos. The political story of chronology is relatively simple. A new political regime sets up a new calendar, with a new inaugural year and new memorial occasions, in order to create a lasting (dynastic, regnal or community) legacy. The same is true for new religions like Christianity and Islam, organised around the birth of Christ in case of the Gregorian calendar and the migration of prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in case of the Hijra calendar. Furthermore, we know that calendars and chronologies are also not just symbolic entities. They are also governmental mechanisms. E. P. Thompson famously showed how clock time, an early modern mechanism for the regulation of factory labor, was a precondition to the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe and Frederick Cooper showed how plantation slavery preconditioned the colonising of time in Africa.¹⁰ Kevin Birth argued how machines for marking and measuring time determined the very cognition of temporality, which is why temporal diversity can never be reduced to any simple notion of 'cultures' of time – for example, Indian temporality, Arabic temporality and so on.¹¹ All this however is not a specifically modern phenomenon. In early Islam, the elaborate liturgical division of the day inspired the development of a highly sophisticated science of time keeping (*ilm al miqat*). Islamic empires oversaw the production of globally consulted astronomical treatises (*zij*) and the setting up of the offices of the *muwaqqit* and *munajjim*, time-experts attached to both the mosque and the state, who supervised multiple regulatory tasks like the setting up a ceremonial calendar for popular participation, deciding auspicious moments for undertaking critical political tasks such as war, calculating cycles of revenue collection, keeping records and chronicles of imperial orders and so on.¹²

The crucial point to note however is not that political regimes regulate society via control of calendars, chronologies, time-machines and periodisation systems, in itself an unremarkable fact, but that in non-modern times, states and peoples necessarily functioned with multiple calendars and chronologies. Stephen Blake's comparative study of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires shows how both king and people operated with more than one

Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late Victorian Empire*. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2010; Mrinalini Sinha, 'The Strange Death of an Imperial Ideal: The Case of "Civis Britannicus"', in *Handbook of Modernity in South Asia: Modern Makeovers*, eds. Saurabh Dube and Ishita Banerjee, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, 29–42.

7 Tim Armstrong, 'Modernist Temporality: The Science and Philosophy and Aesthetics of Temporality from 1880', *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. V. Sherry, Cambridge: CUP, 2017, 31–46; J. Baetens et al. eds., *Time and Temporality in Literary Modernism (1900–1950)*, Leuven: Peeters, 2016.

8 The geographer Monica L. Smith, in a comparative analysis of Inca, Mauryan and Sassanian polities, argues that ancient states are better understood through network models rather than bounded-territory models, which enable us to depict competition within and among polities as they grow and shrink. "Networks, Territories and the Cartography of Ancient States", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95(2), 2008, 832–849.

9 Nomi Claire Lazar, *Out of Joint: Power, Crisis, and the Rhetoric of Time*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

10 For an updated account and critique of Thompson's thesis, see P. Glennie and N. Thrift, 'Reworking E. P. Thompson's "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism"', *Time & Society* 5(3), 1996, 275–299; Frederick Cooper, "Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa", in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas Dirks, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, 209–246.

11 Kevin K. Birth, *Objects of Time: How Things Shape Temporality*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

12 Stephen P. Blake, *Time in Early Modern Islam: Calendar, Ceremony, and Chronology in the Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman Empires*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

calendar and chronology, depending on the nature of activities undertaken. The Safavid empire, which boasted of the three most sophisticated astronomical observatories of the time at Isfahan, Maragah and Samarqand, worked with the Yazdegard, Jalali and Turkish Twelve Year Animal calendars along with the Islamic Hijra. The Mughals, alongside the Hijra, introduced the Fasli calendar for purpose of marking agrarian production cycles. Akbar introduced the *Tarikh Illahi* or the 'divine chronology', in the teeth of opposition by the ulama, in order to mark his new theologico-political dispensation of *Sul hi Kul* (universal accord), while continuing with the local Vikram and Saka calendars to mark both popular and imperial festivities, including his controversial 'sun worship' rituals. The work of time-experts in these non-modern contexts was precisely that of translation across multiple chronologies, not dissimilar to the work of *dubashs* or bilingualists who interpreted across multiple languages. Evidently, it was commonsense that different peoples and different activities of life operated on different temporal registers and with different temporal rhythms, just as they operated routinely with different languages. In fact, it will probably be more correct to say that in precolonial times, multiple chronologies, like multiple languages, existed in a semantic continuum rather than any neatly demarcated relationship of 'difference'.

This changed fundamentally in modernity. The first colonial comparative science of the late eighteenth century, even before the rise of comparative linguistics and comparative law, was in fact comparative chronology.¹³ Calendars of the world were now cross-referenced – by those like William Jones, the 'father of Orientalism' – with Biblical chronology, and Biblical events such as the Flood and eventually the birth of Christ came to be universal time-markers. In the process, Indic temporal sensibilities – such as of *yugas* or epochs of declining virtue and *puranas* or narratives of old times that placed mythical events in line with political chronologies – were dismissed as fantastic and fictional. Indic time came to be classified as cyclical by those like Mircea Eliade, the well-known philosopher of religion, in opposition to the linear salvational time of Christianity,¹⁴ even though a theory of *yugas* was no more a theory of time than is the imagination of capitalist cycles of boom and slump today. Colonial officials across the subcontinent followed the policy of matching local calendars to the Gregorian calendar to achieve absolute commensurability – even if, by their own admission, at the cost of some accuracy – so as to create an inflexible revenue-collection cycle. And colonial offices and factories imposed, in the teeth of some opposition and much confusion, a new regime of work, leisure and holiday, in terms of this newly 'secularised' Christian calendar, in an act of temporal unification and homogenisation of the world.

This had two clear implications. One, there now emerged a new temporally-inflected division between politics and

religion, between public life and inner life, because it was assumed that henceforth the colonised would conduct their traditional spiritual, ritual and cultural activities in terms of indigenous calendars and almanacs while conforming, across the whole wide world, to the Gregorian calendar for activities of politics and work. And two, with the rise of a single universal chronology, chronology now came to be identified with time itself in everyday commonsense, creating a permanent category confusion as it were for us moderns.

Crises and Transitions

The story of time as political category, as distinct from chronology as political technology, is more difficult to think through. One way of approaching this question is to study imaginations of political transition and crisis, which, it seems to me, make the intractability of time subject to articulation. I attempt here a quick detour through a set of mythologies around ideas of transition, despite the complicated orientalist, ethnographic and Freudian antecedents that render this task somewhat risky. I distinguish mythologies of time, albeit somewhat artificially, from philosophies of time, which I discuss in the next section.

In the earliest extant oral traditions of South Asia, time appears as an inexorable agent of death, destruction and transformation. While the Rig Veda is preoccupied with death and decay, with existential time as it were, the later Atharva Veda elevates time to a superior deity. In the Brahmanas, time becomes a subject of what we may call public action, being that which must be 'obtained' as resource through ritual sacrifice, mediated by Brahmins, so that the sacrificial agent achieves immortality like the gods. Incidentally, in this tradition, all gods were not immortal, gods and ancestors could die a second death in *swarga* (heaven), re-death being an earlier concept than rebirth here. In fact, the distinction between gods and humans was based on their differential relationship with death.¹⁶ By the time of the epic Mahabharata, *kalavada* or the doctrine of time as the supreme driving force of the world came to be firmly established.¹⁷

From the Mahabharata onwards, we begin to see the gradual development of an epochal theory in South Asia. Evidently, not only did time need to be predicted, made interpretable by experts like astronomers, astrologers and Brahmins, and if possible controlled through ritual action, historical time also needed a structure of rhythms and cycles, by way of what we call periodisation today, in order to render change in the very long term thinkable. *Itihasapurana* – a genre that stood for both myth and history be-

¹⁶ Wendy Doniger, 'You Can't Get from Here to There: Logical Paradox of Ancient Indian Creation Myths', in Mark J. Gellerand, M. Schipper eds. *Imagining Creation*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, 87–102, 100–101.

¹⁷ Luis González Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas: India's Great Epic Poem and the Hindu System of World Ages*, DC: University of Michigan, 2002, 20. The periodisation of early Indian texts is a hugely controversial matter. Roughly, the Vedas are placed between 1500 and 500 BCE, with the Rig Veda being the earliest. The Brahmanas, again roughly between 900 to 500 BCE, were commentaries on the Vedic hymns layered into the Vedas (there are supposed to be 19 Brahmanas). The Mahabharata was composed and recomposed through centuries, probably between fourth century BCE and fifth century CE.

¹³ Thomas R. Trautmann, *The Clash of Chronologies: Ancient India in the Modern World*, Delhi: Yoda Press, 2009.

¹⁴ *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (1949), Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971.

¹⁵ Banerjee, *Politics of Time*, chapter I.

cause it told stories of the past through prophecies and/or flashbacks, that is, in the form of the future perfect – therefore came to develop a *yuga* theory.¹⁸ The Purana was a genre meant for popular edification, because there were no restrictions of access to *itihasa*-purana, unlike the Vedas, which were denied to women and Shudras (low castes). Accordingly, when new gods, new kings or new *jatis* (castes) came into reckoning or when Brahmanism struggled to spread to *vratyaor* 'outside' regions, such as to the eastern regions of Bengal, Orissa or Assam, new Puranas came to be composed. In other words, political transition required reframing the structure and narrative of earlier myths, the pitching of new regimes as always already foretold, and the incorporation of local and popular customs (*deshachar*, *lokachar*) and of subaltern deities into the Brahmanical episteme.¹⁹ This is a very different logic of managing transition, one may say, from that of claiming utter novelty and restarting history from year zero.

The *yuga* theory posited that human society went through four *yugas* of declining virtue – Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali – in an unceasing process of rise and fall and rise again. The theory changed over time in multiple ways, acquiring large cosmic scales from earlier being shorter, historically imaginable cycles.²⁰ Initially, the *yuga* names did not denote temporal epochs but 'throws of the dice', Kali being the losing hand in the game. Kali also denoted the state of discord that obtained under the rule of a corrupt or inept king.²¹ The dice game was in fact crucial to the Mahabharata plot – where kingship literally gets gambled away at the throw of a dice. The dice-analogy was obviously a gesture towards the instability of political fortune in the face of time.

For our purposes, three aspects of the *yuga* theory are important. One, critical to this theory were conceptions of the end of an epoch (*yuganta*) and epochal 'joining' (*yuga-sandhi*), imagined as troubled times, with violent political struggles, natural calamities and even the descent of gods to earth in human form. Two, human history as we know it was seen to unfold largely in the last epoch of Kali, and in the immediate transition period before it. Perhaps this was because unlike in the more virtuous epochs when humans unquestioningly followed *dharma* or timeless codes of social conduct, Kali offered more opportunities for human decision and volition because norms were in jeopardy and failed to guide human action. And three, while principles of proper conduct became compromised and the social order inverted in Kali, with low castes, women

and *nastikas* (i.e. nay-sayers like Buddhists, Jains and Ajivikas who denied the timelessness and authorlessness of the Vedas and refused Brahmanical sacrifices) now coming on top, Kali was also seen as a time when unprecedented and novel things became possible. Kali was thus a difficult time but also a time of great human potentiality. The ancient idiom of Kaliyuga – the final epoch marked by social and moral inversions – was widely invoked in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, often in cheap print publications and popular satirical plays, Kali being that which explained the pathologies of colonial modern life. Kali however appeared as an idiom of regret and lament as often as of novelty and promise – as that epochal imperative which enabled unprecedented practices in contravention of social norms, such as the remarriage of upper-caste widows or the crossing of the seas without loss of caste. Imaginations of women-on-top and lower-caste insurgency inspired heterodox spiritual movements amongst subaltern peoples at this time.²² When the Santals, an indigenous people in eastern India, rebelled in 1855 against the colonial state and Bengali moneylenders, they insisted that their 'time had come'!²³ And Bhima Bhoi (1850–95), a Khond tribal who became a devotee of the heterodox Vaishnava saint Mahima Gosain, pitched his own movement as a battle between the personified time of Kali and the temporal incarnation of Kalki avatar.²⁴

We know that the great epic Mahabharata, where we find seeds of what later became a full-fledged *yuga* theory, was a tale of a 'world war' between two kin dynasties leading to the destruction of the political class as a whole. The epic housed the Bhagavad Gita, wherein the god Krishna (who also appears as time itself) advises the warrior Arjuna on 'what is to be done' at a moment of crisis of *dharma*, when normative conduct becomes impossible. The epic also housed long discussions on *rajadharma* or principles of righteous rule. Most importantly, the epic contained extended sections on *apaddharma* or *dharma* in times of exception and emergency, epitomised by the great Brahmin sage Visvamitra stealing dog-meat from an untouchable butcher, because the fear of caste pollution came to be suspended in times of crisis such as famine and anarchy!²⁵

As a meditation on time, death and crisis, the Mahabharata acquired the status of political text par excellence in India. Akbar's grand vizier and author of multiple works including *Akbarnama*, *Ain-i-Akbari* and a Persian translation of the Bible, Abu al-Fazl regarded the Mahabharata and the *Harivamsa*, the puranic biography of Krishna, as histories

18 Romila Thapar, *Time as Metaphor of History: Early India*, Delhi: OUP, 1996; D. V. Rao, 'The Mahabharata Contretemps: Temporality, Finitude and the Modes of Being in the *Itihasa*', in Rao, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures, vol. 6, Springer: New Delhi, 2014, 195-231; Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

19 Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process*.

20 Ludo Rocher, 'Concepts of Time in Classical India', in Ralph M. Rosen ed., *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World*. Philadelphia: UPenn Museum of Archaeology, 2004, 91–110.

21 Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 53.

22 Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', *Subaltern Studies*, VI, Delhi: OUP, 1–53; 'Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial Bengal', in *Writing Social History*, Delhi: OUP, 1998, 186–215.

23 Banerjee *Politics of Time*, chapter III.

24 Ishita Banerjee-Dube, 'In Other Times: Apocalypse, Temporality, Spatiality in Eastern India', in *Space Time of the Imperial*, eds. Holt Meyer, Susanne Rau and Katharian Waldner, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016, 71–92.

25 Adam Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India: The Āpaddharmaparvan of the Mahābhārata*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

with political lessons. Akbar oversaw the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata* as *Razmnamah* or *The Book of War*. Akbar's scribe, Tahir Muhammad Sabzawari, made abridged prose translations in 1602–3 of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Harivamsa* and wrote a Persian world history called *Rawzat al-tahirin* or *The Garden of the Pure*, with a separate section on Sanskrit epics. Firishta (d. ca. 1633) prefaced his famous history of Indo-Muslim dynasties interweaving the *Mahabharata* with the heroic cycles of the Persian *Book of Kings*. There was even a rumour, noted by the European traveller Oranus, that Akbar was the tenth incarnation of Vishnu or Krishna!²⁶

Modern Indian intellectuals – from the philosopher of non-violence Mahatma Gandhi to the theorist of revolutionary action Aurobindo Ghosh – too returned to the *Mahabharata* in colonial times in order to fashion a contemporary form of political insurgency. The destructive events of the *Mahabharata* were conventionally held to have happened in the transition moment between the last two epochs, Dvapara and Kali, though scholars point out that the *yuga* theory was still incipient at the time and was probably retrospectively read back into the epic by latter-day commentators. In fact, it was this aspect of the *Mahabharata* – its putative character as a text of transition – that fired the imagination of modern as much as precolonial commentators. The sociologist and feminist from Maharashtra Iravati Karve (1905–1970) studied the *Mahabharata* in order to understand 20th century politics. Unsurprisingly, she named her study *Yuganta: End of an Epoch* (1969). Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950), reading the *Gita* as a source-text for anti-colonial politics, insisted that the *Gita* was neither abstract political philosophy nor historical source-text nor moral allegory (as Gandhi argued), but an inseparable part of the epic narrative, involving great violence and death. It was not a stand-alone abstract text as others, including German philosophers, believed.²⁷ The battle of the *Mahabharata* was not a battle between righteous and unrighteous forces,²⁸ Aurobindo said, for war is precisely when normative judgment becomes impossible. It stood for precisely such a moment of epochal crisis (as presumably was the colonial moment) when mortal humans came face to face with the crushing work of time and ethical choices became impossible to make.

We must note here certain distinctions between epic and modern sensibilities transition. For one, the former seems to deny any categorical distinction between exception and everyday, emergency and normalcy. In Aurobindo's reading for example, violence in the *Mahabharata* is not a moment of exception but an enduring metaphor of life, only more acutely grasped in times of crisis. Life is that 'in which by every step forward, whether we will it or not,

something is crushed and broken, in which every breath of life is a breath too of death'.²⁹ Aurobindo was in fact faithfully following the ancient epic's narrative intent, which was to show how all that rises must fall, all that lives must die (an understanding of time different from but coeval with the modern understanding of time as ceaseless progress and accretion of value). This brings me to the second important moment of distinction. While the modern sensibility partakes in a public/private division, the epic sensibility seems to posit a continuity between personal, existential time and the political time of rise and decline. And three, given this continuity, the ultimate political agency in the epic appears as Time itself and not the political subject, who is an ephemeral, contingent, compromised and uncertain body, forced to engage the 'law of Life by Death.'

The basic question at stake in the *Mahabharata*, elaborated with the greatest intensity in the *rajadharma* sections, was as follows. Political power and political competence necessarily involved violence, even fratricidal violence, and death. Was politics by definition then not a morally compromised principle? Was renunciation not a superior form of life to kingship? Note that kingship here, like renunciation, is posited as a form of life. To reiterate then, in mythologies of time, there appears no division between everyday and intimate experience of time and the time of politics and public action.³⁰ Death, decay and destruction are simultaneously individual, political and cosmic phenomena. It is for that reason that in early Indic traditions, as perhaps elsewhere too, the imagination of time as a narrative of rise and fall, birth and death, is subject simultaneously to political and spiritual reflections. This is in turn why the king and the renouncer are always already thought together as two sides of the same coin – twinned life-forms marked by mastery of the world and mastery of the mortal self respectively.

It is not accidental then that the Buddha was born into a warrior lineage. He chose renunciation over kingship after debating with others in the republican council the merits and demerits of war – a moment which B. R. Ambedkar would dwell upon at length in the 1950s.³¹ The founding legend of Buddhism was that prince Siddhartha, before he became the Buddha, encountered amongst his subjects four canonical moments of the work of time – destitution, disease, age and death – which made him, instead of king, a *parivrajaka* or spiritual wanderer in search for a philosophy of life.³² Scholars have argued that the *Mahabharata*

²⁶ Carl Ernst, 'Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages', *Iranian Studies*, 36(2), June 2003, 173–195.

²⁷ First published in two series in *Arya* between August 1916 and July 1920. Reprinted as *Essays on the Gita*, Pondicherry, Aurobindo Ashram, 8th ed., 1970, 32–33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 367.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 372, 40.

³⁰ Emily T. Hudson in fact reads the *Mahabharata* as a meditation on human suffering in the world. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*, NY: OUP, 2013.

³¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and his Dhamma*, in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 11, ed. Vasant Moon, Delhi: Ambedkar Foundation Reprint, 2014, 24–26.

³² In the early Pali sources, the account of the four sights is only described with respect to a previous legendary Buddha Vipassī (*Mahāpadāna Sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, 14). In the later works *Nidānakaṭṭha*, *Buddhavamsa* and the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, the account was retrospectively applied to the historical figure of Siddhārtha Gautama. Robert E. Buswell ed., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 1, Macmillan Reference USA, 2004, 85.

was itself a response to this ontological question raised by Buddhism and other ascetic traditions of the time. Note that this was not a question of religion as such but of time itself as constitutive of human creaturely condition. Stuart H. Blackburn, in his ethnographic study of folk forms of worship, argues that death is indeed the central concern around which philosophical and popular Hinduism overlap.³³ Because death is commonly understood as the single most polluting and dangerous moment in the caste paradigm, it is life versus death rather than purity versus pollution which is perhaps a more determining binary in this tradition.³⁴ Popular forms of hero worship – such as in the traditions of the *bhomiya* in Rajasthan and the *khambha* in Gujarat, the *paddana* in southwest Karnataka, the *teyyam* in northern Kerala, and the *vil pattu* (bow song) in southern Tamil Nadu – are about the veneration of humans who become gods, not because of their innate goodness but because they die undeserved and most crucially, violent deaths. These deaths are often either in battle or in love, once again bringing us to the point where deeply intimate experience of time intersects with the time of public and political action, mediated by moments of violent struggle and suffering. As Blackburn states, this godly power comes from the hero's (partial) triumph over death, the intensity of the killing itself and deification as a way of making the power over death imaginable and accessible to the living.³⁵ Untimely and violent death, in other words, effectively cuts through the karmic cycle of determined rebirth and redeath, bringing forth a different temporality of liminal being in which humans become powerful gods, ruling the world by returning to possess the living. Udaya Kumar's reading of the Dalit (ex-untouchable) writer C. Ayappan's (1949–2011) short stories foregrounds precisely this 'autospectrographic' (as opposed to autobiographic) speech of Dalit subjects who overcome their marginality and acquire social efficacy by authoring their own, often violent deaths. This is a moment that has a tragic and strange echo in the recent phenomenon of the suicide of the Dalit student Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad University!

The intimate question of death, needless to say, had fundamental implications for politics and statecraft. As Johannes Bronkhorst shows, Buddhists, Jains and Ajivikas of eastern India imagined humans (and sometimes other creatures) as always already caught up in an unending cycle of life and death, pulled forward by a causal chain of action and consequence, consequence becoming cause for further action and so on *ad infinitum*. A theory of re-

nunciation (of social and household life) emerged out of this concern, which became in time a serious challenge to theories of Brahmanical power and ritual sacrifice – leading to many debates, both philosophical and juridical, about the most autonomous form of life in the world.³⁶ Anne Blackburn shows that the imagination of the Buddha's many lives – as he gets reborn as Boddhisattva into different social positions, from untouchable to king, and indeed into different species (a process essential to the Buddha's final achievement of universal compassion) – informed Buddhist kingships in south east Asia, which marked their respective political moments in terms of the Buddha's life cycles.³⁷ The theory of karmic causality, in its diverse and contentious forms, as well as the more subaltern tradition of dead heroes turning into gods, cutting through the karmic cycle, acquired as long a life in the subcontinent as did the yuga theory. Centuries later in India, the idea of nishkama karma or desireless action – a form of causally-undetermined action undertaken without either fear or desire for consequence and thematised most famously in the Gita – became a catchword in anti-colonial politics and subject to debate, amongst others, between Gandhi and Ambedkar. And as Kalpana Ram shows in her ethnography of spirit possession amongst Dalit women of Tamil Nadu, even today untimely/violent deaths of village women turn them into goddesses, who then hold court, through living mediums, bringing into play idioms of pre-colonial kingship, speaking classical oratorical Tamil and acquiring the body language of a king facing her (his?) petitioning subjects.³⁸

The other notable distinction between non-modern and modern sensibilities of transition is that in the former political matters and cosmic events, such as political tyranny and natural calamity, are often seen as connected if not coeval phenomena. Recall here Gandhi's statement about the 1934 earthquake in Bihar as divine punishment for untouchability, a statement that led to his well-known ontological disputation with Tagore!³⁹ The connection between cosmic time, political power and the experience of temporal transition is best discussed in reference to Mughal kingship in south Asia. As A. Afzar Moin shows in his fascinating book, Mughal kingship in fifteenth and sixteenth century India, like Timurid and Safavid kingships in Central Asia and Iran, was a form of millennial kingship. Millennial kingship, often posited in defiance of doctrinal and juridical forms of Islam, drew upon popular devotional forms, such as of Sufi sainthood and discipleship (*muridi*), as well as upon widely shared social and cultural sensibilities of time, cutting across multiple communal constituencies – Muslims, Christians, Jews, Mongols, Hindus, Turks

33 Stuart H. Blackburn, 'Death and Deification: Folk Cults in Hinduism', *History of Religions*, 24(3), February 1985, 255–274.

34 J. Bruce Long, 'Death as a Necessity and a Gift in Hindu Mythology', David R. Kinsley, "'The Death That Conquers Death': Dying to the World in Medieval Hinduism', and David M. Knipe, 'Sapindikarana: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven', in *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religions*, eds. Frank E. Reynolds and Earle H. Waugh, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976, 73–96, 97–110, 111–124; Jonathan Parry, 'Sacrificial Death and the Necrophagous Ascetic', in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 74–110.

35 Blackburn, 'Death and Deification', 260, 270.

36 Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

37 Anne Blackburn, 'Buddhist Technologies of Statecraft and Millennial Moments', *History and Theory* 56(1), March 2017, 71–79.

38 Kalpana Ram, *Fertile Disorders: Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013.

39 Makarand R. Paranjape, "'Natural Supernaturalism?'" The Tagore–Gandhi Debate on the Bihar Earthquake', *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 4(2), July 2011, 176–204.

and others.⁴⁰ Historians have spoken of the 16th century as a global millennial conjuncture, involving competing ideologies of universal empire – legacies of Chingis Khan and Timur, the Counter-Reformation drives to proselytise overseas, as well as the so-called Voyages of Discovery by Spaniards and Portuguese.⁴¹ In this paradigm, kings behaved as saints and saints behaved as kings, following the image of the perfect individual (*insan-ikamil*) who ruled from the location of the *axis mundi* (*qutb*). While the idea of the end of the millennium was crucial to this paradigm, the logic was not always apocalyptic. Rather the logic was more obviously political – that is, of re-ordering of the known world, through the intercession of a *mujaddid* ('Renewer'). The celebrated religious reformer of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, who both rivalled and aligned with Mughal kings, thus assumed the title of the 'Renewer of the Second Millennium'. The idea of the *mujaddid* worked alongside the other idea with deep roots in Islamic history, the notion of the Imam Mahdi, the Concealed or Expected One, who would emerge to reform the world in a radical fashion.

Central to this temporal principle was the notion that a saviour was expected to appear at the end of a thousand-year cycle or the beginning of another, at *yugasandhi* or epochal joining. This new cycle of time could even be the last one before the end of the world, which gave the millennial scheme an eschatological aspect. Even though the thousand-year era was of prime importance in this tradition, its beginning and end were subject to political and metaphysical contention. Moreover, fractions of this all-important 'thousand' also had theologico-political salience, such that the millennium could be put into practice with differing degrees of temporal intensity at different moments. The messiah could appear imminently or in the distant future; he could be a past figure or manifest in the present and so on. Millenarianism was thus that which informed both insurgent action against the established order of things and political power itself. Not surprisingly, the supreme ideal of the king/saint in this tradition was the 'lord of conjunction of stars and planets' (*sahib qiran*), who was responsible for maintaining the rhythm and balance of the cosmos.

Hence, as Moin further shows, the significance of divinatory knowledge forms in early modern politics of time – scriptural interpretation, apocalyptic lore, dream visions, numerology and astrological predictions (analogous to modern theories of statistical probability and evaluation/insurance of the future). In these early modern epistemologies, the future was as important as the past, divination as important as genealogy, and astrology as valuable as history. Indeed, history and astrology, memory and foretelling, were adjacent disciplines, with astrologers working as annalists and historians as oracles. In fact, astrology was as political a science as history, with political actors using astrology to ascertain the health and dura-

bility of the ruling regime, just as in ordinary households, astrological almanacs determined diverse quotidian life activities, from harvest to worship to weddings to the all important occasion of 'meeting the king'. Not incidentally, a Mughal miniature painting, showcased by Moin in his book, shows the Mughal emperor Jahangir enthroned on a gigantic hourglass, his face turned towards a Sufi and away from king James I of England and the Ottoman sultan, who are shown as standing next to him, presumably waiting for an audience while the emperor remains engaged in spiritual discourses under the aegis of time!⁴² Even as late as during the anti-British uprising of 1857, rebel pamphlets and letters cited natural signs, planetary omens, and prophecies about the volatility of the times. These blamed the East India Company not so much of illegally usurping political power as of contaminating, by the logic of commerce and profiteering, the principle of just and sacred rule, in the process perverting the temporal order and upsetting cosmological balance.⁴³

Whether we talk of *kalavadaor* millenarianism, *yuga* theory or *karma* theory, what we have here is the human attempt at overcoming the vicissitudes of time through the creation of a homology between cosmic phenomena, political fortune and personal experiences of mortality. Hence the importance of myth. Here I understand myth as a particular narrative form with two basic characteristics. One, myth brings together within the same 'configuration', stars and planets, gods and ancestors, humans and animals, the disorienting space of forests and deserts and the strategic space of courts and cities – thus upping individual human drama to cosmic (today we shall say 'planetary') scale, but with the political working as a necessary mediating moment.⁴⁴ And two, myth plays with time⁴⁵ – not just by referring to time directly (time is in fact a protagonist in the Mahabharata), but also by playing with the narrative mode (the Mahabharata is a series of flashbacks, wherein each time of telling embedded in yet another time of telling) intended to produce the necessary interface across different registers of time, the cosmic, political and personal.⁴⁶

Creation, Causality and Action

Aside of myths, the radical unthinkability of time as a concept has also inspired multiple philosophical traditions across the world. St Augustine's 'confession', that time is that which one knows but cannot say, remains the departure point of modern European philosophy, from theorists

40 A. Afzar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Saint-hood in Islam*, NY: Columbia UP, 2012.

41 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Turning the stones over: Sixteenth-century millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 40(2), 2003, 129–161.

42 *Ibid.*, 316.

43 *Ibid.*, 324.

44 Louis O. Mink, Louis, 'History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension', *New Literary History* 1(3), 1970, 541–558, 549.

45 See also Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans., ed., and intro. Peter Skafish, Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014.

46 I differ with Ricoeur (and Kermode) on the idea that ending/closure is the overdetermining factor of all narrative forms. I believe that myth as a narrative form is open to re-enactments in changing presents and is thereby not subject to ending in the way that a novel is. Paul Ricoeur, 'The Human Experience of Time and Narrative', *Research in Phenomenology*, 9 (1979), 17–34, 28.

of Reason like Kant to phenomenologists like Husserl to philosophers of history like Hegel to hermeneuts of narrative time like Ricoeur.⁴⁷ The radical unthinkability of time is also constitutive of many other intellectual traditions. The Nyaya school of realism in India, for example, derives the principle that time is 'real' from the indisputable fact that time is 'known' (irrespective of whether or not it is articulated), while the Sankhya ontological system posits time as identical to the transformation of matter while positing 'consciousness', that which 'knows' time, as an a-temporal entity. (Consciousness here is not to be confused with 'mind', as in the mind/body duality, because the mind in Sankhya is, very much like the body, part of ever-changing matter.) Buddhists and Jains argue, though in different ways, that time is a series of discrete moments, and therefore reality a ceaseless flux, while grammarians argue that time is no more than a concept inherent in language and predicated upon the tense structure of human expression and action.⁴⁸

Arabic philosophies of time are equally diverse. The Qur'an states that the alternation of day and night is one of the greatest signs of God, and both scholastic and Sufi traditions identify God with Time (*Dahr*). One critical issue in Islamic philosophy has been the problematic of infinite regress, and the question of whether it is at all possible to think about the beginning or end of time, alongside the beginning/end of the universe, given that notions of origin and end presuppose yet another prior level of time.⁴⁹ On another register atomism has been intensely debated, especially by the Ash'arites, via discussions of Aristotle, Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists,⁵⁰ leading to a conception of the instant as an absolute and self-standing moment, such that movement between moments is imagined as leaps (*tafri*) rather than any form of continuity or succession. In Sufi thought, the distinctions between time, eternity and timelessness (which however is not a-temporality) were intensely debated. Ibn 'Arabi distinguished two levels of time: that of God, *dahr*, and that of human beings, *waqt*, both inconsistent with our ordinary experience of time, because *dahr* stretches out to eternity while *waqt* shrinks to a mere instant without duration. Caught between these two modes, humans imagine *zaman* or *chronos* after two principal models. In the cosmological model, time is founded on the sequence of night and day, activity and passivity. In the model of relativity, however, God and the world are seen as the two terms of a quasi-temporal relation between the Creator and Creation. Time viewed from the side of God is real but does not allow phenomenological grasp. Time viewed from the side of humans, even if ex-

perienced, is unreal and has no existence. Whether conceived from the human or the divine side, time is therefore imaginable only as a relation. (To remember Levinas here, time is that which the self experiences in its relationship with the Other, the Other being the one who remains when the mortal self ceases to be!⁵¹) In other words, although a product of our imagination, time is, in each moment, the virtual and actual object of our interaction with both eternity and mortality.⁵²

The point of this hasty account of diverse philosophies of time is to quickly set aside the conventional way in which philosophies of time have been mobilised in modern political thought – viz., in terms of a universal binary between cyclical and linear, predestinarian and progressive, pagan and Christian, non-modern and modern. It is obvious that even in Indic philosophies, time is thought in many incommensurable ways, and rarely ever as cyclical. I therefore argue that in the context of south Asia, marked by a cross-fertilisation of Indic and Islamic traditions, philosophies of time acquire political salience in terms of a set of very different questions. To roughly summarise an extraordinarily complex and differentiated field of thought, these questions are that of causality, creativity and action. These questions overlap and the division I make is only analytical.

In the *darshan* traditions of philosophy in early India, the concept of time often appears embedded in the problem of causality. The debates between the Nyaya, Sankhya, Vaisashika, Yoga and Vedanta schools were around the cause-effect relationship – viz. about whether an effect was conceptually reducible to its cause or was it simply a mutation or a new 'form' of the cause or was it an entirely new entity distinct from and beyond determination by the cause. The nature of time as imagined by these different schools depended on their respective imaginations of causality and the resulting imaginations of the 'real', including the matter of whether time itself was real or not. As already mentioned, some thinkers listed time as one amongst the 'reals' that constituted the world, based on the fact that time had unmistakable causal efficacy, while many others believed that time was an imaginary construct derivative of experiences of change and did not exist autonomously as a 'real'.

Late nineteenth century onwards, a number of colonial intellectuals mobilised various aspects of this debate on time and causality in their political thinking. Aurobindo and some of his contemporaries imagined the revolutionary political subject, counter-intuitively, on the basis of the causal inefficacy of embodied human agents. The basic idea was that human action and intention were circumscribed by countless other external factors, such as the action and intention of other agents, the release of unintended and unknown consequences and the ever-present possibility of interruption and obstruction by counter-

47 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London & NY: Verso, 1995, 45–49.

48 Anindita Niyogi Balslev, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999; Anindita Niyogi Balslev & Jitendra Mohanty, *Religion and Time*, Leiden: Brill, 1993.

49 Sajjad H. Rizvi, 'MīrDāmād in India: Islamic Philosophical Traditions and the Problem of Creation', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131(1), January–March 2011, 9–23.

50 Richard T. W. Arthur, 'Time Atomism and the Ash'arite Origins of Cartesian Occasionalism', in *Asia, Europe and the Emergence of Modern Science*, ed. Arun Bala, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 73–92.

51 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987. The difference is clear with Heidegger's conception of 'authentic time' as the absolutely solitary experience of the self's 'being towards death'. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962, 310.

52 Gerhard Böwering, 'The Concept of Time in Islam', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 141(1), March 1997, 55–66.

forces. It was therefore an error to think of political action in terms of an autonomous and agential ego. On the contrary, political action called for spiritual disciplines that helped cultivate a 'non-self' – an empty and hospitable subjectivity, amenable to the passage of time through it. For time, like god, was the only 'real', the only force with causal efficacy in this world. Changing the world was thus a matter of harnessing the force of time, which required the emancipation of the self from the prison of the present and an intensification (rather than a deferral) of the human experience of mortality and finitude.

At the other extreme, Ambedkar mobilised Buddhist philosophy in order to argue quite the opposite. Buddhist thinkers imagined time as a discrete series of instants. The implication, intensely debated in early India, was that the existent at any one moment was utterly incommensurable to existents at immediately prior and posterior moments. In other words, identity through time was a philosophical impossibility. This imagination of time lay at the basis of the existential principle of *dukkha* (Pali *dukkha*), the suffering and instability that inevitably marked human life in the world. It also lay at the basis of the anti-foundationalist philosophical doctrine of the void (*shunyabad*) and the epistemological doctrine of dependent origination (*pratyasamutpada*). The idea here is that no entity has a permanent essence that persists through time, because all that arises must necessarily cease and make way for a new arising. Ontologically, existence is therefore a void, so much so that there is not even a god or a deity or a soul that can be imagined as the foundation of being. Hence the epistemological principle of dependent origination that posits that entities exist only in their mutual interdependence and never autonomously as substance or essence. At the heart of this principle lay the notion of an infinite chain of cause and consequence, immanent causality being the force that drives the world from one moment to the next. Ambedkar mobilised the Buddhist notion of the void – which he translated as the constitutive impermanence and changeability of the world – to argue against caste identity given by birth. He also invoked dependent origination and its foundational principle of causal interdependence to propose a theology of mutual social responsibility and accountability – which he called Navayana or the 'new path' of Buddhism. Because there is no god and no transcendental self that is philosophically plausible, Ambedkar argued, all we are left with in this finite world is an ethics of responsibility, of owning up to the causal force of our everyday actions and their consequence for others.⁵³ Ambedkar's project of equality was thus no more and no less than a theology of everyday human life, without foundation in either god or nation, both of which partook in the kind of timeless presence/essence which Buddhist philosophy denied.

The other aspect of non-modern philosophies of time that became politically salient in modern south Asia consisted of theories of creativity, as opposed to causality, especially as thematised in Islamic traditions. Needless to say, the most interesting figure in this context is the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal. Iqbal's magnum opus *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), especially

the second and third lectures, 'The Philosophical Test of the Revelation of Religious Experience' and 'The Meaning of Prayer and the Conception of God', reflects most directly on the question of time, which Iqbal sees as a question deriving from the prior question of God.⁵⁴ Iqbal begins by saying that Time/God cannot be thought either causally or teleologically. The widely held imagination of God as the first cause, Iqbal argues, is philosophically untenable, not only because of the problem of infinite regress (can there logically be an uncaused cause?) but also because it is a category mistake to try to derive the infinite (God/Time) from a finite effect (the world at present). The imagination of God as the designer of the world is equally fallacious because it assigns him, instead of absolute creative freedom, a teleological orientation akin to that of a human mechanic, subject to a series of determined successions. It also posits a division between creator and creation, limiting the maker by his material.⁵⁵

If causality and teleology fail to capture the creative potential inherent in Time/God, this is because Time/God can never be grasped epistemologically. Modern theories of knowledge, Iqbal argued, posit a division between subject and object, knower and known, being and the world – a binary that prevents human comprehension of time because time is neither subject nor object in the conventional sense. Rather Time/God is an ineffable experience of wholeness that incorporates non-successional change within it. That is indeed the nature of creation and creativity. 'We possess no word to express the kind of knowledge which is also creative of its object' – Iqbal said, trying to get at the nature of time as that which is both productive of the world and the world itself.⁵⁶

Iqbal then goes on to reconstruct the long but failed history of human endeavours to grasp time, both as objective fact and as pure concept – from the ancient Greek moment of Zeno's paradox through the Ash'arite imagination of accidental combinations of time-atoms to Einstein's theory of relativity. Humans, Iqbal said, inevitably tried to grasp time in the image of space. Even the Ash'arites, who invented the concept of the point-instant in their revolt against Aristotelian and *Muta'zilit*e ideas of an eternally fixed universe, failed to realize, given the difficulty of thinking time epistemologically, that the point without magnitude was nothing other than the 'necessary mode of the manifestation' of the instant.⁵⁷ And Einstein, believing time to be the fourth dimension of the universe, regarded the future as indubitably given as the past: 'events do not happen in time, we just meet them!'⁵⁸ The reason for this time/space category confusion was modernity's insistence on scientific and secular knowledge at the cost of spiritual insight. Modernity valorised the 'efficient' self, to whom time appeared as a serialised extension of points

⁵⁴ I use here the 2012 Stanford University Press edition, annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh and introduced by Javed Majeed.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵³ Ambedkar, *Buddha and his Dhamma*.

in succession, over the intuitive and 'appreciative' self, to whom time manifested itself for what it was, viz. a simultaneous experience of change and unity.

Pure time, then, as revealed by a deeper analysis of our conscious experience, is not a string of separate, reversible instants; it is an organic whole in which the past is not left behind, but is moving along with, and operating in, the present. And the future is given to it not as lying before, yet to be traversed; it is given only in the sense that it is present in its nature as an open possibility. It is time regarded as an organic whole that the Qur'an describes as *Taqdir* or destiny – ...time regarded as prior to the disclosure of its possibilities. It is time freed from the net of causal sequence ...⁵⁹ [emphasis mine]

To understand time was to rethink the nature of matter, Iqbal argued. He approvingly quoted Whitehead's criticism of the scientific imagination of matter as inert, passive and inanimate.⁶⁰ Matter was a process, subject to constant transformations, a set of 'time-events' – as befitted God's creation. Iqbal disputed the theological division between God and his creation, which led to either Deism (an imagination of a one-time Creator who withdraws from the world, letting it function via eternally given 'natural laws') or Pantheism (which makes the Creator and his creation identical, disallowing by that logic the notion of a creative self). Instead, Iqbal posited creation as an eternally unfinished process, in which the past, present and future appeared contemporaneous. God, Iqbal said, was the quintessential creative self, who held time as an unceasing vibration within his own Being. Creation was God's activism: 'Nature is to the Divine Self as character is to the human self. In the picturesque phrase of the Qur'an it is the habit of Allah'.⁶¹ In other words, the universe was still in the process of becoming and the realm of human possibilities infinitely expanding. This infinity, unlike spatial or serial infinity, was not extensive but intensive, and was experienced by the self as its unlimited creative potential.⁶² 'Shut ye not then, the way to Action, alleging the 'exigencies of nature' – Iqbal exclaimed.⁶³ Here Iqbal was drawing upon early Islamic philosophy of *creatio continua* and creation as God's 'habit'.⁶⁴ Most traditional theological views hold that because God is timeless and immutable, there is only one divine creative act, which originates the whole of space-time from first to last. *Creatio continua* on the other hands imagines creation as taking place in many successive acts, partly in response to events in time. Thus, at any particular time God's creation has not been completed, and the future is partly open, even for God, which

59 Ibid., 39–40.

60 Ibid., 36, 56.

61 Ibid., 45.

62 Ibid., 52.

63 Iqbal 'Taslim-u-Riza', poem quoted by Alessandro Bausani in 'The Concept of Time in the Religious Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal', *Die Welt des Islams*, new series, 3(3-4), 1954, 158–186, 170. Also see Javed Majeed Muhammad Iqbal, *Islam, Aesthetics and Postcolonialism*, London, New York and Delhi: Routledge, 2008.

64 L. E. Goodman, "Time in Islam" *Asian Philosophy* 2(1), 1992, 3–19.

Iqbal saw as the source of a politically open future for human action.

Iqbal expressed two critical points of disagreement with Henri Bergson, despite his approval of Bergsonian duration. One, he argued that Bergson did not have a conception of the self (*khudi*), without which the nature of time as an unending creative process could never be fully grasped. And two and consequently, Bergson still retained, in spite of himself, a division between thought and will, consciousness and life, a division that falls through when one admits the self (both divine and human) as the primary locus of time. Iqbal's epoch-making *mathnawi* (Persian *masnavi*, poem in couplets), *Asrar-I-Kudi* (Secrets of the Self) published in 1915, which also had an important section called *Al-Waqtu Saifun* (Time is a Sword), led to bitter controversy, because of his valorisation of *khudi* and his implied criticism of the Sufi notion of *fana* or dissolution of the self in God.⁶⁵

In fact, Iqbal assigned a self to everything, distinguishing various forms of matter and species beings only in terms of 'degrees' of selfhood.

To exist in pure duration is to be a self, and to be a self is to be able to say "I am". ... It is the degree of the intuition of "I-amness" that determines the place of a thing in the scale of being.⁶⁶

He quoted the Persian poet Urfi in saying that all things created by God had memory and imagination, antecedents and potentialities. Nature itself was animate – every entity in nature was of the quality of a self or an ego, driven by intention and futurity, a neo-materialist statement if any! Iqbal quoted the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi-poet, Fakh al-Dīn Ibrāhīm 'Irāqī's *Flashes*, where Iraqi spoke of infinite varieties of time corresponding to infinite gradations of being between pure materiality to pure spirituality.⁶⁷

In his poems *Shikwa* (Complaint, 1909) and *Jawab-e Shikwa* (Reply to Complaint, 1913), Iqbal blames Allah for the downfall of Muslims in modern times. Allah is compelled to reply. Unsurprisingly, the poems outraged Muslim orthodoxy because of the incredible hubris of a poetic self-assuming the role of God's interlocutor. Iqbal's thinking of time as creative potential was thus based on a heightened notion of a poetic self as continuous with God's own creative self. In his 1932 Persian book of poetry, *Javednama* (Book of Eternity), *Zurban* or time addresses none other than the poet. Time promises that if the poet is able to envision divine time, not only will he see wonderful emergent things but he will also attain sultan or divine/political force. He can then wield time as a sword to cut asunder the veil of destiny, *dahr*, in absolute and uncompromising creative act.⁶⁸

Rabindranath Tagore, philosopher, spiritualist, and most famously a poet of nature, wrote a play called *Kaler Jatra*

65 Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, Lecture I, note 40, 162.

66 Ibid., 45.

67 Ibid., 60.

68 Quoted in 'The Concept of Time', 170.

(The Journey of Time), mobilising the metaphor from the Mahabharata of time as the rope that pulls the world forward. In this play, like in Iqbal's poems, it is the poet who boasts of an ultimate insight into time, who partakes in god's creativity and sets temporality to rhyme. In this text – otherwise peopled by sociological entities, priests, kings, soldiers, merchants, Shudras and women – the poet stands apart, by virtue of his ability to play with time, with a lightness of touch at once more nimble and more modest than the labours of those who claim to be historical subjects, seeking in vain to move the weight of sovereign temporality.⁶⁹ Tagore, as is well-known, was a relentless critic of historicism (and nationalism) and of the way in which historical chronology tamed the free play of temporality.⁷⁰ In his debate with Gandhi about the nature of political action, Tagore insisted that action should be modelled after, not the time of patient and repetitive labour as Gandhi believed, but the creative time of aesthetics,⁷¹ which captured the moment when cosmic temporality and infinity intersected with human experiences of mortality and finitude.⁷²

Unsurprisingly, Tagore was perhaps the only thinker of modern south Asia, who reflected on death as the central problematic of his times. Abu Sayeed Abu talks about Tagore's poetic journey, from youthful romanticism to mature non-dualistic spirituality to distressed concern with the work of time – which led him to reflect on the world wars, colonial violence, the rise and fall of civilizations, the birth and death of stars, the political cruelty of nationalist passions and indeed, the untimely death of his loved ones, including wife and children. In one of his poems in the volume *Navajataka* (The New Born) called 'Keno' (Why), he finds himself at the centre of a temporal 'echo circle', which runs through millennia and having 'lost its way among the stars', crystallises within the poet's self.⁷³ Like for Iqbal, for Tagore too, philosophy of time, in context of violent, twentieth-century world politics and personal encounters with mortality, devolved into the question of poetic insight and freedom, returning to us in a new way the ancient epic moment of the Mahabharata!

Conclusion

Can one then argue that politics is impossible to think without thinking about the intractability and alterity of time and about human attempts to overcome it? Perhaps one can even say, somewhat provocatively, that if there could ever be a universal definition to politics at all, it would be that politics is a mode of activity that seeks to ride/play

time in favour of the political subject, be it the sovereign or the community (the modern conception of progress being just one instance of this). And because this enterprise of making time one's own cannot be distinguished from the quotidian question of the finite and mortal human condition, politics shades off inevitably into what we today call the religious and the existential.

Needless to say, this is very different from the political theology thesis of Carl Schmitt. For at stake here is neither theology nor the 'secularisation' of the theological into the political – secularisation being a critical mediatory moment in Schmitt's argument. At stake here is a very different thesis – that of an ontological sharing between the political and the spiritual, so beautifully elaborated in the Mahabharata, which modernity brushed under the carpet by rendering it pre- or non-modern. This ontological sharing indexes the constitutive indeterminacy of both time as a concept and politics as a practice of radical risk-taking. Discussing its ineffable nature, the Marxist anthropologist Maurice Godelier argued that the sacred works by an 'occultation of reality and an inversion of the relationship between cause and effect'.⁷⁴ This is a description that works equally well for the contemporary idea of free and undetermined political action transcending the prison of the present and ushering in the future, against the grain of time as it were. I have already mentioned the anti-colonial ideas of *nishkama karma* and absolute creative action as ways to overcome causal determinism. One also wonders – what is the Marxist sensibility of the real as auto-driven by a dialectic of internal contradictions if not another kind of 'occultation of reality' in Godelier's terms? Equally relevant here is Roger Caillois' insight that the sacred engages unknown and dangerous forces⁷⁵ – such that the becoming sacred of a human agent, be it the millennial king or the warrior monk of medieval Indic devotional cults or the Leninist vanguard who is 'ahead of his/her times', is not only to dramatically transcend one's given social position. It also means to transgress into a domain of absolute risk and radical unknowability, constitutive no less of political practice than of spiritual journeys. Of course, poetry remains as a residue in this discussion of politics and religion, as that imperative which breaks the given tense structure of language and freely innovates with time (both the Mahabharata and the Quran are poetry after all). But then, as evident from the examples of Iqbal and Tagore, poetry, despite its modernist setting, returns us to the question of the mortal self and cosmological concerns and hence to the point where politics shades and fades off into the ultimate spiritual and ontological question. Can we then end by saying that if time is a constituent principle of politics, then, time is also the limit condition of the political, which pulls us towards the extra-political moments of solitude and cosmicity, singularity and dissolution in the cosmic state of things, in and at the same time?

In this lecture, I have tried to argue that returning time to modern political thought, by way of a detour through non-modern philosophies and experiences of time, forc-

69 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Kaler Jatra', 1922, Rabindra Rachanabali, vol. XI, Calcutta: Visvabharati Press, 1990 reprint, 249–287.

70 Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World History*, NY: Columbia UP, 2013.

71 M. K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–41*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, New Delhi: NBT, 1997.

72 Prathama Banerjee, 'The Untimely Tagore', *Seminar: Special Issue on The Nation and its Poet*, 623, July 2011, https://www.india-seminar.com/2011/623/623_prathama_banerjee.htm, accessed 17 Sept 2013.

73 Abu Sayeed Abu, *Tagore and Modernism*, trans. Amitava Ray, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995, 110.

74 Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, 171.

75 Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred* (1939), trans. Meyer Barash, Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

es us to rethink the very concept of politics. It forces us to breach the private/public, human/planetary, politics/religion binaries that we assume unproblematically, and helps us face up to the inescapable presence of religion, affect and non-human entities in the political field today. In fact, if we closely read modern political thinkers from the Global South, it becomes apparent that they were always already engaged in this task of thinking across traditions and thinking across temporalities. Here, I tried to foreground those aspects of modern political thought from South Asia which escape our notice when we work with interpretative categories drawn solely from modern European political philosophy but become visible once read in the light of other philosophical and mythological traditions.

Prathama Banerjee is a historian and a professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi. She is the author of *Politics of Time: 'primitives' and history-writing in a colonial society* (Oxford University Press 2006) and *Elementary Aspects of the Political: histories from the global south* (Duke University Press 2020). She is interested in political philosophy, cultural history, history of concepts and literary studies.

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