

Chapter 5

FUTURE'S PAST

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Introduction

Prophets are best at predicting the future – though, they tend towards the dystopic and the apocalyptic. The more philosophically inclined among us, when asked to imagine the future, create utopias secluded in the woods or contained on an island – in other words, by clearing away the accretions of the past and the unseemly present. Everyone else tends to read the best or the worst of the present moment and write it into the future – cars replaced by flying cars, cities replaced by mega cities, wars replaced by greater wars and so on. Such is the grasp that the present has on us – it is always natural, progressive, rational and *just so*. Historians, being neither prophets nor philosophers, usually have no thoughts on the future. We are busy figuring out what happened, why it did not happen some other way and why we should care it happened the way it did. But we do have a charge to unsettle whatever “truths” seem above reproach in our presents, to question basic assumptions of how things appear *now* and to argue for an imagination that ponders all possible futures, not just the ones that seem predestined.

My claim, as a historian, is simple: The “South Asia” we inhabit is a recent construct. It is a limited and restrictive political space as compared to more than a thousand years of textual history and thousands more in material and cultural memory. The stories it currently tells are themselves limited, the imaginations it cultivates are themselves rigid. The geographies that seem so indelible, so permanent are mere shadows upon regional perspectives that are still legible movement and life patterns, in languages, in customs, and in cultural imaginations. Taking this *longue durée* look at the Indic peninsula compels us to imagine varied configurations for the future sixty years, hence. I also take this as an opportunity to be fundamentally optimistic – that we can collectively realign our political memory to look at the past in new light and, hence, imagine other futures.

Conceptions of the Past, Realities of the Present

We have a very limited, highly prejudiced, imagination when it comes to comprehending the premodern in South Asia. This is so because our evidences are often fragmentary,

malleable or encoded in political and social tropes that are overtly determined. But the fault doesn't lie there. It lies, I would argue, in our overtly presentist vocabulary within which we chose to frame the past. The words we use, informed by our immediate past, are already encoded with incomprehensible difference – *coercion, submission, conversion, conflict*. The categories we construct are already hegemonic – “Hindu,” “Muslim,” “invader,” “indigenous.” We take these ahistoricized words and categories and proceed to give them universality that they don't deserve even for the here and the now. What is produced are deeply pessimistic formulations, of clashes and conquests, which suggest only intractable fault lines etched into the sites and spaces of South Asia. There is a terrible conflation at work in our historiography when it reads a mosque destruction in 1992 or the political tension between India and Pakistan in 2005 as a necessarily transparent rereading of a temple destruction in 1024 or the military conflict between the Mughals and the Marathas in 1682. That past, unmoored from its historical specificity, overshadows the contexts of the present. That particular past is used to explain, uncritically, or to justify, unambiguously, that which is left unexamined and unassimilated in the present.

Such a reading of the past is itself historically situated. Already from the late eighteenth century, the British efforts to narrate a history of India assumed “difference” within its inhabitants. When James Mill, in 1817, argued for a demarcation of Indian pasts into Ancient/Hindu, Mohammadan and British India, he was codifying as fact what the East India Company was engaged in as practice. The Uprising of 1857, the birth of nationalist politics in the 1880s, the splintering of public space as Hindu or Muslim in the 1890s along with the partition of Hindavi language as Urdu/Hindi created new representations of the past, all charged with explaining communal difference to a politics which was rapidly coagulating along religious lines. The *Arya Samaj* or *Anjuman Himayat-e Islam* were communal answers to political problems, which took as granted the idea of a unitary community. Hence, by the time Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared in 1940 that “[...] the Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs and literatures. They neither intermarry nor interline together, and indeed they belong to two different civilizations, which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions,” he was echoing an established understanding of incommensurate difference. Jinnah did see the political danger in ascribing difference only to the realm of religion and hence offered a thousand year old history of cultural practices as evidence of both scriptural and practical difference. Yet, articulated as such, difference remained paramount – in policy, in historiography and in the everyday political realm. The sixty odd years since 1947 have cemented difference, as only shed blood can. Given such renderings, we can only imagine dystopic futures for 2060 – 1947 gives us 1992, which gives us 2002, which in turn gives us 2009 and so on and so forth. The best minded among us can just hope for temperance.

Let me briefly offer a slightly lesser acknowledged history of the last millennium. However, I want to draw teleology away from the linear, progressive and ask you to imagine three concentric circles, each encoded with deliberately imprecise dates. The innermost circle, labeled 750–1250 CE, is where a specific dialogue of political

theology is mostly concentrated, though it emanates outwards. The second circle, labeled 1220–1850 CE, is the site of development of a new political language, administrative and localized. The third circle, labeled 1480–1947 CE, is the space of a distinctly visible vernacular culture, though it permeates back towards the center. The point of these concentric formulations is very basic: each of the processes I mention are visible (alongside other processes I do *not* mention) throughout this past, but at varied levels, and with varied emphasis. Into these contained, overlapping zones, we can sketch out both a history of South Asia and a sense of the regionalities that neither make difference as the *raison d'être* nor banish it from view. What follows is idiosyncratic and sketchy, so I urge the readers to seek greater details in the appended reading list.

An Alternative History

The Indian Ocean trade routes linking the coastal cities in western India to Sri Lanka and the East China Sea on the one end and to Yemen and the Red Sea on the other give us a clue to the regional foci of the first millennium. The Greek accounts, dating back to the fourth and third century BCE veer between utilitarian accounts of sea currents and ports to the fantastic and the marvelous descriptions of creatures and inhabitants. There is not much to suggest that these merchants and sailors ever inhabited the space or constituted a lived community. For that, we go to the Arab geographers and their accounts dating from the mid-ninth century, which tell of pivotal ports like Sarandip (then Ceylon, now Sri Lanka) that connected cities such as al-Mansura, Multan, Lahore, Aror or Indian states such as Kerala and Gujarat. In these accounts we begin to see how various sectarian and religious communities coexisted in mutually understandable political and cultural balance. I use the word “understandable” to highlight that it wasn’t the absence of strife (since there were near constant battles), nor the logic of hegemony (the Arab accounts routinely praise “great” kings of al-Hind) which enabled coexistence. Rather it was the mutual recognition of dueling interests, balanced for the sake of building communities – the Arab frontier city-states were inconsequential in relation to the Deccan-centered Rashtrakuta rajas or the Kanauj-based Gurjara-Praritharas. This is most visible in the political theology which developed in this frontier region – treaties with the bordering Rashtrakutas and the Gurjara-Paritharas, coinage with dual Arabic–Sanskrit legends (some bearing the inscription *śrī madhumadī* – the blessed Muhammad) built to Indic weight and protection for the pilgrims to the Sun Temple in Multan. To give a concrete example, *Hudud al-Alam* (Limits of the World), a geography compiled in late tenth century lists Lahore as a bustling city, with almost no Muslim population, under an Isma’ili governor. It notes, with approval, the security provided by the city to the traveler and the trader but it also carefully encodes sectarian difference into the description. Similarly, the accounts that specify the reuse of sacral space (e.g., building a mosque at the site of a temple, a Sunni mosque at the site of an Isma’ili mosque, reusing temple corpora) situate these acts as frontier practices which were inherently multivalued – legible as political and as religious acts, and as such, negotiable. The early thirteenth-century Persian *Chachnama* narrates several accounts

of sacred sites being protected specifically for their sacral and political value after a dialogue with the attendants and the community.

The “Muslim” empires that followed in the eleventh and twelfth century were based not in Damascus or Baghdad but in Ghazna and Ghur (Afghanistan), situating them specifically as Indic polities – the Ashokan empire from the third millennium BC stretched to Kandahar, after all. Hence, they need to be contextualized in much the same way as the Chola dynasties in the south – belonging to a mutually intelligible political theology in the Indic peninsular. Evidences for such a framing are abundant. Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030), that foremost iconoclast, employed Hindavi commanders and battalions. Tilak, the commander of the Hindavi troops, first got a job as a translator with the Mahmud court and then rose up the ranks, eventually having his own quarter in the city of Ghazna. Some accounts of that city, as well as surviving architecture, reveals a multiethnic space where artisans, trades and crafts communities from the Sindh and Rajasthan thrived. The regional specificity of Mahmud’s court is also visible in Buddhist temple paintings in Ladakh, which show the royal family clothed in textile patterns and style recognizable from Ghazna to Baghdad.

As we enter the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, we can now talk directly about the development of a new political language – Persian, and later Hindavi. The rapid rise of the Mongol empire across central and western Asia prompted mass migrations to cities across southern Asia – especially where preexisting networks of patronage and habitation were the strongest. These new migrants leveraged a networked globe where scriptural and scribal qualifications could enable someone to move across the cities of India and beyond (one can use the life of Ibn Battuta as exemplar of such a network). The capacity of the Delhi and Deccani courts to absorb such immigrants was possible only because of greater and tighter integration between the throne-city and its environ. I am, however, not referring simply to the Persian language, but to an Indo-Persianate literary culture, which sustained itself through deeply heterodox political communities – scribal, bureaucratic, martial, artisanal and governing. These knowledge brokers (*munshi, vakil, amil* to name just a few categories) were just as likely to be Brahmin or Kathari as Sunni or Shi’a. They acted as translators of custom, practice and law across the wide swaths of bordered empires and imperial practices, making possible the many transitions between the political entities from the Delhi Sultanates in the thirteenth century to Vijayanagar to the Mughal – and the Rajput, the Maratha and then the Sikh, the Nizam and the British. It was also in this realm that official acts of translations were conducted – in texts (of *Yoga-vasishta* or *Ramayana*), in architecture, in painting, cuisine and royal clothing.

The largest circle belongs to the vernacular culture. We can use the emergence of Hindavi vernacular, from the fourteenth century forward, to best contextualize this realm. However this isn’t a scriptural tradition, rather one that combines orality, practice and daily rituals where various strands of spiritual knowledge make new forms – deeply rooted in the local, from Punjab to Awadh to Deccan to Bengal. The clearest we can access it for the premodern is in the poetic and literary culture – the Hindavi riddles of Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), Khawaja Nakhshabi’s *Tuti Nama* (c. 1350),

Maulana Daud's *Cāndayān* (1379), the *Padmavat* of Malik Muhammad Jayasi (d. 1542), the *Madhumalati* of Shaikh Manjhan Shattari, the Panth of Kabir (early sixteenth century), the *kafiyān* of Shah Hussain (d. 1599) and Bulleh Shah (d. 1757), the *Heer* of Waris Shah (d. 1798). The short list is merely to sketch a literary culture that translated sacral and mystical sentiments within communities across the vast plains of north India and dipping down to the Deccan. Hence, these names and texts reflect everyday life in living communities (whether “Hindu” or “Muslim”) where such narratives, stories, and songs found daily practice and were sustenance.

These processes were never mutually exclusive nor were they sequential. One way to imagine them is to see the circles radiate out from the various royal cities which dotted the geography of premodern India peninsular – where the political theology was most visible in the courts, among the nobility, the political language of everyday governance tied the court to that city and others beyond via a diverse and vast bureaucratic class, and the vernacular cultural practices entwined the millions of inhabitants across the regions.

Making a Community through Bollywood?

Read against this long history – of intersectorian, interreligious politics, rooted languages, nested stories, entangled everyday lives – civilizational difference seems impossible to argue. Yet, ethnic and religious strife, whether intercommunal or intersectorian, is now the norm. The regional connectors such Kashmir, Kabul-Peshawar, Sri Lanka and Dhaka are decoupled. The centers of power, and consequently access to development is cordoned off for the vast majorities and the various demagogues from the radical right continue to have unfettered access to the mainstream. Except for a few restricted exercises (cricket), the states have been careful to keep the segregation intact.

Clearly, the work of the various states in demonizing the other is well documented through these decades (not just Hindu–Muslim but the linguistic and ethnic “Others”) resulting in bloodsheds across South Asia. The bloody scars of the various partitions (the 1905, the 1947, the 1971) themselves constitute a radical history of violence and grievances that rewrites the everyday. Clearly, the states are active agents in constituting the cultural landscape – either directly or indirectly. Given all that, what can we say about those three concentric circles, constituting nearly 1,300 years of historical time? Is that world of mutually comprehensible difference vanished, taking along with it, the vernacular culture?

However, I started writing this piece with an optimistic mindset. I gave you that long history to assert that what I hope to see is neither impossible nor improbable. To imagine a South Asia where cultural comprehension exists despite difference is to remember the life of the Lahori *munshi* Chandar Bhan Brahmin (d. 1662) who was cherished by three successive Mughal emperors for his eloquence, his service and his intelligence. To imagine a South Asia with porous borders is to realize the cultural network of poets and texts that stretched from Kabul to Dhaka to Sri Lanka. To imagine a South Asia where difference is mutually comprehensible is also to look at the *desi* diaspora around the world.

I think that the Bombay-based Hindi film industry (Bollywood) does create a public, and a vernacular culture that is legible across western and southern Asia – a rarely discussed facet of this global juggernaut – there is, of course, substantial academic attention paid to the ways in which audiences from Egypt and Morocco to Hong Kong and Singapore consume Bollywood. Within South Asia, Bollywood enables the creation of new cultural referents, and provides a common vocabulary; most crucially it keeps long-standing historical and cultural themes within living memory – the particular view of love, of jealousy, of friendship, of the beloved that we can easily trace to the vernacular epics of the seventeenth century. Most of this is not a surprise considering that from the very beginnings of Indian cinema, the epics (from the *Mahabharata* to *Laila Majnun*) have been a popular source, and that the film industry has remained far more agnostic on the faiths of its workers than the surrounding society.

To be precise, in arguing Bollywood's role in sustaining a particular vernacular culture, I am referring largely to its aural effect – the embedding of cultural markers within songs. I am less keen to argue the role of the movies themselves – even those as disparate as *Jodha Akhbar* (2008) or *Mission Kashmir* (2000) – which do create the capacity to imagine the Other, by presenting both the syncretic and the demonic, mainly due to the limitation of space. The dominance of radio *sangeet* programs from the 50s, 60s and 70s, which popularized the vocals of Kishore Kumar, Mohammad Rafi and Lata Mangeshkar with the words of Majrooh Sultanpuri and Sahir Ludhianvi, to this day in secondary and tertiary markets across South Asia is no accident. There is a wonderful sequence in Kabir Khan's *Kabul Express* (2006) where the Indian, Pakistani and Afghan characters (journalists, army officers and suspected terrorist) break out into a Sahir Ludhianvi song from the 1962 film *Hum Dono*. This modern rendition of a verse creating a community of listeners is not too far removed from one that informed the listeners of *Heer Ranjha* of Waris Shah. A more recent phenomenon is the surprising popularity of the *Coke Studio Music Sessions* in Pakistan, that pairs folk songs and singers with more contemporary arrangements – the intense emotive capacity displayed by the Pakistani audiences enraptured in Balochi or Seraiki or Punjabi lyrics echoes my sense of “making a community/” The purpose was mainly to give bathos to the idea of the Other – the capacity and the possibility to imagine, and to know.

It is the viewer/listener's engagement with the motifs, the sounds, the looks, the dialogues, the lyrics of Bollywood that writes a very different type of narrative. It creates an everyday poetics and disseminates it across a broadly varied ethnolinguistic terrain. So, to imagine that group from *Kabul Express* singing Sahir Ludhianvi's lyrics (through Dev Anand, of course) is to recognize that there already exists a cultural space where such a translation can happen effortlessly. This is, then, the most significant point – that despite the political and religious jaggedness, the cultural terrain of South Asia remains broadly ecumenical and diverse.

Asserting comprehensible difference does not mean negating difference or reverting to some Nehruvian secularity or some Ayubian militarized communalism. Neither does it mean to ignore the internal contradictions and inequities of each polity in South Asia. Further, an argument for the role of Bollywood poetics in sustaining

a conversation does not reduce the complexity of Bollywood itself – a commercial product appealing to the broadest possible demographic at the lowest common denominator. Those readings remain valid. I am positing a narrower, third reading that focuses primarily on the role of the song as it combines the various genres, inhabits various linguistic registers, yet “speaks” in a cultural vernacular that continues to hold valence. It is this capacity that allows us to connect not only the past, but also the many implicated presents – e.g., the role of AM and FM radio, especially Radio Ceylon, All India Radio and Radio Pakistan in constituting this shared listenership. Similar is the case of cultural blogs, YouTube and Twitter in maintaining an audience, a repository of cultural memories.

Present as Future?

I am reminded of the late Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali’s poem, “Farewell”:

At a certain point I lost track of you.
 You needed me. You needed to perfect me.
 In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
 Your history gets in the way of my memory.
 I am everything you lost. You can’t forgive me.
 I am everything you lost. Your perfect Enemy.
 Your memory gets in the way of my memory.
 (Ali 1998)

Cultural memory is not a salvation, and culture, however defined, is not a project. Yet, imagining our Other as a sympathetic interlocutor, against the immediate political and social past is a necessary act of disruption. Owning up to a history that undermines the rigidities of the presence is a shared responsibility. The long past of South Asia offers concrete ways of imagining mutually comprehensible difference, and the specificities of regional politics and economies demonstrates interconnectedness. That it once was doesn’t mean that it will be – it simply shows that what *is* is only one possible future among many.

Section II

STATE RELATIONS