

Les Treilles

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TIME IN THE INDIAN TRADITION

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All civilizations have been captivated by the mystery of time, something everyone is aware of and yet totally mystifying. The views they have formed about time, rather than being merely of interest for discussions in metaphysics, shape the attitude of the people towards life experiences, historical perspectives and anticipations for the future. The two great civilizations of Asia, the Chinese and the Indian have treated time and events differently. The Chinese kept meticulous chronology, immediate ancestors were very much part of the society, and work towards the progress of society as a whole was the duty of the individual. Hard work would lead to progress and a better life for all. On the other hand Indian society seems to have the notion that time as experienced depends on the state of awareness of the individual and hence time functions in a variety of forms. So chronology in India is unreliable, and most events were simply "a long long time ago." In this brief presentation, I attempt to give the many views on time in the Indian tradition.

Time in the World, but not World in Time

Throughout the tradition, time is not an external framework or scaffolding but an integral component of the world. The world is not in time, but it incorporates time. In fact, the Vaiśeṣika system of Indian philosophy, which is closest to physics, time (kāla) is an ingredient of world building. In the traditional greeting of the morning and evening twilight in the declaratory segment (sankalpa), one identifies oneself as a committed research student belonging to well-defined family and hue (varṇa), cosmic and regional spatial coordinates (space) and the cosmic time (kalpa, manvantara, yuga, year, month, date, asterism and time of day) are recited. Even as they are recited and you recall the vastness of the time you are also reminded that the yuga (kali), the manvantara (vaivasvata) and the

kalpa (adivārāha) are going to recur “in the fullness of time” when there is total dissolution (pralaya) and subsequent creation; and superdissolution (kalpānta) and reinvention of the concepts of space, time and manifestation. This curiously finds an echo in quantum mechanics where any local clock should cycle after a long but finite time depending on the elaborateness of the construction of the clock and the number of its dials.

Irreversibility, History and Causality

Is this time reversible or irreversible? One of the stanzas of Rāmāyaṇā echoes (dhvani) an answer to this question:

One who transcends the limitations
knows time as his chariot.
But one who is limited knows
cause-effect relations.
So, in that context, delimitations leads to irreversibility.
(rāmam daśaratham viddhi mām viddhi janakātmjām).

In the Aitareya Upanisad the mechanism of sentience is described: prajāpati has provided the five senses and their presiding graces (devata) but they entreat prajāpati to provide them sustenance so that they may function; in response food was created. But none of the graces could assimilate food: neither the sight with the eye nor the hearing with the ear. The life currents (prāṇa) were pressed into service; but only the downward current (apāna vāyu) could utilize food by digestion and decomposition. This is the first account of irreversible time, to provide the impetus to drive processes. It is an open system since food is from outside which is ingested, digested and ejected. The second law of biological thermodynamics appears and makes history enter physics. There is a sense of time from past to future.

What is true in the small is true also in the large. (yato pindah, tatho brahmāṇdah) External events are ordered by time, everything is indexed by time. The essential connection between events is now ascribed to a sense of causality: that which invariably precedes is the cause, that which invariably follows is the effect. There is an arrow and flow from

the tail to the tip of the arrow, from cause to effect. This is our experience of “profane time.”

Insight is also Irreversible

Along with this directed flow is a counter-flow from the present to the past. While everybody functioning has the present affect the future but has no influence on the past, in the context of insight and understanding the situation is precisely opposite. Ignorance (avidya) has no beginning (anādi) but has a definite end. And the proper insight illuminates the past, dispelling all ignorance and reveals the harmony of the restricted experience and thus affects the past. (nirastha sarvasandéham ékikṛtya sudarśanam, rahasyam yo darśa iti). In this context illumination is instantaneous and effortless but the glow of illumination can extend for a long time, maybe all your life. Perception of such countercurrent moments is in “sacred time.”

We may remind ourselves that Lord Buddha intuitively grasped that suffering was there always but there is an end to suffering.

Living in Two Time-Streams

An insightful person lives in two distinct streams of time “simultaneously.” The two kinds of times are distinguished by their topological connectivities and the texture of perception of external events. In profane time there is chronology, discreteness of events and a fragmented world structure. But in sacred time there is no chronology and no sense of the long interval of clock time between two occasions; and insight is always fresh. It comes uninvited and without the feeling of exertion.

In the Viṣṇu Purāṇa there is a mythological story about sage Nārada asking Lord Viṣṇu as to why people are deluded into living in profane time when all along they could function in sacred time. Lord Viṣṇu offers to do so, but asks Nārada, in the meantime, to fetch a cup of water. Nārada goes to the nearest house and knocks on the door to ask for the water. A beautiful and attractive young woman opens the door. Nārada is completely captivated by her charms, forgets about his fetching a cup of water for the Lord, forgets that he is an avowed celibate; and he woos and wins her hand. They live

together in a house after getting married and in due course two beautiful children arrive in successive years. While they are living in contentment, suddenly a flash flood engulfs their neighborhood and even their home. They have to try to escape for their life as the flood waters rise and the current becomes stronger. It becomes so strong that first one child, then the other and finally his wife are swept away by the raging waters. Nārada himself is barely able to have a precarious hold on a tree branch and feeling terribly shocked by the tragedy that has befallen him. While waiting thus, he hears Lord Viṣṇu's call asking him where is the cup of water because he is still thirsty. Nārada suddenly realizes that he was all the while standing on the firm ground and only a few moments have passed!

There are a number of other such parables in the Yoga Vāsiṣṭa about the paradoxes of experienced time and clock time. So apart from the distinction between linear and cyclic times, between directed historical time and reversible time-as-a-chariot we cannot ignore the importance of experienced time.

Even if we don't have sage Nārada's (or King Lavaṇa's) adventures with time we do have several experienced times, since, when we dream the time in the dream state (svapna) is not the same as the time in the waking state (jāgrat) or in the deep sleep state (suṣuptā). If there is experience of a substratum to all these states, the fourth encompassing state (turiya) there would be a corresponding time sense. It is part of the tradition that this time sense is the same as the "sacred time" of insight. In Sankarācārya's Dakṣiṇāmūrtistōtram this is stated as

At the time of self-realization

At the moment of insight

Arises the conviction truly

That you are in essence the World

(ya sāksātkuruté prabhādasamaye svātmānevādvayaṁ)

There are two equivalent ways of stating this state of affairs: one can talk about events outside our time stream; or one can talk about multiple strands of time. The classic koan is the following: you see a piece of rope lying in the shadows and get thoroughly frightened believing it to be a serpent. You get a lamp and look more carefully at it and recognize it

to be a rope. Your fear is gone, but the physiological symptoms of fright take some time to settle. Question: When and from where did the serpent come and when and from where did it go away? If you say there never was any serpent, then you have to concede that even then your body suffered from extreme fright. At that time to you, there was a serpent. It must then have come sometime and gone away some other time. Our experienced time and events may be like time.

Order and Creative Disorder

A beautiful traditional way of stating the experienced world is to say there are two modalities in which our intelligence works: the Vaiṣṇava mode and the Śaiva mode. The first one is temporally ordered, causal, spatio-temporal and continuous. It has a place for society, ethics, morals and work towards a goal; and the notion of progress. The processing is sequential, algorithmic, and reliable. The world is sustained by the Vaiṣṇava mode: sometimes it is phrased as Lord Viṣṇu is the maintainer of the world. It is not surprising that Lord Viṣṇu's consort is Devi Lakṣmi, the goddess of wealth.

In contrast the Śaiva mode is atemporal, non causal, and spontaneous. Insight is the central theme of all experience. The Śaiva mode is intermittent in profane time, though between two such insightful extended moments there is no discontinuity. The Śaiva modality is creative and hence uncaused. It is nontemporal so it cannot be predicted. Creativity and end of certitude are characteristic of the Śaivite modality.

It is only fitting that in Śiva sutra, a collection of aphorisms about Lord Śiva the four stages of creativity are named: they are the transcendent (parā), the seeing (paśyanti), the transducing and processing (madhyama) and the expression (vykhari). The fourth stage the creativity becomes the common asset of everyone since it is displayed, exhibited, sculpted or performed. But before this stage there is a lot of work on part of the scientist or artist to process his insight and inspiration into a form where it can be expressed. It is not always a matter of technical skill but it involves shifts back and forth between the Śaivite and the Vaiṣṇavite modalities. There is often a reluctance to descend from the sacred worked of insight into the profane world of common language and symbols. This is an important part of the process of creativity. One can do it with diligence but it cannot

be rushed. A receptive audience is a great aid for this processing. Not doing enough work on transmitting insights and processing visions can have the detrimental effect of the whole expression being flawed, and the insight rejected by the community of scientists or artists.

But where did the vision come from? The best answer is “from beyond”, “transcending limits”, the “absolute” etc. These are all names for the unnameable, for the source outside time, space, and causality from which insights come. So we may symbolically refer to it as “the beyond” (parā). Quite proper that “the beyond” reveals itself in the Śaivite mode, beyond the everyday world.

From the moment of insight the creative insight assumes form and substance during the processing and finds itself in the world in full glory at the fourth stage. The abstract is completed in time, so it is (ka + alam = kalam) absolute + completing = time or as an answer to what is it that completes we say time: what? + completing = time (ka ? + alam).

Is Time Discrete or Continuous?

Lord Buddha and his followers considered the instants of time associated with events as the primary reality which only appears continuous since our individual persona strings them together into continuous time. These primary temporal fragments, are called kṣaṇa (chronons). The person who by discipline has overcome the illusion of the connectedness of the kṣaṇa through a continuous time stands to free himself from the bondage to his past more or less. Of course things did not remain that simple and later philosophers have subdivided the kṣaṇa and introduced several parts of connection but only one part of choice. Again a causal world with partial openings to creativity.

Comparison with Other West Asian Traditions

In the West Asian religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are dominated by linear programmed purposive good life now, so that you may go on to a perpetual blessed existence after death, possibly long after death. Jehovah made a covenant with his people and did lay down rules of conduct which forbid many of the creative graphic arts, for example. It is therefore an irony that many of the most creative have come from the tribes of the

chosen people. The instructions to the followers of each of these religions contains many edicts calculated to stifle any Śaivite experiences. The Old Testament painstakingly traces genealogies and chronicles events during many generations, hopefully true though highly partisan accounts. Cosmology is laid out and the final events too are predicted. Where then can be Śaivite atemporal events?

A careful review shows the moment when Moses comes in view of the burning bush which burnt but was not consumed, he not only sees, but also hears a voice from beyond. He is told that the time and place are holy, so he removes his sandals. What is the outcome? The fugitive from Egyptian Justice, responsible for murders, now living as a shepherd for his father-in-law is transformed into a diplomat who has to negotiate with the Egyptian Pharaoh himself. Awed by the tremendous task of translating his son-et-lumière experience into a negotiating process, Moses is overcome but he does not waver about the authenticity of the experience. He ends up liberating his people from Egypt and takes them on a random walk for forty years in the Sinai. Eventually he hands over the reins to a young Joshua.

In the New Testament, there is repeated effort to show that Jehovah's plans as told in ancient times have been fulfilled. There is a newer path, a softer covenant, but still the general scheme is the same: a linear time, a purposeful march towards the ultimate goal in systematic fashion. Yet there are isolated Śaivite events. One such is the baptism of Jesus by John at River Jordan. Jesus' head shone with the glory of the Holy Ghost in the form of a white dove while God the Father spoke, "Here is My Son, My Only Son!" It was a moment but that opened up a lifetime of His world ministry. There is also the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor: the vision and the voices heard by their disciples shake their long held beliefs; and one of them wishes to perpetuate the moment by pitching three tents on the Mountain: one for Jesus, one for Elijah and one for Moses. The past and the present are commingled and sought to be perpetuated at that location. St. Paul reminds all about the mysterious Melchizadech who had no father, no mother, no genealogy, yet was perpetually priest for the Lord God. Abraham, the Patriarch of the faithful paid tithe to him on behalf of Levy and all the Jewish priests. Yet the only time we see Melchizadech appears is before Abraham for a brief encounter. It is not the length

of the duration, but the depth of its impression that determines the effectiveness.

Witnessing Awareness (Śāksi bhava)

Back to the Indian tradition regarding time. An elaborate discussion takes place between Prince Arjuna and Lord Kṛṣṇa, his charioteer and adviser in the Kurukṣetra War. The discussion takes place before the hostile armies drawn up to start the fight. At one stage Lord Kṛṣṇa says

I am the inner self of all creatures
I am the beginning, the middle and the end
(Ahamātmā gudākéśa sarvabhūtaśayasthita
ahamādim ṇa madhyam ṇabhūtānām antah eva ṇa)

After the glimpse of the all encompassing universal form (visvarūpa) of the Lord, Arjuna sings forth in adoration:

Many hands, torsos, mouths, eyes
I see You everywhere: endless forms.
Neither beginning, middle, end nor source for Thee
Lord of the Universe, I see your Universal Form.
(anékabāhudara vaktranétram
paśyāmi tvam sarvato anantarūpaṁ
nāntam na madhyam na punastavadiṁ
paśyāmi viśvéśvara viśvarūpaṁ.)

To this the Lord replies

I am indeed Time, that dissolves the world
I function to gather together/slay mankind
Truly no one will survive to see the future
Among these armies; except for thee.
Gita XI 32:(kāló smi lokakṣayakṛt pravurdho
lokān samahartumiha pravruttaḥ.
ṛtépi tvam na bhaviṣyanti sarvé
yō vasyitaḥ: pratyānikṣu yodhaḥ)

Not everyone has the experience of Arjuna nor is there always Kṛṣṇa to explain and to illuminate. But the message to us is that “time” is that which is experienced in different textures under different levels of awareness. At one level it is merely a label, at another level it is a sequential historical label but the role of time becomes all encompassing in intense illuminating experiences. There have to be different descriptions in these different contexts. Orderly lawful equations of motion embodying predictable evolution which could acquire irreversibility and time sense. These are the everyday view of the world, the Vaiṣṇavite modality. But spontaneous creativity, unpredictable, indescribable, functions as surely, and this is the Śaivite modality.

Tradition describes a level of awareness in which the creative insights as well as the orderly evolution are seen as harmonious aspects when the whole world is seen as Arjuna saw the Viśva rūpa. It is called the witnessing awareness (sākṣi bhāva) and it sees the mind and all its modifications and phenomena along with the external universe. The external universe is no longer external, the mental no longer internal, but everything is seen as an undivided whole. This is described in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad in terms of two birds allied in friendship (dvā suparṇa sayūja sakhāya) sitting on the branches of the same tree; while one eats the sweet and bitter fruits the other watching it. It is even more graphically depicted in the Ṛg Vēda as: the Master of the house is seen at a distance (dūre dṛṣam gr̥hapatim).

We who are engaged in basic scientific research are fortunate since we are like the sages and seers (ṛṣi) of old: we can be engaged in contemplation in the midst of activity and even wander around beautiful Sylvan settings like Les Treilles. We proceed in an orderly

manner with our investigation; and worthwhile problems take much effort and much time. Then come the flashes of insight, uninvited, unexpected, awesome, but never unwelcome. The first timeless state (paśyanti) illuminates but does not speak. There is the long period of processing (madhyama) the insight into a complete solution not only to ourselves but to all the world. This processing takes place in time. So does the final stage of presentation (vykhari). These are some of the traditional views on time in the Indian tradition.