

The flowing river of Time

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One way of understanding different cultures is through their beliefs regarding Time. While all religions of the world have at their core similar truths regarding human life, they vary in their approach to Time. And it is in the way Time is viewed, in the way human lives are interlinked with the passage of Time, that cultures and religions impact upon the psyche.

As a dancer, I began to engage early with concepts related to Time, not only those of the beats of the rhythm-cycle but also through myths with their dual quality of both antiquity and timelessness. The stories in the myths, though having taken place in other eras, are ever-present, ever relevant in the Indian universe, for our festivals re-enact those very stories and serve as links across the centuries.

Time is vividly encapsulated within myths. At some blessed moment when all the guards are asleep, a storm is raging and the chains at his feet fall off, Vasudeva is able to spirit Krishna away to Gokul. Rama is banished to the forest for fourteen years and the great paradox of a man of blemishless character, a prince, having to suffer untold hardships in the long course of fourteen years due to family intrigue is central to our identity. When all sorts of calamities befall Nala who loses his kingdom, his wife, even his clothes, it is attributed to the dark effect of the seven and a half years of Saturn's sojourn over his Moon. The story of Shakuntala raises the question whether a loss of memory can obliterate the historical and emotional truth of an event.

According to Indian thought, Time is one of the three keys to understanding a situation, the other two being place and person: *Desha, kaala, paatra*. In other words, when points along the continuum of time

and space are locked down, they create the specific historical, geographical and circumstantial context in which a person exists.

This is crucial in a worldview where Time itself is counted in terms of *kalpa*, one day in Brahma the Creator's life that equals to 4.32 billion human years. One's idea of Time thus expanded to infinity as it were, the life-span allotted to a human beings, rarely exceeding 120 years, seems paltry. All life as we know it, is subject to dissolution at the end of a Time-cycle, Brahma's night, after which a new one begins. The Matsya avatar, with strong parallels to the story of Noah's ark, deals with precisely one such junction in time.

In our frantically busy modern lives, where even a delay of a minute can sometimes set off a cascading effect of irritation and anger and nerves, it is rarely that one steps back with the kind of perspective this night and day of Brahma offers. When I try to relate to it, what becomes clear is the dispiriting insignificance of much that occurs in my daily life. Thank god I think, for the possibility of other lives in which I might achieve what is left unfinished in this life.

Coupled with a belief in re-birth, it is clear that in the Indian space, Time takes on a slow attenuated quality for there is no pressure of the kind that a belief in a single life to live might create. Clearly then, one's idea of history is also different, not as something linear but something cyclical. Re-birth itself implies a link across lives, a belief that one's actions in a particular life have consequences that unfold over future lives.

It creates the foundation for good, principled behaviour, for good deeds in one life promise lack of suffering in later ones. God has no place in the brusque logic of karma: as you sow, so you reap. However, the idea of rebirth delinks immediate effect from cause. It tells us that the effect of a particular act may sprout in a future life, where we will have

no obvious memory of this life but will carry the seeds that our actions marked on our souls.

The continuum of Time is not a blank dimension devoid of qualities. Time embodies within itself the qualities of planetary conjunctions, the cycles of the Moon, the light of the Sun. That is the reason that all Indian festivals are based on the lunar calendar, all except Sankranti in January which celebrates the Sun's entry into Capricorn. It is this understanding that leads to horoscopes being cast on the birth of a child, for the life of that child will embody the specific qualities imbued in the time of its birth. I like the idea that we are all walking illustrations of the map of the heavens when we were born. The auspicious energies of a given moment are harnessed in the concept of muhurtha, or favourable time for beginnings, for those energies will protect and nourish the nascent endeavour.

India is a land of festivals, and these special days of celebration punctuate the long unspooling of time, creating personal memories along the way. A festival engenders a curious relationship with Time: there is no way to prolong the festivities. When the ten days of Dussehera are over, they are, one can neither extend nor shorten the celebration. And that tension, that it will both arrive and inexorably end, is what lends a keen edge to the event.

I have always been struck by the fact that the bombs and firecrackers that people light with great abandon during Diwali, stop in the skies as though by common consent as soon as the new-moon night of Diwali is over. Children who have hoarded their crackers do burst their store in the days to come but somehow it lacks the mass energy created when people, rich or poor, come together in celebration.

In the same way, a death in the family and the subsequent non-participation in festivals for a year pushes one into a separate loop of Time. My father passed away this year, and it felt strange not to be in the flow of Diwali festivity, to maintain a little pool of darkness when a

million lamps were lit in the neighbourhood. At such a time, remembering my father's conviction that every day is a festival, that there is an ongoing daily celebration of life not restricted to festivals alone, helped to fill his absence.

There is a self-sealing quality to Time, in that once the moment is over there is no way to enter it again save by way of memory. Simultaneously, the future becomes porous when we dare to dream, when we project fruition of events and longings to a later time. We can navigate times past through music; listening to the same song we heard four years ago we do so as older, changed creatures, and yet we are able to connect the response to our younger selves.

It is the mind really that informs us of the division of time and keeps track of the seconds and minutes and hours. But our perception of those units of time is altered by our mind. A vacation always ends faster than it should while time goes slowly while waiting for examination results. The deadline for this article ambushed me suddenly. Engrossed in a movie or a book, time flies, waiting for a delayed plane, it drags. Memory distorts emotions felt at an earlier point in time and when in trouble, we often we make vows to ourselves or god regarding the future that are promptly forgotten once danger is past. It is by conquering our own minds that we achieve parity between real and perceived time.

The epic Mahabharata, often thought to be just a story about warring cousins, is actually a detailed exploration of the nature of human reality, of what happens when *desha*, *kaala* and *paatra*, or place, time and person come together. Some very beautiful verses therein relate to Time:

'Time creates all beings and Time destroys what is created.

Destroying what is created, Time is pacified by Time.

Time is the doer of all that happens in the world, of the good and the bad alike. Time contracts and limits what is created; and Time expands and sets free what is limited.

While everything sleeps, Time keeps vigil.
None can transgress the movement of Time...'