

Myth as History and History as Myth: The Instructive Case of India

Gerald James Larson

Tagore Professor Emeritus, Indiana University, Bloomington
and Professor Emeritus, Religious Studies, UC Santa Barbara

Introduction

Few modern nation states are as diagnostically interesting as India in exhibiting the well-known paradoxical comment of William Faulkner: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” (Faulkner 1951: 92) As I have argued elsewhere, (Larson 1995: 52-141) layers of cultural development in the South Asian region going all the way back to the second millennium BCE have left significant cultural residues and valuations even in twenty-first century India, for example, from the Indus Valley Civilization in the third and second millennia BCE (c. 3000-1500 BCE), the Indo-Brahmanical (Vedic and Upaniṣadic traditions) (c. 1500-600 BCE), the Indo-Śramanical (Buddhist, Jain and other non-Vedic traditions) 600 BCE-300 CE), the classical Indic (Hindu epic and Purāṇic traditions) (c. 300-1200) the Indo-Islamic (c. 1200-1757), the Indo-British (c. 1757-1947), and, of course, the new Indian nation state itself since partition and independence (1947-present). (Larson 2013: 121-135)

I am not suggesting that these cultural layers and options are significant in some essentialist or reified Procrustean sense, but, rather, I see them in the sense of ever-present forces of contentious interaction, much like geological

tectonic plates constantly moving and pushing one another over long periods of time, to use the well-known metaphor of the Allchins. (Allchin, B. and R. 1982: 13) Or, if one prefers a biological metaphor, these cultural layers are much like the unfolding secondary trunks of a single banyan tree that can spread over an acre with odd and conflicting twists that continually reshape the emerging tree, which was W. Norman Brown's favorite metaphor for describing modern India. (Brown W. N.: 433-34).

Social scientists often miss the "*la longue durée*" of Indian cultural history because of their orientation to modern social science methods (Braudel F. 1972). There are, of course, important exceptions in this regard, for example, McKim Marriott, T.N. Madan, Gananath Obeyesekere, et al., who truly grasp the profound meaning of ancient Indian social reality. Humanists, of course, with their focus on classical texts and philology often have the opposite problem. They sometimes become tone deaf to the manner in which the classical insights of Indic ritual, philosophy, religion, poetry, sculpture, and painting from pre-modern periods in Sanskritic and Arabic South Asian traditions are in significant ways present as living options in terms of behavior, aesthetic taste, beliefs, and commitments in twenty-first century cultural life in modern India. Here again, of course, there are important exceptions, for example, W. Norman Brown, Franklin Edgerton, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, et al., who fully grasp the value of ancient

humanistic insights that continue to be relevant in the present. In other words, the past is alive and well in modern India, *pace* those who gloss over India's ancient past because the modern notion of "social science" seems to be absent or those so caught up in obscure textual and philological details that they lose touch with the contemporary relevance of what they study.

What is intriguing, indeed, astonishing, about India's assimilation and retention over time of vast cultural differences is that many of our usual notions for interpreting social reality begin to appear strangely inappropriate, challenging us intellectually to re-think the notions themselves. In this regard, two commonly understood notions especially call out for reinterpretation in any attempt to understand Indian civilization whether in terms of its traditional heritage or its current contemporary social reality, namely, our notions of "myth" and "history."

I wish to argue that what is crucial to understand in order to appreciate Indic notions of "history" and "myth" is that Indic traditions themselves appear to exhibit as "myth" what modern scholars attempt to construe as "history." This in turn makes possible an interesting mirror reversal, namely, that what modern scholars appear to construe as "history" is what Indic traditions themselves would for the most part consider to be "myth." This somewhat odd juxtaposition is what I am trying to suggest by my title to this chapter, namely, "Myth as History and History as Myth: The Instructive Case of India."

The Notion of “Myth”

Before proceeding further, however, let me make clear what my own understanding of “myth” is, followed by my understanding of the notion of “history.” The notions of “myth” and “history” have been discussed in all sorts of ways, and there is a vast bibliography of such discussions. I only wish to show here, however, how I am using the notions, so that I can present my basic argument in what I hope is a clear and consistent manner in the sequel. For my purposes,

“...a myth or mythology means a narrative or a collection of narratives about the gods or supernatural beings used by a people—clan, tribe, or ethnic community—for purposes of interpreting the meaning of their experience and their world, both individually and corporately. Such narratives may describe the creation of the world, ...the destruction of demonic forces, the origin of death, ...and so on. What is fundamental in the definition of “myth,” however, ... is that myth articulates the basic self-understanding of a people and thereby operates as a kind of charter for the total cultural life.” (Larson 1974: 1)

Such a definition is clearly Dumézilian (Dumézil 1958), but it is also compatible with Malinowski’s functionalist observation that myth,

...enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for...guidance.... Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force. (Malinowski 1948: 101)

My understanding of the notion of “myth” also includes the insight of my former colleague in history of religions, Raimundo Panikkar.

A living myth does not allow for interpretation because it needs no intermediary. Myth is precisely the horizon over against which any hermeneutic is possible. Myth is that which we take for granted, that which we do not question; and it is unquestioned because, de facto, it is not seen as questionable. (Panikkar, R 1979: 4-5)

The myth or mythical narrative exhibits the unquestioned presuppositions with which and through which a community understands itself. Sometimes myth is understood literally or dogmatically, but sometimes, perhaps more often, many ancient peoples fully appreciate myth as a symbolic portrayal or an imaginative projection of the way the world is for them.

The Notion of “History”

As for the notion of “history” or “historical traditions,” Romila Thapar’s characterization is broadly inclusive and especially useful with respect to India.

Historical traditions emanate from a sense of the past and include three aspects: first, a consciousness of past events relevant to or thought of as significant by a particular society, the reasons for the choice of such events being implicit; second, the placing of these events in an approximately chronological framework, which would tend to reflect elements of the idea of causality; and third, the recording of these events in a form which meets the requirements of that society.

If the above definition is acceptable, then it can in fact be said that every society has a concept of the past and that no society is a-historical.

(Thapar 2013: 4)

Furthermore, a distinction is usually made between “history” itself as the events and actions that make up the past in contrast to what is usually called “historiography,” the study of the accounts given of that past and the modes of investigation for constructing interpretations of those events and actions. (Little, D: 1-22).

In this regard, there have been at least two prominent lines of argument in discussions of historiography about the nature and validity of historical knowledge. (Weingarthner 1967: 7-12) The first line is sometimes called an “explanatory dualist” or “hermeneutic” line of argument, which distinguishes between the *Naturwissenschaften* (the hard sciences) and the

Geisteswissenschaften (the “spiritual” or humanistic sciences), arguing that historical understanding is uniquely different from scientific understanding in that “historical awareness” focuses on human “understanding” (*verstehen*) and the actions of persons in specific contexts in the past—a line of argument that can be traced primarily in European continental philosophy from Hegel through Rickert, Dilthey, Troeltsch, Mannheim, Vico, Croce and R. G. Collingwood (Little,D: 4-11). A second prominent line of argument sometimes called a “deductive-nomological” or “covering-law model” argues that the *Naturwissenschaften-Geisteswissenschaften* dichotomy is confusing and unnecessary, arguing that the historian is as much subject to the universal principles of verifiability and/or falsification as the natural scientist. This line of thinking about historical knowledge largely grows out of British and American analytic philosophy. For the most part, it is fair to say that the former or “explanatory dualist” line of argument has been followed by most historians in recent theoretical work. There are, of course, numerous nuances and variants to the various theoretical discussions, and there are many historians, probably most, who quietly pursue their historical research without unduly taxing themselves over the theoretical issues.

In any case, it is no exaggeration to say that an historical perspective is a completely taken for granted presupposition of what it means to be human, or, as Ortega y Gasset has put it: “...man... has no nature; what he has is—history,”

(Kaufmann 1975: 157) or as R. G. Collingwood has put it, in a somewhat more imperial manner: "...the chief business of twentieth-century philosophy is to reckon with twentieth-century history." (Collingwood 1944: 56) We all, I think, more or less, accept this view of the importance of history—indeed, find it hardly controversial. The human condition is an historical condition.

In contemporary social life we have often become skeptical about traditional metaphysics and normative philosophy generally. We have realized that a two-valued logic is only one kind of logic. We have frequently abandoned normative ethics and engage, rather, in meta-ethics. We have often ceased taking religions seriously as cogent belief systems about which we care very much. We have even questioned the procedures and validity of our scientific theorizing together with its operational applications. But no one of us seriously doubts that such subject-areas as metaphysics, logic, ethics, religion, science and cultures in general have a "history." To the contrary, all of these subject-areas for many of us are only meaningful or interesting precisely because they have a "history." Our unquestioning assumption that there is such a thing as "history" provides a basic coherence for most of what we do and what the world is "really" like for most of us. Whether what we do and think has any ultimate significance may be an open question, but that what we do and think has a "history" is seldom seriously doubted.

“Myth” as “History” and “History” as “Myth”

Here I return to my earlier reference to Raimundo Panikkar and his comment: “Myth is that which we take for granted, that which we do not question; and it is unquestioned because, de facto, it is not seen as questionable. (Panikkar, R 1979: 4-5) Panikkar has focused on this taken-for-granted sense of history to make a somewhat startling claim, namely, that our contemporary notion of “history” itself is in important respects our modern “myth.” That is to say, what is the most taken-for-granted presupposition in a community, what is completely unquestioned and assumed by everyone is the “myth” of that community, and a prime candidate for the primordial “myth” of our contemporary intellectual life is, according to Panikkar, the “myth” of “history.” This does not mean that the symbolic and imaginative narratives of modern “history” are, thus, not true in some sense. Quite the contrary, they are completely true in the sense that the “myth” of “history” is the unquestioned presupposition in all of our attempts to “understand” “history”, whether we use an explanatory dualist version of the “myth” or a “covering-law” model version of the “myth,” and perhaps most of all, if we make use of a theological or biblical version of the “myth” of “history.”

Perhaps needless to say, Panikkar’s assertion that “history” is little more than our modern “myth” is something of an equivocation, or, at best, an exaggeration, but Panikkar’s suggestion makes a telling point in our attempts to understand

contemporary India and the manner in which pre-modern layers of cultural development continue to be present. The telling point is that our assumption about the reality of “history” may itself in some sense be best understood in terms of “myth”, and, if that is the case, we might well learn something important about our own notion of “history” from examining some foundational “myths” from pre-modern India. Put another way, it perhaps can be argued that the boundary line between “myth” and “history” in our modern sensibility is simply not present in an Indic context, that is, in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain contexts. Along the same lines, the boundary between what is human and what is divine in an Indic environment is much more porous than our usual contemporary understanding of the human and divine, again, at least in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions.

Historical, Pre-Historical, Un-historical

In this regard, the conventional distinction all too often drawn between cultures that are “historical” vis-à-vis those that are supposedly “non-historical” or “pre-historical” is clearly wrongly formulated. The distinction resembles the distinction criticized by Plato in the *Statesman* between “Greeks” and “barbarians.” (Hamilton 1961: 1026). What appears to be a dichotomy of two well-formed classes is in reality one well-formed class, that is, the Greeks, and some sort of formless entity, that is, “barbarians” or everybody else! In a similar fashion the distinction between “historical” cultures and “non-historical” cultures is

wrongly framed. The “historical” is any culture that accepts a certain conceptualization of “history,” and “non-historical” or “pre-historical” is simply a formless group of everybody else. In fact, of course, every culture has some sense of the meaning of the events and actions that together make up the past, and the task is one of formulating what the well-formed classes might be. When we recognize that our modern notions of “history” may be in some important sense be our modern “myth” of “history,” this opens up a vast range of “historical” (“mythical”) classifications that need to be formulated.

Cyclical and Linear

Yet another wrongly formulated dichotomy that has been conventionally employed is the distinction between “cyclical” and “linear” views of “history,” with linear being progressive development from the past into the future that is characteristic of “historical” cultures in contrast to “cyclical” repetitive or recursive views of time typical of “un-historical” or “pre-historical” static societies. The distinction is faulty mainly because it cuts across almost any conceptualization of time, whether ancient or modern, eastern or western. It is a distinction based on a metaphor and can be used in all sorts of ambiguous ways. It can be argued, for example, that Hegel’s notion of “history” is clearly cyclical as well as linear. Likewise, one can argue that the Hindu and Buddhist notions of time and history

are cyclical but also linear in important respects. Romila Thapar comments as follows about “cyclical” and “linear” in Indian conceptualizations.

Some scholars maintain that cyclic notions of time are characteristic of India and the recurring cycle is a refusal of history. But a different reading can be given of cyclic time. Cyclic or cosmological time becomes the circumference of social activity, seen sequentially as units within which a society is created, lives out its history and is extinguished. Change therefore is evident. Cyclic cosmology therefore marks a growing concern with the relationship between past and present.

There is also in the epic the initial notion of linear time. This is evident in the recording of descent through genealogies. These are not elaborate, but they record a sense of the chronology of person and event. (Thapar 2013: 205)

This is not to suggest that the metaphors “cyclical” and “linear” have no descriptive or heuristic utility. It is only to suggest that they are not necessarily helpful metaphors in determining well-formed classes of what can and cannot be considered “historical.”

Four Recent Books on India’s “History”

Four recent books are especially interesting by way of illustrating the theoretical problem I have been attempting to identify in this essay, namely, the

manner in which we conceptualize and apply our modern notions of “history” (and “myth”) in ways that may well lead us to overlook or be non-plussed about certain foundational notions of “history” that go all the way back to Vedic and possibly pre-Vedic times and that continue to be the “historical” worldview of many people in contemporary India. The four books I have in mind are Wendy Doniger’s *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Doniger 2009); Sheldon Pollock’s *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Pollock 2006); Romila Thapar’s *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (Thapar 2013); and Ramachandra Guha’s *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy* (Guha 2007). All four books are important scholarly achievements, and let me make it clear at the outset that what I shall be suggesting in the sequel in no way is meant to denigrate what these four books accomplish, that is to say, thoughtful, critical and comprehensive treatments of certain aspects of the modern “historiography” of India.

Wendy Doniger’s book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, is an attempt to get beyond what she calls the “Brahmin imaginary,” that is, the conventional elitist brahmanical interpretation of Hindu culture.

Different Hindus not only lived different Hinduisms but privileged different aspects of Hinduism, different qualities among the (non)-defining

clusters.... In addition to including women's as well as men's voices and Other Ranks as well as Brahmins, Hinduism is composed of local as well as pan-Indian traditions, oral as well as written traditions, vernacular as well as Sanskrit traditions, and non-textual as well as textual sources.

(Doniger 2009: 32)

Doniger's narrative overall focuses on the rich mythologies, legends, and tales, so typical of Hindu religious traditions, and she also offers brief comparative discussions of how Hindus fared vis-à-vis the encounter with Islamic traditions from the Delhi Sultanate (1210-1526) through the Mughal period to the first contacts with the British in the mid eighteenth century. Doniger throughout is not especially interested in theorizing and takes a tongue-in-cheek perspective on much of what she writes. She concludes her "alternative history" with the following wry comment:

India is a country where not only the future but even the past is unpredictable. If you have read this far, dear reader, and have plowed through these many pages, and have paid any attention at all, you will have learned at least one important thing. You could easily use history to argue for almost any position in contemporary India.... (Doniger 2009: 688)

Shelldon Pollock's *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, in contrast to Doniger's mythological story-telling, focuses less on religion and more on the development of literature, looking first at Vedic Sanskrit as a largely unchanging ritual or liturgical medium (through much of the first millennium BCE, a language medium that begins to change or be modified in the last century or two BCE and the first centuries CE into a general literate (written) and literary medium with the emergence of *kāvya* (classical Sanskrit poetry) and *praśasti* (inscriptional panegyric). It is in the first centuries CE (and to some degree in the last few centuries BCE) that the great epics (*Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*) take definitive shape, lawbooks emerge (*Dharma-śāstra-s*), “historical” texts (*Itihāsa-purāṇa*) begin to be composed, and learned Śāstra literature generally in all sorts of intellectual subject-areas. This is also the period, of course, in which the literate medium of Sanskrit becomes increasingly prevalent in Buddhist (both Theravāda and Mahāyāna) and Jaina texts. Moreover, the emergence of Sanskrit as a cosmopolitan medium coalesces with the discourses of political power in the South Asian region, and what Pollock calls a “Sanskrit cosmopolis” (analogous in some respects to the Latinate world of pre-modern Europe) that spreads widely throughout South and Southeast Asia. According to Pollock, this Sanskrit cosmopolis begins to fade in significance towards the end of the first millennium C.E., transmuting into numerous local vernacular languages (again on analogy

with the development of European vernacular languages in the Latinate world up to the end of the premodern period). The dichotomy of “cosmopolitanism”/“vernacularism” or “cosmopolitanization”/“vernacularization” is fundamental, according to Pollock, in order to understand pre-modern South Asia.

Romila Thapar directly addresses the issue of historiography in India and the claims from the early colonial period along the lines of A. A. Macdonell's comment, “...early India wrote no history because it never made any,” (Thapar 2013:19) or Rapson's comment, from his, *The Cambridge History of India*: “In all the large and varied literatures of the Brahmans, Jains and Buddhists there is not to be found a single work which can be compared to the *Histories* in which Herodotus recounts the struggle between the Greeks and the Persians....” (Thapar 2013: 19) Thapar also, however, quotes a further comment of Rapson: “But this is not because of the people of India had no history... We know from other sources that the ages were filled with stirring events; but these events found no systematic record.” (Thapar 2013: 19) Thapar then proceeds to show how historical awareness slowly emerges, first, through what she calls “embedded history,” that is, bits and pieces of historical events and actions that can be found in primarily ritual texts. (Thapar 2013: 49-143). Second, she looks at what she calls the emergence of “externalized” history when attempts to

describe past events are able to stand alone apart from ritual or religious intentions in such texts as the epics (Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata), lawbooks, early philosophical writings, *kāvya* (classical Sanskrit poetry), *praśasti* (inscriptions) and so forth, that become prevalent in the post-Gupta period. (Thapar 2013: 144-262). She also distinguishes between three distinct kinds of historical traditions. There are the *Itihāsa-purānic* texts [“*itihāsa*” meaning, “thus indeed it was,” and “*purāṇa*” meaning, “old stories or tales/myths”] that are largely sectarian but also trace the various lineages of rulers and dynasties, composed by *brāhmaṇa* authors. (Thapar 2013: 265-318) She contrasts this, secondly, to the extensive story literature and lineage literature composed by bardic authors (sometimes over-written by later *brāhmaṇa* writers) that provide slightly more realistic accounts of families and dynasties (*vamśāvalīs*, *vamśānucaritas*, and so forth) (Thapar 2013: 319-377). Third, Thapar focuses on the extensive Śramaṇical literature (Buddhist and Jain) that offer alternative accounts of the past in various kinds of historical writing (biographies, chronicles, temple histories, and so forth). (Thapar 2013: 442-596)

Thapar concludes her excellent survey with the following diagnostically interesting comment.

But somewhere a beginning has to be made towards thinking about the idea of history in early India, and that is what this book has attempted. I

have tried to argue that there is what might be called a historiographical trajectory, although not altogether smooth, in the texts to which I have referred. This points to a concern with a historical past, even if this past is constructed in ways different from what we conventionally regard as historical. I have argued that a sense of history and historical consciousness existed, that there were historical traditions emerging from diverse historiographies, and that these occasionally took the form of historical writing. (Thapar 2013: 701)

Thapar's comment is diagnostically interesting because it expresses a remarkable skepticism. There is, to be sure, a "historiographical trajectory," but it is not "altogether smooth," and, more than that, there is an historical past, "even if this past is constructed in ways different from what we conventionally regard as historical."

Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* undertakes a task that few have attempted, namely, to write a history of democracy in India since partition and independence. He sets forth his basic purpose in the Prologue to his book.

In the academy, the discipline of history deals with the past, while the disciplines of political science and sociology deal with the present. This is a conventional and in many ways logical division. The difficulty is that in

the Indian academy the past is defined as a single, immovable date: 15

August 1947.

In the decades since 1947, the present has moved on.... The past, however, has stayed fixed. By training and temperament, historians have restricted themselves to the period before independence. (Guha 2007:12)

He concludes his comments in the Prologue with the following comment.

This book is...simply an attempt to tell the modern history of one-sixth of humankind.... However, the manner of the telling has been driven by two fundamental ambitions: to pay proper respect to the social and political diversity of India, and to unravel the puzzle that has for so long confronted scholar and citizen, foreigner as well as native—why is there an India at all? (Guha 12007: 15)

Through some thirty detailed chapters, Guha then traces the history of “the world’s largest democracy” through the Nehru era, the Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi periods, the problems over Kashmir, Punjab and the Sikh community, Islamic terrorism, the “pogroms” that occurred against the Sikhs after Indira Gandhi’s assassination in Delhi in 1984, and the burning of the train carrying Hindu pilgrims and the resulting violence, primarily among Muslims, in Gujarat in 2002. In an Epilogue to his study, he offers the following two comments:

As a modern nation, India is simply *sui generis*. It stands on its own, different and distinct from alternative political models such as Anglo-Saxon liberalism, French Republicanism, atheistic communism, and Islamic theocracy....

So long as the constitution is not amended beyond recognition, so long as elections are held regularly and fairly and the ethos of secularism broadly prevails, so long as citizens can speak and write in the language of their choosing, so long as there is an integrated market and a moderately efficient civil service and army, and—lest I forget—so long as Hindi films are watched and their songs sung, India will survive. (Guha 2007: 758-59)

Exogenous versus Endogenous Historiography

What becomes clear, in my view, in a careful reading of these recent “histories” or “historiographies” of India is that they are all what I am inclined to call “exogenous” historical studies. They are all addressing the Indic material from the “outside” in terms of the interpretations of the meaning of the past. The methodologies employed are almost entirely derived from European models of historiography. One is reminded of Sir Isaiah Berlin’s comment.

It seems to me that the thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was astonishingly Europocentric. When even the most imaginative and the most radical political thinkers of those times speak of the

inhabitants of Africa or Asia, there is, as a rule, something curiously remote and abstract about their ideas....

...the peoples of Africa and Asia are discussed...seldom, if ever, in their own right, as peoples with histories and cultures of their own; with a past and present and future which must be understood in terms of their own actual character and circumstances.... (Berlin 1979: 354)

Much has changed, of course, in more recent historical research, but much continues along the same lines as Berlin observed to be the case in earlier years. I am inclined to think in this regard that Wendy Doniger's "alternative history," Sheldon Pollock's "Sanskrit cosmopolis," Romila Thapar's "embedded history," and Ramachandra Guha's "history of the world's largest democracy" are all twenty first century retrofits or reconstructions of what India's "history" ought to be in order to bring it up to compliance with "code," to use a metaphor from the building trades. This is especially apparent in Romila Thapar's work and the work of Sheldon Pollock. In the case of Thapar, she concludes her massive study of Indian historiography with the phrase, "...even if this past is constructed in ways different from what we conventionally regard as historical." In the case of Sheldon Pollock, it is diagnostically interesting that he finds evidence for his reconstruction of the history of Sanskrit literature in the Latinate world of pre-modern Europe, without hardly a mention of what might have been obviously

argued as a more apt comparison, nearer at hand, namely, the “Arabic cosmopolis” throughout South and Southeast Asia, a “cosmopolis” that operates in precisely the same time-frame as his so-called “Sanskrit cosmopolis.” One is tempted to argue for what might be called a “Neo-Orientalist” bias in all four of these recent historical discussions, “Neo” not in the sense of colonialist control but, rather, “Neo” in the sense of historiographical control. Ramachandra Guha recognizes this to some degree when he asserts at the end of his study: “As a modern nation, India is simply *sui generis*.” (Guha 2007: 758) In my view, he could well have extended his assertion to the entire panorama of the subcontinent’s development.

Towards an Endogenous Historiography

I argued in an article many years ago the conventional view that modern notions of history are absent in South Asian thought. I commented: “...to put it directly, historical interpretation is *ours*, not *theirs*! ... In a South Asian environment...historical interpretation...is a zero-category.” (Larson 1993: 381)

Now, however, I recognize that I was mistaken. It is not the case that historical interpretation is a “zero category.” It is, rather, the case that there is a different view of historiography appropriate to the Indic intellectual environment, based largely on the philosophical insights of Sāṃkhya (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987) and Pātañjala Yoga (Larson and Bhattacharya 2008)

philosophy together with the *Iti-hāsa* and *Purānic* textual traditions, a world-view that mixes “history” with “myth” with alacrity but nevertheless represents a coherent “historiography,” albeit a puzzling and complex one.

I have in mind the common world-view of karma (*karman*) and rebirth (*punarjanman*) that is presupposed among the various *dharma*-traditions (Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina) in South Asia, or what Gananath Obeyesekere has characterized as the “...karmic eschatologies...found only in Indic religions.” (Obeyesekere 2002: 17, Lippner 2010: 11—120, Lippner 2010: 18-186, Malinar 2010: 202-208) In his important study entitled, *Imagining Karma*, Obeyesekere documents a fundamental distinction between “rebirth eschatologies” and “karmic eschatologies.” The former, rebirth eschatologies, are found throughout the world, often in small-scale tribal contexts, or in more complex social contexts (for example, the Pythagoreans in Hellenic and Hellenistic traditions, and so forth), linked with ancestor-rituals, and with or without “ethicization.” Karmic eschatologies, however, are unique to Indic traditions and have highly developed accounts of “ethicization” in terms of good and evil deeds, moral behavior, moral retribution, and so forth. (Obeyesekere 2002: 17-18)

There are many texts that could be cited by way of describing the “karmic eschatologies” of the Indic worldview, but, in my view, there are two that are not only typical but also analytically interesting in terms of exhibiting the common

framework of world-periods (*yugas*) and world geography (*loka, dvīpa*), namely, (1) the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, Book I, Chapter III and Book II, Chapter II; and (2) “knowledge about the world” (*bhuvana-jñāna*) as set forth in the commentary attributed to a certain Vyāsa on *Yogaśūtra* III.26. (Wilson, H.H. 1972: 19-24 and 134-141, Larson-Bhattacharya 2008: 91-99) The account in the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* is a well-known mythological characterization, whereas the account in the *Yogaśūtra* is a more systematic theoretical interpretation. (Haag, Peterson, Spezio 2012: 113-123) Both accounts are typical to the sorts of discussions one finds in most of the other *Purāṇas*, the great epics, the Hindu law books, and in most Buddhist and Jaina accounts as well. (Jacobi 1961: Volume 1: 200-202 and Volume 4: 129-138 and La Vallée Poussin 1961: Volume 1: 187-190 and Volume 4: 129-138)

Descriptions of cosmological time in terms of *yugas* and the details of the description of cosmological geography in terms of the “world egg” (*brahmāṇḍa*) need not detain us. Suffice it to say, that the former has to do with the well-known theory of declining *yugas* or “world periods” from the perfect *Kṛta* (abiding for 1,728,000 human years), through the *Tretā* (1,296,000 years), to the *Dvāpara* (864,000 years) and, finally, to the *Kali* (432,000 years), together with the various correlations of these numbers in a declining progression through 72 Manvantaras that is without beginning (*an-ādi*). The latter, namely, the “world-egg” has to do

with the threefold division of the cosmos in terms of the seven heavenly *sattva*-worlds (*lokas*) of extraordinary sentient beings such as gods and yogins, the terrestrial *rajas*-worlds of our earth with its seven continents, the seven “nether” (*pātālas*) *tamas*-worlds together with the seven “hells” (*narakas*) or *tamas*-worlds ending with the lowest “hell” (Avīci).

Throughout these worlds are all sorts of sentient beings working out their karmic trajectories through on-going cycles of manifestation or coming forth and withdrawal (*pralaya* and *mahā-pralaya*). This is the case with Brahmā and the world-egg or universe as well. The so-called "creative-force," Brahmā, sometimes called Hiranyagarbha, the “golden germ or womb” and the world-egg itself both under-go periodic manifestation and withdrawal as well. The worlds, whether in manifestation or in withdrawal, are subject to a beginningless process (*parināma*) of time or becoming (*bhava*). How the cycles unfold is determined by the trajectories of the various species of beings that have been self-constructed by the afflictions (*kleśas*), actions (*karman*), ripenings (*vipāka*) and resulting residues (*vāsanās*, *āśayas*, *samskāras*) of their own behavior or functioning.

Leaving aside the mythological descriptive framework, what is of greater interest are three fundamental principles that appear to provide a basis for this common Indic worldview that is taking shape in the first centuries of the Common Era in many areas of South Asian cultural life, namely, what I would identify as a

principle of synchronic phylogeny (*varṇāśrama-dharma*, or the rough equivalents in Buddhist and Jaina texts), a principle of diachronic ontogeny (*punarjanman*), and a principle of precessional transformation (*samsāra*). By the term “phylogeny” I mean the Indic account of the development of the material world and its sentient species, based on the old Sāṃkhya philosophy. By the term “ontogeny” I mean the Indic account of the development of the individual sentient being (whether human, animal, divine, and so forth) over many rebirths. By the term “precessional” I mean the manner in which Indic transformation unfolds in keeping with the notion that the universe is overall running down or declining. I am using the term “principle” in the general sense of an established presupposition accepted commonly in a cultural environment.¹

¹ I have written about these matters in several other publications and express my thanks especially to *Philosophy East and West* for permission to use some material from my article, “The *Trimūrti* of *Smṛti* in Classical Indian Thought,” *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 43, No. 3, July 1993, 373 and 381-385. It was in this article that I first discussed the three principles in a systematic manner. I have also discussed this basic conceptual scheme in other articles. See Gerald J. Larson, “Karma as a ‘Sociology of Knowledge’ or ‘Social Psychology’ of Process/Praxis,” in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed., Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 303-316; also, Gerald J. Larson, “The Structure of Ancient Wisdom, Part II,” *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*, Volume 6, 161-167; also Gerald James Larson, “Hindu cosmogony/cosmology, in J.W. Haag, G.R. Peterson, M. L. Spezio (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Science*, London: Routledge, pp. 113-122; Larson-Bhattacharya (eds.), *Yoga: India’s Philosophy of Meditation*, Volume 12, Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008), pp. 91-100.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SYNCHRONIC PHYLOGENY

Our modern notions of history, deriving largely from the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity and from modern theorizing about historiography, are for the most part absent in Indic thought in the early centuries CE. There is, however, an odd notion of ‘history’ operating, but it is certainly not our modern western notion. What, then, is the Indic notion? What is striking about the Indic worldview (as exemplified in the *yuga* periods and the “world egg” geography) is that everything is perfect, properly formed and excellent at the outset of the world process with the accompanying paradoxical claim that the process is beginningless. In other words, nothing new can emerge that is not already presupposed and fully formed at the outset, but that which is fully formed was or is, as it were, without beginning! According to Madhav Deshpande, there is a deep conservatism in classical Indic thought. He comments:

All forms existed, and it is a matter of pure accident that certain forms are or are not found in a particular text, a particular time or a particular region.

Thus, the problem of “existence” was separated from the problem of “attestation.” Non-attestation did not imply non-existence. While eternal existence was the fact, the attestation and non-attestation of forms was a matter of historical accident. (Deshpande 1979: 9-10)

Whatever changes occur either in language or in society are treated as “options,” hence, the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* (the ideal synchronic order of caste and stage of life). Language, society and cosmos were dealt with largely in a deductive fashion. The human community is not to be viewed as developing over time diachronically. It is to be viewed, rather, in terms of “synchronic phylogeny.”

History as viewed from this deductive perspective is not a matter of new creation of events or new inventions, but simply an unfolding of implicit aspects and values of the eternally self-existing reality. (Deshpande 1979: 18-19)

To do “history” in this sort of synchronic perspective is continuously to look back and remember the eternal first principles that are truly authoritative and make possible the options with which we must continually live

THE PRINCIPLE OF DIACHRONIC ONTOGENY

Yet in a problematic manner, the synchronic phylogeny wherein everything is fully formed at the outset links up with a second principle, which in a puzzling way appears to undercut the first principle. The second principle might be expressed in the following manner. Everything is fully formed at the outset, beginninglessly, then so likewise are all sentient creatures throughout the extended universe. There never was a time, in other words, when I or any other

sentient creature was not, since all were there potentially at the outset. Hence, through all the unfolding periods of becoming, I, along with all other sentient creatures, must also have been becoming, or, in other words, the principle of karma and rebirth (*punarjanman*). My identity in this particular rebirth is shaped by a linear series of preceding lifetimes stretching back to a beginning-less beginning! In any particular lifetime, the sentient being is part of an unfolding synchronic whole, but the particular identity of a given rebirth has been shaped by an incredibly complex series of linear actions (*karman*) which have determined my synchronic place in this particular rebirth. Moreover, if the process is beginningless and, hence, infinitely so, then my actions as a sentient being have undoubtedly brought me into almost every possible life-form that has been formed from the outset, beginninglessly!

There are, therefore, two continually intersecting processes. On the one hand, there is the synchronic phylogeny of everything having been fully and perfectly formed at the outset. On the other hand, there is a continuously operating linear (diachronic) ontogeny of individual sentient beings whose trajectories in rebirth after rebirth are determined both by the synchronic presuppositions coming from the past being projected into the future, and by my continuing actions as a “dividual” sentient being, to use Mckim Marriott’s well-known neologism. (Marriott 1990: 1-39)

From one point of view, the system appears to be completely determined (synchronously) along the lines of *varṇāśrama-dharma*. From another point of view, however, the system is completely open and free, in the sense that at any given point-instant, I, along with all sentient beings, must engage in action (*karman*) that will shape my future becoming (ontogenetically). There is a profound “fluidarity” or “plasticity” in the understanding of selfhood or identity, not only for human sentient beings, but for all forms of life, including animals, gods, demons, spirits, and so forth, in their respective levels (*lokas*) of becoming. There is a simultaneous synchronic-cum-diachronic inter-subjectivity in all forms of sentient life whereby sentient beings are regressively and progressively “creating” a common life-world.

THE PRINCIPLE OF PRECESSIONAL TRANSFORMATION

There is still another principle in Indic thinking, however, that always accompanies the intersecting processes of synchronic phylogeny and linear ontogeny. Not only is everything present in its perfect and well-formed nature at the outset beginninglessly (synchronic phylogeny), and not only are all sentient beings nevertheless undergoing recurring linear identities based upon their karma in rebirth after rebirth, the entire cosmic drama is continually declining. The world is continually running down, falling backwards or regressing from an original excellence. The Indic worldview, of course, is not unique in this regard.

The notion of the world running down is frequently accepted in the ancient world.

It is widely accepted in the ancient Near East, in ancient Greece, and elsewhere.

What makes the notion of decline especially poignant in the Indic worldview is the strong linkage of decline with karma and rebirth.

The reasons for decline are problematic in most discussions of decline in the ancient world. Typical is Madhav Deshpande's comment.

It is not very clear why such a doctrine of decline developed in ancient India. It is conceivable that the invasion of the Greeks and the emergence and dominant political and social position of the non-Vedic religions like Buddhism and Jainism were viewed to be “darker times” in comparison with previous ages, and this might have led to the theory of four ages.

(Deshpande 1979: 6)

Such an explanation may not at all be necessary. More likely, in my view, is that the notion of declining ages has a great deal to do with ancient traditions of “astronomy”/astrology that were widespread throughout the ancient world.

Since the plane of the earth's equator is at a slight angle (twenty-three and one-half degrees) to the ecliptic, the vernal equinox of the beginning of spring “precesses” or moves backward through the ecliptic one degree of arc about every 72 years. It takes approximately 26,000 years (or more precisely just under 26,000 years) for this precession or falling backwards to make a full circle

so that the vernal equinox can occur again at its starting-point. According to one calculation, the oldest zodiacs were constructed by using the fixed star Aldebaran in the exact middle of Taurus, thereby making the vernal equinox at one degree of Aries around 4139 BCE. (Gleadow 1969: pp. 55ff) Other calculations have also been used for determining the “Ages” of the world. Generally, however, it was understood that a time frame of approximately 26,000 years was needed for a complete “pre-cession” (or falling backward). It is known as the “Great Year”, and it may well have an analogue in the Yuga theory. All of the numbers mentioned in the Yuga-theory discussed earlier, namely, 1,728,000, 1,296,000, 864,000 and 432,000 years together with some 72 “human-intervals” (*manvantaras*), appear to reflect a comparable understanding of the “Great Year.”

The large numbers used are probably due to the desire to express mathematical ratios and relations in term of whole numbers. Since so much ancient knowledge relating to astronomy/astrology is traceable to the ancient Near Eastern cultures of Babylonia and Sumeria, it is credible to think that in the first centuries CE (that is, the period of the *Iti-hāsa* and *Purānic* textual environment) calculations reflecting continual decline become part of framing the Indic conceptual account of karma and rebirth. A. L. Basham comments,

Western [that is, Greek, Near Eastern and Mediterranean] astronomy brought to India the signs of the zodiac, the seven-day week, the hour, and several other ideas.... Like all ancient astronomy, that of India was restricted owing to ignorance of the telescope.... For purposes of calculation the planetary system was taken as geocentric, though Aryabhata in the 5th century suggested that the earth revolved round the sun and rotated on its axis.... The precession of the equinoxes was known...as were the lengths of the year, the lunar month, and other astronomical constants. (Basham 1982: 492-493)

In using the expression “precessional transformation,” however, it is not my intention to enter into the problem of origin or diffusion or scientific explanation. My point, rather, is to highlight a dominant mind-set regarding the unfolding of time. The mind-set is one of falling backwards, of “precessing,” and, hence, at least in the classic Indic formulation, of the present and future always becoming the past (or, in other words, karma and rebirth).

To be sure, we are free to act in what appears to be the “present” moment, but we are not changing only the present. We are also re-covering and/or re-membering the past. Given such a mind-set of “precessional transformation,” there are only two possible options: either acquiescing or adjusting or harmonizing with what is (was), that is to say, the option of *varṇāśrama-dharma*

(synchronic phylogeny), or somehow renouncing in terms of the quest for *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa* or some other renunciatory technique (linear ontogeny in an environment of precessional transformation). Clearly these principles that are presupposed, *mutatis mutandis*, throughout the *dharma*-traditions (Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina) of the Indic worldview of karmic eschatologies can be described as “cyclical” so long as it is remembered that the critical intuition is a cycling neither into the present nor the future but, rather, a linear cycling into the past, a “falling backwards,” a “re-covering” or “re-membering” or “precessing” for which my own karma is fully accountable, because what was is what is, and what was, in fact, is nothing less than what will be!

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