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Chapter Nine

Imperial Orders of the Past: The Semantics of History and Time in the Medieval Indo-Persianate Culture of North India

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In approximately two hundred years, we have come to know more about the past of mankind in general than mankind had in this past known about itself.
Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*

History is the witness of time, the light of truth, the life of the memory, the messenger of antiquity – thus wrote Cicero about the ancient art and science of history. This reflection derived generally from the Greeks and was disseminated in various and specific ways both to Europe in the middle ages and parts of the world wherever Islam bequeathed a tradition of Perso-Arabic scholarship.

Following the conceptual groundwork of western historiography as studied by Rickert, Bury and Collingwood we may suggest that the historian of antiquity in Europe left a profound and uncertain legacy. The organisation of chronicles in the Greco-Roman world had always been driven by a moral purpose that loomed larger than the study of events merely human. Since the rise and fall of Rome, and the idea of *regere imperio populos*, historical exegesis was dominated by eternal principles of good and evil. With the advent of Christianity and of a history that recorded the working out of God's purpose, medieval Europe forged conflictual accounts of the past into a vast singular chronology, placing further academic burdens on Cicero's alleged witness and messenger.[1]

Reinhart Koselleck in his stately survey of the breach in the historical *topos* between the pre-modern and the modern in the European tradition pauses on this idea of history as a repository of

[1] Discussing the provenance of medieval European historiography Anthony Kemp notes the mutually antagonistic strands of early Christian historiography in the work of Sextus Julius Africanus and his successor Eusebius of Caesarea, Anthony Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 3-5.

lessons and a source of examples that thinkers of antiquity bequeathed to the medievals. In this conception, the orator, or in the absence of the direct voice, the narrator, renders the instructions of history immortal for the wisdom of humankind.[2] Such an idea of history is based on faith in the constancy of human nature, a fixed point of reference on which morality, law, theology and the polity turn. What separates modern historiography most radically from this mode of historical thinking (as Burckhardt propounded in his *Reflections*) is that not only does it deny the possibility of knowing the future from the past but completely disregards it. Human potential in modernity is always directed, to borrow a phrase from Karl Löwith, 'to a future of indeterminate possibilities'.[3]

The present essay proceeds from a major premise of antiquity that the future can be discerned from the past only because human disposition is consistent, a premise that also contributed to the metaphysical foundations of medieval Islamic historicity in India. It leads to the question of whether medieval Islam in India, akin to later medieval Christianity, led to a departure in historical thinking and in the apprehension of historical time. Historical learning and reflection as a necessary step towards aristocratic respectability was widely pursued in medieval India, where divergent ideas of human nature and divine ordinance had come together in the making of an Indo-Persianate polity and culture intitated during the period of the Sultanate and later exemplified by the Mughal regime in India which lasted for well over three hundred years.[4] In this broadly conceived tradition the classical idea of a *polis* (*madīna*) and a conscious politico-religious community (*umma*) drawn from the philosophical foundations laid by Al Farabi and Avicenna, came to rest together with the heterodox directions in Islamic mysticism following the expositions of Al Ghazali, as well as an idigenous Sufism inflected with strands of Hindu devotional ideas.

[2] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 23-4.

[3] Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History*, Chicago, 1949, p. 11.

[4] I use the term 'Indo-Persianate' following Marshall Hodgson's concept of an 'Indian Islamicate' which refers more generally to a comparative *ecumene* of the Islamic expansion than the specific foundations of a composite imperial polity and courtly-scribal culture: Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago, 1974, pp. 59-60.

The twin precepts of the perfectable polity and the human capacity for knowledge can be located in the Mughal imperial desire to authorise the writing of historical accounts. Forms of historical understanding in north India, predating developments under the Mughals and the Delhi Sutlanate before them, can also be traced back to mythical or Purāṇic conceptions of genealogy and righteousness. I shall suggest in the latter part of this essay that standard pre-Islamic genealogies continued irrespective of the foundations of Islamic culture in India. Very old and very resilient ideas of genealogical succession continued silently assimilating empires and dynasties back to the formal structure of the cyclicity of ages, *kalpa*, *manu*, *yuga* and *yugāntara*.

I invoke these divergent and distinct strands of thinking in the context of medieval and late medieval Mughal India to raise some larger questions about the philosophy of history and temporality. I shall suggest that concepts of history and historical time in medieval northern India can be discussed macrologically in relation to *historia magistra vitae* in a vein similar to medieval Europe, although with some crucial distinctions. History here can be translated variously as a didactic lesson, a discipline, a form of art, a science. What we perceive as history may be evident in genealogy, chronicle, memoir, diary, biography or courtly record. The task here is not to provide a typology or even an outline of the relationship between these various genres, but to trace the relationship of historicity to ideas of empire during the medieval period.

In order to ask the question whether there was a dominant conception of temporality at work in the historical writing of Mughal India, we must also ask at the same time what might have been the link between the description of the past as historical (or chronological) memory and invocation of the past as *collective memory*. Collective and historical memories are both vital to a religiously oriented, aristocratic and learned community where tradition is nothing if not a continuous and tangible reminder of the past. Second, an inquiry into the nature of temporal authority must also include the question what indeed constituted a source or an authority. What, in other words, distinguished mere chronological succession of events from a narrative? Indeed what were the fundamental purposes of the chronicle and whom did it seek to represent: the individual, society, tribe, race, nation

or the will of God? Without a discussion of agency and the nature of historical causality, an inquiry into the medieval dimensions of historical time would remain inadequate.

Messengers of the Past

Sir Henry Elliot in his original preface to *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* (1849) was confident in his assertion that the history of India would be brought out of obscurity under the 'full light of European truth and discernment'. Native chroniclers to him were as a rule 'dull, prejudiced, ignorant and superficial'. He also remarked that by the Dionysian standard of history as the teaching of philosophy by example, there were really no native Indian historians. Irrespective of the examples passed down through generations, truth was obscured by the 'hereditary, official and sectarian prepossessions of the narrator'. Indian analysts never contemplated society in its constituent elements or its mutual relations, in terms of its institutions or classes, its public and private countenances. Moreover, under the despotic reign of the Muhammadan princes with their 'rigorous and sanguinary laws' and under the injury of such a state perpetrated on the body of the nation, the grand object of History, its *telos*, was lost.

What is significantly misguided in this indictment of historical writing is that the more important historians of medieval India did indeed see themselves as passing on lessons of the past.[5] Such lessons were integral to an overall sense of tradition in Islam which include in the most extensive sense all the branches of knowledge (*'ilm*), and in particular, religious knowledge as found in the Qur'ān, *ḥadīṯ* and the *sharī'a*. It also included the basic tenets of Islamic belief and humanism

[5] Mohammad Habib on his essay on Sir Henry Elliot has pinpointed the fallacies inherent in these remarks. Not only was Eliot comparing Indian governments of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with the constitutional and political achievements of Victorian England, but also implying that the medieval period of history in India was period of darkness bereft of any indication of 'the inner life of civilised man': Mohammad Habib, *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period*, Aligarh, 1974, pp. 2-5.

as distilled in the ideology of *adab* which can also be defined more functionally as a code of conduct and behaviour.[6]

Ziya-ud-din Barani, perhaps the most well known historian of the Sultanate period, in the introduction to his *Tārīkh-i Firūz Shāhī* (1358) declared that his manuscript combined more than one virtue in that it was an account of the kings, a book on law and governance, a source of precepts and advice for rulers and an authentic account of the past. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami points out that Barani's ideas of history as a proper science were in a conventional sense close to the study of the Qur'ān, for Qur'ānic teaching demanded that the faithful draw lessons from the civilisations and creeds that came before Islam.[7] Barani considered history or *'ilm-i tārīkh* as intimately related to the tradition of the Prophet's teaching, the *'ilm-i ḥadīṯ*.[8] Rather than debate whether Barani was a historian struggling with the theological, we should note the didactic task of history as example is clearly manifest here. Barani considered his project as a continuation of the chronicle of the great master Minhaj-us Siraj, the *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*. He noted, however, that if he simply transcribed what Minhaj had already written his readers would gain no knowledge from his work, and yet if he put down anything contrary, or summarised or expanded on the master's writing, he would be considered brazen and 'people would consider him insolent and presumptuous and he would also be casting doubts in the reader's mind about the correctness of the *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*'.[9] This admission is perhaps more than just on account of conventional literary humility. If we take this statement seriously then the historical narrative cannot be entirely contingent on the subjective position of the author and his interpretation, but must be part of an ongoing discourse larger in its teachings than the views and experiences of the individual historian. Elsewhere Barani stated that there were so many collected

[6] Barbara Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority*, Berkeley, 1984, p. 39.

[7] Mohibbul Hasan (ed.), *Historians of Medieval India*, Meerut, 1968, pp. 37-9.

[8] It should be noted here that contemporary Muslim scholars in India were particularly interested in the four main branches of religious discourse: *taṣavvuf* (mystical treatises), *ḥadīṯ*, *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tafsīr*: Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*, New Delhi, 1978 (first pub. 1961), p. 277. Also see below for a discussion of the status of History in relation to the transmitted tradition.

[9] Mohammed Habib's translation, Habib, *Politics and Society*, vol. 2, p. 296.

accounts of the deeds of the people associated with Firuz Shah Tughlaq and his dynasty – allies, companions, generals and commanders of the army – that he hesitated to recount them once again.[10] And yet he remained committed to continue his recension because without the mention of the attributes and achievement of the worthy, his history would remain 'unadorned' and austere. Barani in the passage cited above described himself as a *m'uallif* (literally the one who makes familiar or joins together) – a compiler of texts, an author. He also described his text as a *taṣnīf* which indicates both literary composition and record. In his world of the scribe, literary composition and historical writing shared the same overall genre, and thus the historical sensibility was immanent in the pursuit of writing and recording in themselves. Knowledge of glorious deeds, virtuous action, nobility of character and ethical conduct (*māṣir, maḥāmad, buzurgānī, avṣāf-i-buzurgī, akhlāq*) was requisite among the cultivated, and so knowledge of the past was cumulative.[11] The historian's discerning vision was guided not so much by events and their causes as by the their underlying moral significance.

Among Barani's illustrious contemporaries, Isami in his *Futūḥ-us Salāṭīn* put forward the idea that lessons could indeed be gleaned from the mistakes and misdeeds of Muhammad-bin Tughlaq, and these could be shored against a providence which was mysterious and yet determined the course of human life.[12] Peter Hardy in his discussion of Isami's work points out that his repeated moral injunctions were drawn often from formalistic criteria of human vices and virtues incumbent on all good Muslims.[13] Of a decidedly mystical bent, Isami was drawn to the successors of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, and the moral adages that illuminate his history underline the impermanence of glory and wealth

[10] Calcutta University, *Persian Selections*, Calcutta, 1963, p. 59.

[11] This mode of historical writing can be traced to al-Tabari's famous *Universal History* where the chronicle is openly a compilation of past authorities, and dedicated to the revelation of God's will in history: H.A.R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature: An Introduction*, Oxford, 1963, p. 58.

[12] Jagadish N. Sarkar, 'Personal History of Some Medieval Historians and their Writings' in M. Hasan (ed.), *Historians of Medieval India* Meerut, 1968, p. 175.

[13] Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, London, 1960, p. 109.

and the arbitrariness of providence.[14] The world is just like a stage; human history is like an endless succession of plays, and destiny is the playwright.[15] Thus while recounting the achievements and exemplary character of the reigning Sultan on the throne of Delhi, he had an indirect but more vital recourse to moral judgement. Shams-ud din Siraj Afif wrote his history of the reign of Firuz Shah by compiling other pre-existing accounts.[16] It is worth noting here, as Hardy has pointed out, that Afif also wrote a biography of Firuz Shah in the form of a *manāqib* which is usually a record of the merits and miracles of Islamic holy men laid down for the enlightenment of future generations.[17]

In such instances the life of the emperor served as an example much like the life of a religious leader. Historical truth as distinct from empirical veracity for its own sake could thus be read allegorically. Episodes in the life of the emperor or individuals exalted by the ruling dynasty were known to the historian as well as his audience. Ontology of the past here was not strictly historical in the modernist sense, for virtue and faith were tied to a relatively fixed cosmology. It is not surprising that without such qualifications the observations of medieval historians appeared as unreflective theology to colonial historians delving into medieval Indian history for the first time. Thus Edwardes and Garreth, one a civil servant and the other a member of the Indian Educational Service, in their history of the Mughals, warned the students of Indian history that they should use these authorities with great caution for the 'manipulation of historical fact to suit the ideas of the author .. is nowhere worse than in India'.[18] There were so many cases of 'deliberate distortion of facts' that the 'political bias of a work like Macaulay's *History of England* pales into insignificance'. Needless to say nationalist historiography in India in response to such accusa-

[14] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India*, Delhi, 1983, p. 115.

[15] Isami, quoted by Nizami. Also 'destiny bestows two kinds of head dresses – one on the poor in the shape of a cap and the other on the King in the form of a crown. But whether it is the royal crown or the dervish's tunic, both will have to be left behind for the heirs to inherit': ibid., p. 116.

[16] Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, p. 54.

[17] Ibid., p. 41.

[18] S.M. Edwardes and H.L. Garrett, *Mughal Rule in India*, Delhi, 1956, p. 1.

tions has struggled persistently to rescue a critical, secular and progressive historical awareness from among medieval accounts.

In the Sultanate period there was a great deal of uneasiness about the proper station of kings and emperors *vis-à-vis* orthodox *'ulamā* as well as the ardent followers of the mystical orders. Some orders like the Chistis were foresworn to abstain from the company of Kings and categorically refused royal patronage and service, others like the followers of Suhrawardi either acquiesced to the ascending authority of the Turkish Sultans or actively endorsed it.[19] The achievements of an ideal emperor in Muslim society would not have been made directly analogous to the traditional veneration of the Prophet. Even so, medieval chronicles of the Sultanate bore a likeness to the kind of records that were complied from the sayings and teachings, both heard and reported, of eminent Sufi elders and their disciples.

Adulation of the lives and acts of Mughal emperors of Hindustan, however, came closer to the kind of appreciation reserved for saints. The most well known instances of this are Abu'l Fazl's acclamation of Emperor Akbar in the *Akbar-nāmah* and his description of the imperial realm in the *'Ain-i Akbarī*. Abu'l Fazl's eulogy of Akbar was undisguised. Akbar was depicted both as the true philosopher-king as well as the Sufi epitome of human perfection: *insān-i kāmil*.[20] We know that Abu'l Fazl's vision of the Mughal emperor and his regime can be related to the eschatology of the Mahadavis, the dualism of the (Aristotelian) Peripatetics and the Nuqtavis, and the illuminationist philosophy of the (Platonist) Ishraqis. Akbar appeared to him in exalted light: a perfect vehicle for the teachings of both Plato and Plotinus. Royalty was a 'light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues'.[21] Akbar was beheld as the 'lamp of creation' (*chirāgh-i āfirīnish*). Over and above the dictates of eulogy the story of his patron's life was a source of reason and illumination, a beacon for the most noble pursuit, *irfān*: the ultimate realisation of truth. Abu'l Fazl wrote:

[19] Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics*, pp. 242-52.

[20] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, pp. 75-6.

[21] Abu'l-Fazl, *The A'in-i Akbari*, H. Blochmann (tr.), Calcutta, 1927-49, p. lv.

> My sole object in writing this work was, first to impart to all that take an interest in this auspicious country, a knowledge of the wisdom, magnanimity, and the energy of him who understands the minutest indications of all things, created and divine, striding as he does over the field of knowledge; and, secondly to leave future generations a noble legacy.[22]

Such an image of the emperor as the *ens perfectissimum*, placed the function of history against the grain of eschatology. The purpose of the chronicle then was to order the past accordingly and show how the emperor is blessed with the utmost good fortune (*iqbāl*) and unsurpassed military and administrative sagacity. And thus in the *Akbar-nāmah* the emperor's early life and struggles were narrated to show the signs of greatness, which unfolded gradually but surely over time.

Another historian of repute who was part of Akbar's courtly circle, and whose views were openly contrary to Abu'l Fazl's, was Abdul Qadir Badauni. Badauni in his history and occasional critique of Akbar's reign, the *Muntakhābu-t-Tawārikh*, introduced the worth of history as a noble science or branch of knowledge (*'ilm*), a fountain of knowledge for the learned and the discerning, and a source of examples (*sabab-i-'ibrat*).[23] History was a pursuit of importance for it was not only a noble branch of knowledge and a refined art, but a great reminder to the faithful of the true knowledge of past experience which should keep them steadfast in their faith, and the teachings of the *shari'a*.[24] Badauni was clearly opposed to heterodox mysticism and refers to some of the less orthodox sects drawn to Akbar's court as 'an insignificant band of innovators and inventors' driven by greed, importunate desires and shortsightedness.[25] Yet, in a crucial sense his

[22] Ibid., pp. 1-2.

[23] 'Abd al-Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh*, Delhi, 1973, p. 4; Fauzia Zareen Abbas, *Abdul Qadir Badauni, as a Man and Historiographer*, Delhi, 1987, p. 132.

[24] In Badauni's words: '. . . the science of history is essentially a lofty science and an elegant branch of learning, because it is the fountain-head of the learning of the experienced, and the source of the experience of the learned and discriminating, and the writers of stories and biographies, from the time of Adam to this present time in which we live, have completed reliable compositions and comprehensive works, and have proved the excellence thereof by proofs and demonstrations . . .': Badauni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh*, p. 4.

[25] Ibid., p. 6.

history was still exemplary history, the history of kings and their earthly majesty. The ill-gotten fruits of power and deviation from the path of righteousness is a valuable cautionary tale. Thus the ancient *Shahnama* which 'relates the affairs of kings of the world' should be read with circumspection for it may bring sense to those who 'on account of pride' have fallen into a slumber of oblivion and thus been tricked by the devil. History in both Abu'l Fazl and Badauni provided a mirror for the prince, and the reflections therein are propitious or ominous according the kind of moral lesson the historian wishes us to glean from its surface.

Witness of Time

The immutability of human nature and the universal validity of virtue and vice, wisdom and folly, indicate a conception of time and temporality in medieval Indian chronicles quite distinct from our post-Enlightenment sensibility of time as progress or as a movement forward from the past to the present. In order to examine this, we need to ask: what kind of consequence Islamic notions of history and temporality had on the writing of Indian history?

In medieval Europe, as Collingwood argued in his *Idea of History*, it was Christianity that broke away from the a-historical Platonist metaphysics of late antiquity which had long maintained the idea that the agency of human action stood outside the course of history as an eternal, unchanging and dimly apprehensible substance.[26] In the Christian eschatological tradition, nothing was eternal except God; history was nothing but the working out of God's purpose and the only way the human mind could conceive God was as an agent of 'pure action'. A significant legacy of the Christian thaumaturgical vision of time was that it attached great importance to the succession of historical events, and its ecumenical orientation opened up the possiblity of a single chronological framework as well as the idea of a universal history of salvation for the human kind. Medieval scholars in Europe saw history 'not as a natural development but as a series of events

[26] R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, New York, 1956, pp. 48-56.

ordered by divine interventions and revelations'.[27] The Lutheran reformation challenged the dogma and speculative theology of the Catholic Church as well as the idea of Rome as the City of God thus driving a vast temporal rupture between the first apostolic Church and the present.[28]

We hardly need emphasise that Islamic metaphysics was equally heir to Greco-Roman substantialism, and a sharp duality of form and substrate was transmitted to the tradition of *falsafā* through the translations and controversies during the 8th-10th centuries of the reign of the Abbasid Caliphate.[29] This 'radical dualism of the body and mind' to borrow a phrase from Fazlur Rahman, permeated the eschatology of the early Muslim philosophers and led to a difficult *rapprochement* between metaphysics and theology.[30] Yet Islamic philosophy did not attempt a systematic disavowal of its Greek metaphysical foundations. It sought recourse to the idea of a unique human intellect that had the potential to apprehend reality, but did not need to arrive at it through reason alone. Rather, the path of knowledge was seen as intuitive and accessible to the common believer through rightful conduct. The doctrine of the Prophet as the ideal man was indeed fortuitous for the development of a rigorous tradition of historical exegesis, for although normative conduct (*sunna*) and the reported sayings of Muhammad and the Companions (ḥadīs̱) were seen as co-extensive and coeval, changing social and cultural contexts with the geopolitical expansion of Islam led to a formal critical apparatus to mark the authenticity of the verbally transmitted corpus and the chain of authority by which it was supported (*isnād*). In short, doctrinaire Islam in itself inspired a critical chronology and a vital rehearsal of tradition for generations of Muslims separated further and further in time and space from the Prophet and his Companions.

[27] J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, New York, 1932, p. 21. Johannes Fabian, in his study of the roots of temporality in current anthropological theory focuses specifically on the age of Enlightenment as the watershed between sacral and secular time, arguing that the modern secular dimensions of time developed, *tout court*, from the universalisation of Judaeo-Christian versions of time: Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York, 1983, p. 2-3.

[28] Kemp, *The Estrangement*, pp. 80-1.

[29] Gibb, *Arabic Literature*, pp. 63-70.

[30] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, Chicago, 1979, pp. 118-19.

The relevance and authority of the past in theology suggests, *a fortiori*, a possibility of universal history seen through eyes of an expanding community of believers (*millat*) across the variation of epochs and climates. The two terms most commonly used to denote history in Arabic are *akhbār* which denotes most of all information, but also events, story and anecdote, and then, *tārīkh* a term for history in general. The etymology of the word tārīkh denotes the lunar month, and thus, date, era and epoch.[31] Tārīkh in the sense of *epoch* came into circulation with the introduction of the Muslim era of the Hijra and subsequently meant both history and the writing of history. Although history was not considered to be a part of the general classification of sciences, historical knowledge acquired respectability as the source of wisdom. Without an *a priori* division between knowledge of the natural and human world, early histories included the history of natural calamities, succession of dynasties and the climates in which they prospered, as well as the creation and resurrection of prophets.[32] As a branch of literature in general, history writing was an aspect of penmanship – a certain manner of prose and style of narrative art. In the shadow of an elaborate critical apparatus of received tradition that evolved around the biographies of transmitters and formal theological instruction, history became the source of precepts more of the temporal world, the lives and conduct of emperors and kings, the repository of *adab*.[33]

Classical Islam may not have articulated fully its own version of secular time, but an awareness of ecumenical history beyond scholastic chronology must have been indispensable to the encyclopaedic projects such those of al-Tabari and al-Masudi that wove together geography, philosophy, history and comparative religion – products of Islamic culture approaching a true cosmopolitan character.[34] Al-Tabari's *Kitāb*

[31] Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Leiden, 1968, pp. 11-13. Note that the same word has been adopted in vernacular languages of northern India such as Bengali, but only in the strict sense of a *date*.

[32] Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, pp. 32-5.

[33] Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, pp. 42-6.

[34] According to Muhsin Mahdi this was a move from political chronology to 'world cultural history', Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, Chicago, 1964, p. 143. There have been many debates as to whether Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* represents a fundamental departure in historical

Tārīkh ar-Rusul val-Mulūk (*The Book of the History of the Prophets and the Kings*) begins with creation and recounts both Biblical and Persian legends to lay down the origins of Islam. In this annalistic form historical duration is conceived both in terms of Muslim years as well as the reigns of the Caliphs.[35] Historical time here is also coextensive with the idea of the perfect city[36] (madīna, *tamaddun*), but increasingly – and this would certainly be the case after the Ghaznavid and Ghurid excursions into north India – confronted with the possibility of gaining a composite society of both believers and non-believers, Arabs and non-Arabs (*'ajam*). Alberuni's *magnum opus* on India (*Kitabul Hind*) written during the reign of Mahmud of Ghazna (eleventh century A.D.), from the above standpoint is the testimony of an expansive, ecumenical Islamic culture which had undergone the experience of having to organise a polity in lands of the uncivilised as well as countries inhabited by people of the book.[37] Alberuni's discussion of the learning of the Hindus is critical, reasoned and assured, and does not hesitate to 'confront the theories of one nation with those of another simply on account of their close relationship, not in order to correct them'.[38]

If a mature conception of the Sultanate was predicated on a more ecumenical form of historical awareness, its commonplace outcome

ratiocination (see for example, Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World*, London, 1984, pp. 168-9). According to Mahdi, Khaldun is primarily concerned with the permanent aspects of history, the universal nature of man and society, thus the importance of history is not necessarily in that it constitutes an autonomous science, but in that it leads to a general science of culture: Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy*, p. 149.

[35] Ignace Goldziher, *A Short History of Classical Arabic Literature*, Berlin, 1966, p. 122; Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, London, 1968, p. 389.

[36] The *Madīnat an-nabī* or the City of the Prophet was established when Muhammad journeyed to the city of Yathrib along with his companions, Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, Chapel Hill, 1984, p. 13.

[37] One could cite a parallel eleventh-century study of the history of science from Islamic Spain, al-Andalusi's (Said) *Ṭabaqāt al-Umam* or the *Classes of Nations*; Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy*, pp. 143-4; Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 566. We can compare this to Ibn Khaldun's experiences as a scholar and administrator in North Africa, Spain and Egypt and the impact it had on his conceptions of history: Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy*, pp. 53-6.

[38] Al-Beruni, *Alberuni's India*, tr. E.C. Sachau, London, 1910, p. 24.

was the familiar *annalistic* form of historical writing, most often cultivated under the auspices of particular dynasties. One of the more obvious features of the annalistic form was that it was cumulative. Eyewitness accounts of a particular period became the established content of the subsequent historical work. A common chronographic feature of this, derived from the Arab tradition, was the *ṭabaqāt* division, narration of events arranged according to a certain number of years, typically ranging from a decade to forty years.[39]

The Timurid confederate polity, which later grew into the Mughal empire, had been founded by Chaghatai migrants into northern India who succeeded in securing the loyal military and administrative services of Persian and central Asian (Turani) nobility. The Timurid doctrine of rulership was conceived independently of the classical companionate Islam and its legitimate temporal representation, and the legacy of a direct lineage and a centralised control of the army was passed on to the Mughals as well as the Ottoman and Safavi dynasties.[40] Akbar's singular political achievement was the foundation of a composite ruling class loyal to the imperial dynasty initiated through the displacement of Turani nobles and diminution of the Chaghatai confederate traditions, and the successful incorporation of Rajputs and Muslims of Indian descent into the administrative structure.[41] At the same time Akbar sought the approbation of heterodox Muslim groups such as the Chishti Sufis, and his status as the spiritual instructor of the realm, as portrayed by Abu'l Fazl, derived partly from this very association.[42]

This composite heritage of Mughal kingship inspired dynastic histories both annalistic and esoteric. It is difficult therefore to establish that there was a prevailing distinction between linear, chronological succession and the notion of an eternal return as proclaimed among the heterodox mystic groups. We know that Akbar's court admitted and

[39] Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, pp. 93-4.

[40] Douglas Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire*, Delhi, 1989, pp. 31-2.

[41] Iqtidar Alam Khan, *The Political Biography of a Mughal Noble: Mun'im Khan Khan-i Khanan, 1497-1575*, Delhi, 1973, p. xvi.

[42] John F. Richards, 'The Formation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir', in J.F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, Madison, 1978, pp. 256-8.

patronised Shaikh Mubarak, an adherent of the Mahdavi movement and his two sons: the court poet Faizi and historian-philosopher Abu'l Fazl. Shaikh Mubarak has been credited with a commentary *Tafsīr-i-Kabīr*, where, according to Badauni, he claimed to be the *mujaddid*, or the renewer of the new Islamic century.[43] Another follower of Akbar's new eclectic faith (*Din Ilahi*), Mir Sharif of Amul in 1580 had tried to prove that the Lord of the Age was going to appear in Hijri 990 or 1582 A.D.[44] According to Badauni there were many others who sought to demonstrate that Akbar was indeed the *Sāhib-i Zamān*. Whether the emperor acknowledged the implication of these descriptions or not, Akbar did proclaim a new solar calendar (the Ilahi Era) partly for administrative purposes which remained in official circulation even during Aurangzeb's time.[45]

Along with the new era he also commissioned a new history of all Mohammedan kings on the occasion of a millennium being completed after the flight of the Prophet. This work called the *Tārīkh-i Alfī* (*The History of a Thousand Years*) composed by Maula Ahmad and other chroniclers, however, was begun ten years *before* the completion of the period and given the appropriate title of *alfī*. Akbar also ordered that the word death (*rihlat*) replace the word flight (*hijrā*) and all the dates be changed accordingly for the events of the world.[46] This was to be a detailed historical account (*bayān-i umūr*) of the millennium after the death of the Prophet till A.H. 997 (1589 A.D.). The work was initiated by Mulla Ahmad Tatwi and continued after the Mulla's assassination by Asaf Khan, while Badauni himself in 1591-92 completed the final version of the last two volumes. Thus the dates of Muhammad's flight and death, as well as the commencement of an emperor's reign lent a certain ordination to the measure of time for the realm (*ahl-i bait*) as a whole. From the emperor flowed the calendar as well as days of the week which were marked for audience at court with people of different

[43] A.A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign*, Delhi, 1975, pp. 101-2, 419.

[44] Ibid., p. 431.

[45] Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire*, p. 133.

[46] H.M. Elliot and John Dowson (eds.), *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, Allahabad, 1964, vol. 5, pp. 151-52; Ethé Collection of Persian Manuscripts, India Office Library and Records, London, p. 2.

classes: men engaged in war and administration, scholars and men of religion, and entertainers.[47] Days of the week were also associated with their respective planets: Tuesday was the day of Mars auspicious for the patronage of warriors, and Sunday, which belonged to the Sun, portended good fortune for rulers and kings. Regnal time thus did not function as an absolute: the Ilahi co-existed with the Hijra for at least two generations at the court. Various strands of temporal reckoning were thus woven together in the deep time reckoning of the medieval Mughal courtly culture.

If the figure of the emperor was the axis that lent meaning to calendrical and astrological time, regnal time often became the marrow of dynastic history. Distinctions of deed, date, event and observation acquired a certain degree of historical transcendence subject to the workings of empire. This effect can be described as an *imperial ordering* of the past, not so much as an imposition of the supreme will of the emperor, but the assertion of a semantics of time, a normative system of meaning in political-moral events. The crucial difference between this mode of historical authority and ours is that the authenticity of the chronological narrative does not flow from purely syllogistic means, that is, simply through the strategies of induction and deduction. The hierarchy of events or a painstaking arrangement of chronology may seem strange to us, but they presume a referential frame in which the particular duration and order of things can be variously related to the superordinate scheme of temporality. Ambitious emperors such as Akbar sought to command this entire corpus thoroughly and not just through the courtly patronage of writing. Needless to say such ordering could also be perilous. By elevating a court and its closest circle of households above the community of believers it threatened to subsume the larger *ecumene* of Islam which included the Sunni orthodox genealogies, the Shi' traditions of divine viceregency and the genealogies of the Sufis.[48] Thus for Abu'l Fazl universal historical time is happily ordained through the auspices of the *pādshāhī*, for Badauni it is not.

[47] Elliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, pp. 121-2.

[48] This formulation was suggested to me by Faisal Devji. See also Faisal F. Devji, 'Muslim Nationalism: Founding Identity in Colonial India', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1993

Both history and time in the Indo-Persian world therefore were apprehended as plural: the word for date, tārīkh stood for history, both in the singular and the plural (*tavārikh*). In a few clear instances date, event and historical example come together in the account of empires and imperial reigns. Most notable of these, of course, is Abu'l Fazl's *Akbar-nāmah* which assumes that every unusual event in Akbar's childhood, adolescence and early development is a sign for the clear and present greatness of the emperor. This is historical time as *prognostic* time with a foreknowledge and after-knowledge of occurrences. The overall consistency of a plural historical duration makes it possible to appreciate the *discrete* nature of date and event, especially where a narrative is broken down into typical episodes on war, march, hunting, fruits, miracles, audience, entertainment, description of places and so on, in quite a seamless sequence. It might be that our contemporary historical discipline perched resolutely on a singular axis of temporality has lost sight of the heterogeneity of time in which the medieval world might have apprehended the relations between person, place and event.

Memory, Genealogy, and the Subject of History

Is it possible for us to describe a medieval relationship between historical time proper and an intuitive time that was closer to lived experience? Modernist historical consciousness is premised on the very idea that objective time, as a cognitive *a priori* or as a Newtonian constant is truly distinct from experiential time. For Kant, absolute time had only one dimension. Because time was necessarily successive it could not allow simultaneous and different registers of temporality that were derivative of experience, as experience could not be trusted for 'strict universality or apodeitic certainty'.[49] Modernist historical discourse has replaced the heterogeneity of experiential time with the notion of time as the progress of humanity in abstraction (society, nation, state) so thoroughly that we no longer need to articulate the metaphysics of its underlying temporality. Bury's *locus classicus* on this point is still suggestive:

[49] Immanuel Kant, 'The Relational Theory of Space and Time.' in J.J.C. Smart (ed.), *Problems of Space and Time*, New York, 1964, pp. 110-11.

> The idea of human progress then is a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing – *pedetemtim progredientes* – in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely ... The process must be the necessary outcome of the physical and social nature of man; it must not be at the mercy of any external will; otherwise there would be no guarantee of its continuance and its issue, and the idea of Progress would lapse into the idea of Providence.[50]

Such a thesis pits the affective life of the individual against the course of history, and as Philippe Ariès observed, cloisters the quotidian – the '*vie particulière et intérieure*' – against its grand pronouncements.[51] A medieval historical imagination, we can posit, did not occasion such a rift between the social and the personal or between historical veracity and collective memory *per se*.

Halbwachs, one of the first theorists of collective memory saw the in the birth of general history the fragmentation and loss of social memory as well as the end of live tradition.[52] Memory, after history, had had its say thus could only represent a past that was lost, matching its own fixed present with time that was *post mortem*.[53] Without questioning the justification of Halbwach's characterisation of the historical discipline of his time, we can explore his insights in the context of our discussion of medieval Indian historicity. First, even modern society partakes of a collective historical reckoning that 'pronounces judgments on people while they are alive and on the day

[50] Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 5.

[51] '*C'est porquoi le témoignage est un acte proprement historique. Il ignore l'objéctivité froide du savant qui compte et qui explique. Il se situe à la recontre d'une vie particulière et intérieure, irréductible à aucune moyenne, rebelle à toute généralisation, et des poussées collectives du monde social*': Philippe Ariès, *Le Temps de l'Histoire*, Paris, 1986, p. 86.

[52] Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. by F. J. Ditter and V. Y. Ditter, New York, 1980, pp. 78-80.

[53] Pierre Nora has recently argued that the disciplinary history in our times has thoroughly usurped the space of historical memory, and all that remains in contemporary society are fragmented 'sites of memory' (*lieux de mémoire*): Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, no. 26, (1989), pp. 7-11.

of their death'.[54] And second, social memory in itself is *epochal*; that is, history can only become socially familiar through the collective identification of certain chronological landmarks. According to Halbwachs the density of these landmarks resemble the density of street signs as we approach a tourist site (may we suggest also a medieval pilgrimage) and thus society marks passages of time for collective reckoning.

Given an age where the disjuncture between the historical and collective memory does not obtain, where the past is not quite the object of mourning or nostalgia, but a living archive of precedent, what is historical is also memorable. We have already noted that the historical account in medieval Islam drew inspiration from the tradition of transmitted authority and its exegesis. Muslims were enjoined to cherish the lifetime of the Prophet, his family, and his companions. Descendants of people who were close to him were venerated for powers of blessing which were considered to have been passed on through them.[55] A similar virtuous anamnesis is associated with the veneration of mystical figures and their spiritual successors who maintain the genealogy of teacher and disciple (*silsilah*). It is not hard to imagine that in the mature phase of Indo-Persian kingship the collective memory of the lives of emperors and their courtiers would also become the substance of filiative historical accounts which are our only clues to the density of an epochal remembering that was an integral part of the immense popularity and lasting veneration of the Mughals.

In the period of the Delhi Sultanate kingship, although founded on an well-entrenched ruling class and a formidable muster of forces, could not hope to assimilate either the authority of the orthodoxy or the popularity of the Sufis. The dissociation between imperial power and saintliness was clearly evident among courtier-littrateurs such as Amir Khusrau who had no hesitation in putting down the worldly ambitions of Alauddin Khilji and reprimanded him for his overweening ambition in grabbing cities and countries through unholy war.[56] The true Sultan

[54] Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 175.

[55] Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, p. 21.

[56] K.A. Nizami, *Studies in Medieval Indian History and Culture*, Allahabad, 1966, pp. 120-1.

according to Khusrau was none other than Shaikh Nizam-ud-din Auliya who did not need a throne or a crown, for the dust of his feet was coveted by all emperors alike. Zia-ud-din Barani regarded the Prophet as *sultān-i-paighambarān* (ruler of all Prophets) and before his death composed a biography of Muhammad; he spent his last days in the *khānqā* of Shaikh Nizam-ud-din Auliya among pilgrims. In the Mughal period, however, the aura of the emperor had bourgeoned much further in popular reckoning.

It is well known that Akbar cultivated inspirational loyalty with his close companions, and among the newly instituted rites of the Din Ilhai was the initiation ceremony where members of the household and the nobility accepted the discipleship (*murīdī*) of the emperor as spiritual guide (*murshid*). During this initiation disciples laid their head on the Akbar's feet. The emperor placed their turban back and gave out the *shasht* (girdle) in the form of a ring or miniature portrait to be worn as an amulet.[57] The practice of discipleship among courtiers continued through Jahangir's time. Nobles of high rank inscribed the word *murād* on their signets and the emperor gave daily glimpses to prostrating crowds assembled outside the palace. Water blessed by the emperor's own hands was routinely used as a cure for sickness. Such divine attributes of Mughal emperors had become the accepted standard of kingship. It is no surprise then that the memory of imperial association added transcendental significance to the past, particularly among a heterogeneous nobility which was not necessarily bound by the same religious sensibility.

Historians of the realm were typically associated with families who were pledged, often across more than one generation, to the royal household. They fulfilled in the temporal realm what was expected of the murād in the hospice, the promise of unquestionable loyalty to the mentor. Abu'l Fazl's family had come originally from Yemen. His grandfather Shaikh Khizr migrated from Sind to Nagaur.[58] His father Shaikh Mubarak persecuted by the *'ulama* for his Mahdism and under the threat of exile and murder was given refuge at Akbar's court. His two sons, Abu'l Fazl and elder brother Faizi were also initiated into the

[57] Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire*, pp. 150-1; Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, pp. 398-400, 406-7.

[58] Azra Alavi, *Socio-religious Outlook of Abu'l Fazl*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 5-6, 23.

courtly literary circle. Later Abu'l Fazl wrote that in Akbar he had finally found a guide in action and a comfort in times of loneliness. Badauni was introduced to the court through Jalal Khan Qurchi, confidant and personal friend of the emperor.[59] J. F. Richards has located the practice of devoted hereditary service to the imperial household in the comprehensive term *khānazādī*, derived from both the idea of discipleship as well as a kind of military slavery, the word *khānazād* meaning literally 'son of the house'.[60]

Such identification of imperial servants to the ruling house suggests a desire for ennoblement that exceeds the sparse rationality of profit and power, and indicates that the wider family was a crucial site for the repository of anecdote, memory and records – an extended scaffolding around the unfinished architecture of the past. Thus memoirs (*tuzuk*, *tazkira*) of emperors and their family members or the reminiscences of courtiers intimate with the royal family share the same rank with accounts of court historians and scribes. Akbar, keen to preserve the memorial of his Timurid ancestors in India, issued an order in court that any of his attendants who had the gift of composing a historical account and who had witnessed the reign of his father should come forth with a manuscript.[61] Thus Jauhar, Emperor Humayun's ewer bearer for over twenty five years, found the courage to write a history (*Tazkirat-ul Wāqi'at*) based on the strength of what he saw and heard.[62] Abd al-Hamid Lahawri in his *Bādshāh Nāmah* composed under the patronage of Shah Jahan laboured to provide the minutest details of the everyday affairs of the imperial household: pensions and honours to various members of the royal family, titles and *mansabs* to nobles, gifts given out in public ceremonials during the vernal equinox or the royal birthday.[63] The autobiographical memoir *Tārīkh-i dilkashā* ('Heart-revealing History') of Bhimsen, a Hindu (Kayasth) officer of middle rank in the employ of Aurangzeb, put forth a detailed eye-witness account of the conduct of the nobility during Aurangzeb's Deccan

[59] Abbas, *Abdul Qadir Badauni*, p. 44.

[60] Metcalf, *Moral Conduct*, pp. 362-4.

[61] Nizami, *Studies in Medieval Indian History*, p. 152.

[62] Ibid., pp. 154-5.

[63] Sarkar, 'Personal History of Some Medieval Historians', pp. 185-6.

campaigns.[64] For whom were these histories written? Before the age of the printed word, when readership was limited by the transcription of manuscripts, such records must have served as reminiscence and moral self-reflection – the *milieux de mémoire* – of a very select brand of the learned and the discerning. The presentation of copies of history by the emperors to the closest nobles and members of the household must have been a formal recognition of this exercise.

While nationalist historians of India in the present century have tirelessly demonstrated the fecundity of the indigenous archive for the reconstruction of medieval history, the richness of such findings should not necessarily lead us to believe that the Mughal Indo-Persian achievement in creating a lasting conception of kingship in medieval India also effected a general revolution in temporality among the mass of its subjects. This point brings us closer to a formulation of history as descent, both sanguinary and spiritual. Genealogies, however exalted, are inherently conservative in their account of the past, and do not serve well the cause of a general history of society. Over the course of time Persian chronological compendia of rulers in Delhi would come to share routine structures of succession with Hindu dynastic genealogies based on Purāṇic conceptions of temporal cycles.

One of the first histories published during the period of the East India Company's rule in Bengal, Mrityunjay Vidyalankar's *Rājābalī* (1808), locates genealogical time of kings within the Purāṇic hierarchies of cyclical duration – kalpa, manu, yuga – and joins it with the *śaka* era based on (as most pre-modern Bengali calendars were) the Scythian period. In this rendition of the past, Partha Chatterjee points out in a recent analysis, both mythical and historical past are rendered uniform under one unbroken chronological sequence.[65] The lineage of Muslim kings (*yavanas*) in Upper India in this scheme would begin with a divine retribution for the sins of the Chauhan dynasty of Prithviraja, and the Mameluks as well as the Mughals have their place in the great chain of kings traced back to the solar and lunar progenies (*sūrya* and *candra vaṃśas*). In Mrityunjay's manuscript a kind of demiurgic temporal sequence winds its way relentlessly to the eighteenth century (Mrityunjay was born in 1762).[66] It is clear that Mrityunjay's *Rājābalī* resembles genealogies of epigonous groups (*kula-grantha*, *kulapañjikā*) written for ritual purposes, and yet at the same time it also seems to have been influenced by histories such as the *Tārīkh-i Firishtā* and the works of Al-Biruni. It is evident that some histories dating as far back as the twelfth century, such as the anonymous collected history of Indo-Persia *Majmū'-t Tavārikh*, exhibit the same temper in the assimilation of royal lineages with chronological tables containing the genealogy of the Prophets, the Kings of Turkey, Arabia, Ghazna, Persia and India. The *Majmū'-t Tavārikh* includes a history of the Pāṇḍavas as in the *Mahābhārata*, the 'brahmin dynasties' and the history of Kashmir. One can detect the same genealogical sequences in other compilations of history like the surviving Persian translations of Yazid al-Taburi's *Tārīkh-i-Taburī* put together between the years 961-76 A.D. The *Risāla-i Rājāvalī* credited to Banwalidas, a scribe who worked with Dara Shukoh's retinue, tabulates Indian kings and emperors from the ancient times to the reign of Alamgir II. These manuscripts reveal the collective work of medieval chroniclers who tried to compile exhaustive cumulative acknowledgements of all the Rajas of Hindustan and the Islamic rulers of Delhi (*nām rājāhā-i hamūd va bādshāhān-i islām*).[67] Among the Rajas of the solar and lunar dynasties, the foremost is of course King Yudhishthira of the epic *Mahābhārata* – a figure unlikely to have existed outside mythical range – and the last, Prithvi (Prithviraj Chauhān who fought against Muhammad of Ghur). Remarkably, this same sequence is adopted by Mrityunjaya in the early nineteenth century.

[64] Richards, 'The Formation of Imperial Authority', p. 270.

[65] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993, p. 80.

[66] This kind of time reckoning has an inexorable consistency. In another early nineteenth-century chronicle *Rāja-bibaraṇa* the era of kings begin with the beginning of the *kaliyuga* at the end of King Yudhisthira's era from the *Mahābhārata*, Dineshchandra Sen, *Banga Sahitya Paricaya*, Calcutta, 1914, pp. 1729-31. Years are counted in the Shaka era. Hindu kings reign for 4267 years followed by 51 Muslim kings, who tally 651 years, 3 months and 28 days. Within the Timuri time span, Humanyun's second accession to Shah Alam's accession denotes 14 rulers with 257 years, 4 months and 29 days!

[67] Ethé, p. 207.

How does a Purāṇic conception of *vaṃśacarita*[68] share the same genealogical page with rulers of the Delhi Sultanate or the august Mughals? After all the Purāṇas derive all dynasties from the mythical figure of the Manu Vaivasvata whose descendants found the solar progeny of Ayodhya and the lunar progeny of Pratisthana.[69] Moreover in the Purāṇic conception the great cycle of time is divided into the four yugas which follow one another without interruption one thousand times making up one day of the lord of creation Brahma (kalpa) ending with total destruction (*pralaya*) and the beginning of a new creation.[70] The only explanation of this is that the vernacular chroniclers do not share the history of the kings whose genealogies are being enumerated; such kingship is not subject to their historical memory or their sense of self in society.[71] Situated at the margins of the time-span of legendary history, the world of the humble Purāṇic chronicler remains only dimly apprehensible to us. But what also of the adaptation of Purāṇic dynasties into the Indo-Persian histories cited above? Such incomplete borrowings denote the heterogeneity of time reckoning, where different significations of temporality can coexist without precipitating a Copernican rupture of existing cosmologies. Thus the weaving in and out of story, chronicle and record can continue *ad indefinitum*.

In devotional mysticism, however, confronted with a task of introducing a historical figure capable of affecting the genealogical order itself, the Purāṇas are simply retold to accommodate history. Let me give a brief example here from the medieval Bengali recensions of the life of Caitanya, the Vaiṣṇava visionary and revivalist. In Brindabana Dasa's *Caitanyabhāgabata* the opening *śloka* describes Caitanya and his chief companion Nityānanda as '*yugadharmapālau*' – keepers of righteousness of the age. In Krishnadasa Kabiraja Gosvami's celebrated *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*, Caitanya is described as the embodiment of lord Kṛṣṇa on earth. Just as Kṛṣṇna appeared among mankind

[68] The *Devībhāgavatam* says that a proper genealogy should account for the kings of the solar and lunar progeny as well as the dynasty of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu; it should also describe the duration of the various Manus and their descendants, P. Tarkaratna (ed.), *Devībhāgavatam*, Calcutta, 1981, p. 4.

[69] Ludo Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, Wiesbaden, 1986, p. 116.

[70] Ibid., p. 124-5.

[71] Partha Chatterjee, 'Itihāsera Uttaradhikara', *Baromāsa*, April 1991, p. 7.

during the *dvāpara-yuga*, in the *kali-yuga* Caitanya is his mortal embodiment.[72] These narratives begin typically with a rectial of the Purāṇas and Upapurāṇas and trace the genealogy of Caitanya to Śiva, Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, and unfold his life and deeds (*līlā*) presupposing a fore-knowledge of the events on the part of the listener. The nine *avatārs* or forms of Viṣṇu thus appear in the physical body of Caitanya, and he assumes from time to time the form of the *Varāha* (the Boar), *Matsya* (the Fish), *Kūrma* (the Tortoise) and *Nṛsimha* (the Man-Lion).[73] In the very body of the dancing and singing Caitanya, Purāṇic episodes are revealed to the devotees. What is most remarkable about such narratives is that Caitanya is treated *equally* as a human figure with episodes of birth, adolescence, and travels to various cities and pilgrimages in the region. Yet in this salvific genealogy, which posits an instantly numinous present, *our* distinctions of mythic time and historical time collapse.

Accounts such as these suggest that unlike historical consciousness of the rational subject giving meaning to time, history in the pre-modernist world does not attach time *in itself* as a condition of its possibility. The historical subject is neither derived from the dichotomy of the individual and society, nor from the notion of an anonymous interlocutor endowed with *post datum* historical rationality. In this, historical writing in pre-modern India dimly resonates the ideas of Greek antiquity – man is not the subject of knowledge, but subject *to* knowledge.[74]

[72] K.K. Gosvami, *Śrī Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, Calcutta, 1991, pp. 42-4.

[73] Brindabanadasa, *Caitanyabhāgabata*, Delhi, 1982, p. 132.

[74] Aristotle in *De Anima* conceives soul to be constitutive of the body and 'common sense' (*sensus communus*) that makes judgement and apprehends experience. *Noûs* (intelligence, intuition) is above the corporeal realm and is not subject to human exprience; rather, *noûs* is the agent of intelligence that actualises knowledge in the person who becomes subject to it, Aristotle, *Aristotle's De Anima*, Oxford, 1968, pp. 4, 8-9, 50. This notion of separation between human understanding and divine knowledge was passed on to the medieval world including the world of Islamic scholarship, Al-Farabi, *Sharh al-Farabi li-Kitab Aristutalis fi Al-ibarah: Al-Farabi's Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione*, London and New York, 1991; *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, Muhsin Mahdi (tr.), Ithaca, 1969.

Epilogue: The Uncertainty of Topologies

How far was the historical imagination of Indo-Persian culture representative of the general mass of inhabitants in medieval India? We cannot know for sure. It is likely that the more we move away from the confines of the imperial city and court, regnal histories recede into popular or folk narratives of the past that resemble the succession and not the substance of Purāṇic, Islamic, or mystic geneaologies. Vernacular chronicles we have discussed so far come close to this form of recognition of returning time as a motif. As Walter Benjamin reminded us, the chronicler is the *history-teller*.[75] The history-teller does not suffer from the obligation of the historian to explain the succession and causality of events, for events are embedded in a world whose workings are more or less inscrutable. However wide we cast the definition of history, we cannot but suspect that temporality in the medieval world remains impervious to purely human predicament and follows a teleology that can only be truly cosmo-moral in proportion.

Mythic-historic time (*mahākāla, purāṇetihāsa*) then can only be understood in a cosmographical plane where conceptions of space do not follow the present-day equations between cartography and the nation-state. Even in the imperial ordering of historical time, when new illustrious genealogies are created in the shadow of older ones, the interweaving of time and space remain crucial. The strength of empire lies in the ability to rule over the seven realms (*haft-kishvar*, derived originally from Persian, Mazdean cosmogony, of which the region of Hind is only one) traversed by seven climes (*haft-iqlīm*). If we take Abu'l Fazl's illuminationist philosophy seriously, then Akbar's aura lies beyond the seven known worlds in the numinous realm of the celestial pole. And further, imperial polty is conceived as an unchanging corporeal realm where flows of different classes of people are seen as Galenic humours and branches of the polity as vital organs.[76] In much of pre-modern cosmological traditions including Islam, *homo microcosmus* is situated at the center of spatial knowledge and cannot be replaced as an objective observer, as intellect is immanent in the seeker of knowledge and does not exist in and by itself.

[75] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York, 1968, pp. 95-6.
[76] Abu'l Fazl, *The A'in-i Akbari*, p. 3.

The particularities of time, place and person, the substance of eschatological, annalistic, and dynastic histories thus existed under shadow of immortality of the spirit. We do not have to turn to formal theology to appreciate what Alexandre Koyré described as the closed or 'interminate' universe of the Middle Ages and the recognition of the partial, relative character of human knowledge which cannot presume to represent the created world objectively.[77] The actuality of historical, mortal time in relation to the overarching consistency of the moral universe can be perhaps described in the concept of pointillism: many separate dots on a canvas that cohere into an image only if we walk away from it. In the pointillistic medieval universe the coordinates of time and space have not been reduced to fixed abstractions. A great continuum bridges the episodes of mortal and mythic life, genealogical time and historical time, the future and the past. Revolutions that threaten to shake this historical continuity – heterodox or revivalist movements – cannot radically alter the form. The future here does not appear as opaque or as perfectly uncertain as in modernity, nor does it produce the asymptotic expectation of some abstract principle: progress, development, revolution and other such absolutions. A very different journey begins with the early romantic novels of nineteenth century British-India such as Bankimchandra's *Durgeshanandinī* where the narrative opens with the protagonist riding towards a blind, uncertain, bold, historic future.

[77] Alexandre Koyré, *From Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, 1957, pp. 7-8.