CHRONOLOGICS

CHRONOLOGICS
PERIODISATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Section II
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Contested Ways of Thinking Time

4. Periodisation as Dialectic in a Peasant Discourse from Late Colonial India

Milinda Banerjee ⬤

A periodisation scheme, like any other kind of conceptual work, may bear either (or often, both) the traces of imposing mastery—through the stratification and government of time—or (as well as) the apparatus for fracturing and surpassing mastery.[1] Such dialectics often involve negotiations of force. Among recent reflections on concept work, Ann Stoler, for example, has highlighted the "relations of force" through which concepts gain traction and achieve stability and abstraction:

> If stability is not an intrinsic feature of concepts, then one task must be to examine how their stability is achieved, how unequal things are abstracted into commensurabilities that fuel our confidence in those very concepts that then are relegated as common sense.[2]

Nowhere is this truer than in the construction of a periodisation scheme where vastly diverse forms of social relations, economic processes, legal and theological fields, ethical and political postures, and so on, are abstracted and rendered quasi-commensurable (as something shared and common), in order to define a certain 'epoch,' and further placed in relation and difference with other 'epochs.' Such abstraction is never politically neutral. There are several rich strands of scholarship which have highlighted the intimacy between periodisation schemes and, for example, the legitimation of colonial invasion, the justification of specific modes of dispossessing the colonised, the racialised subordination of indigenous cultures, and so on.[3]

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1   I share some of the concerns of Vittorio Morfino and Peter D. Thomas, eds., *The Government of Time: Theories of Plural Temporality in the Marxist Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), though my work gives greater centrality to non-European subaltern actors.

2   Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 17–18.

3   It is impossible to summarise the massive and growing scholarship here. See, as typical examples: Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and*

The conquest of time has often been a paradigmatic way of articulating conquest as such. With a regime change, whether in the form of an imperial conquest or a popular revolution (I am not synonymising the two, though there are often tragic convergences), time is forced to begin anew. The French Revolution offers a locus classicus, but it is hardly exceptional.[4] The old regime is discredited and relegated into the hinterland epoch of history, leading to a rearrangement of the chronological landscape. If the assertion of sovereignty entails the construction of borders in spatial geography, periodisation embodies an analogue: the construction and policing of borders in the domain of time. Only slightly altering Walter Benjamin's reflections on law, violence, and myth, one could present a periodisation as a myth-making event that founds or preserves a regime of power.[5] Periodisation, like a legal order, offers the mythic justification for a system of power. It is, often, a "founding act" that marks the coming into existence of a regime which sees itself as the culmination of the march of time, and keeps others at variegated distances from itself, the radiant centre. Classification of time has thus frequently been a tool for ruling elites to classify and hierarchise society, privileging the power of some actors over others, along lines of ethnicity/race, class, gender, religion, political affiliation, and so on.[6]

In this chapter I wish to query periodisation as conceptual work from a slightly different standpoint: less the perspective of the rulers, and more that of the ruled. I want to ask what happens when a subalternised community in revolt creates its own periodisation, its own abstractions, to steer a staged transition from heteronomy to freedom. Rather than re-narrating canonical thinkers who have imagined periodisation by centring exactly such a transition in their scheme of history—G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and so on—I will focus on a 'lower caste' peasant discourse, produced by the Rajavamshis of late colonial India. This chapter is of course hardly the first one to relate conceptual labour to the achievement of autonomy. In his celebrated reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Alexandre Kojève argued: "Understanding, abstract thought, science, technique, the arts—all these, then, have their origin in the forced work of the Slave. […] Work will also open the way to Freedom or—more exactly—to liberation."[7] Furthermore, the slave (here Hegel's Knecht; allowing for

   History-Writing in a Colonial Society (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

4   See, for example, Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

5   Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," [1921] in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 277–300.

6   On the founding act, see Ozouf, *Festivals*, 159, and, more recently, Serdar Tekin, *Founding Acts: Constitutional Origins in a Democratic Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

7   Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980 [1933–39, 1947]), 49.

some variation in translation),[8] "by using the thought that arises from his Work, […] forms the abstract notion of the Freedom that has been realized in him by this same Work."[9] The slave "possessing the idea of Freedom and not being free, […] is led to transform the given (social) conditions of his existence—that is, to realize a historical progress."[10] It is impossible to do justice to Kojève's rich argumentation here (or, for that matter, to Hegel). I will, nevertheless, use this reading to examine Rajavamshi conceptual work as being, very precisely, a work, rooted in Rajavamshi political and intellectual practices as well as agrarian and military labour. Further, this conceptual work produced an abstraction—a periodisation scheme entailing a phased transition from heteronomy to the cessation of all rule—which cannot be understood except in terms of the labour done by a Knecht, by someone in a condition of subalternity. In other words, I will argue that the Rajavamshi actors—who had no known familiarity with Hegel—produced a fascinating discourse about periodisation which can be read as a discourse produced from a position of suppression in order to achieve liberation. This entailed a dialectic where every epoch sowed the seeds of its own negation. History moved forward from a period of nature/non-rule to the rule of the master/king, to the rule of society, to self-rule, to ultimately, the end of all rule, allowing the self to find fulfilment. In every stage, an epoch (or rather, the nature of human social relations within that epoch), prepared the conditions for its erasure, to facilitate the forward movement of human life. In other words, periodisation was here inseparable from dialectical thinking. This discourse was, in very broad terms, a cosmological founding act: a justification, ambitiously sketched through a grand scheme of interpretation about how the universe functions, and how human social life progresses, to inaugurate and bolster the trajectory whereby Rajavamshi actors hoped to gain autonomy during the interwar years. This chapter will first empirically describe this discourse, and then turn to examine why and how this Rajavamshi periodisation assumed such a profound dialectical form.[11]

Let me add a caveat. I am more interested in drawing out the political implications of this Rajavamshi periodisation, than in classifying it within some typology of

8   On this slippage, see Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

9   Kojève, *Introduction* (see note 7)*,* 49.

10 Kojève, *Introduction* (see note 7), 50.

11 In what follows, I will heavily draw on and condense, while also relating to this chapter's broader argument about periodisation, empirical materials and theoretical arguments discussed in Milinda Banerjee, *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Chapter 4; and Milinda Banerjee, "How a Subject Negates Servitude: A Peasant Dialectic about Mastery and Self-Rule from Late Colonial Bengal," in *HerStory: Historical Scholarship between South Asia and Europe: Festschrift in Honour of Gita Dharampal-Frick*, ed. Rafael Klöber and Manju Ludwig (Heidelberg: CrossAsia, 2018), 87–104, https://doi.org/10.11588/xabooks.366.517

temporality. One could certainly bring this periodisation into dialogue with scholarship about typologies: the Rajavamshi periodisation shares some features with Jörn Rüsen's notion of the genetic narrative, where "time is temporalised as meaning," for example, as well as with his idea of "actualising the past" in a critical narrative, which proceeds through negation and deconstruction. My approach however, fundamentally differs from Rüsen in questioning his faith in "anthropological universals" and his belief that "we need a new universal idea of time, which covers the multitude and diversity of human life forms in space and time." Rüsen (in this volume 26-27) sees such universalism as an antidote to "the postcolonial criticism of the traditional treatment of non-Western cultures." I do not think that such constructions of universalism constitute an effective response to the inequalities—material as much as epistemic—that postcolonial critiques seek to battle against. After all, universalistic ideas have historically often been merely the assertions of ruling classes seeking to transfigure their dominance into cultural hegemony. A study of the dialectics of power, as viscerally incarnated in every periodisation, may eventually open up variegated forms of unbounded selfhood. Such conceptualisation, to be politically radical, has to proceed from below, as I will show, from the vantage point of the subaltern seeking emancipation. It cannot be a universalism imagined from above. From this perspective, it is also unhelpful to analyse such a periodisation from a methodologically nationalist lens, that is, as a strand of some overarching 'Indian' way of conceptualizing time.[12] We need to understand the Rajavamshi periodisation as a historical expression of subaltern dialectics of power, rather than as an avatar of some transhistorical national consciousness.

The particular Rajavamshi periodisation I will discuss here stems from 1918. It is a record from the annual proceedings of the Kshatriya Samiti, the premier early-mid twentieth century association of the Rajavamshi community of sub-Himalayan northern Bengal, the princely state of Cooch Behar, and adjacent parts of Assam.[13] The annual session of the Samiti that year was held in Dinajpur, a town in northern Bengal. We do not know the name of the author of the report. We cannot even assume that it had a single and singular author; it may well have been collectively written. What is important is that the report was produced, published,

12   For scholarship on various South Asian forms of temporal consciousness, see, for example, Ludo Rocher, "Concepts of Time in Classical India," in *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World*, ed. Ralph M. Rosen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2004), 91–110; A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003); Banerjee, *Politics of Time* (see note 3).

13   On the history of the Kshatriya Samiti, see Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910–1947* (Delhi: Manohar 2003); Sukhbilas Barma, *Indomitable Panchanan: An Objective Study on Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma* (Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2017); Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11).

and archived as part of the collective deliberations of the Kshatriya Samiti. I would see it as reflecting views widely shared by many Rajavamshi activists. The leading members of the Samiti had rural-peasant origins, but had acquired some education, through indigenous and/or Western institutions. Their main economic base lay in the agrarian sector, in landed property and related agrarian businesses. Some of them had also branched out into modern professions like law. Hence, we can surmise that the 1918 report, like other similar Rajavamshi sources of the time, bears some traces of general Indian as well as European thought. Since the 1918 report is written in an ambitiously abstract prose (without footnotes or even explicit empirical citations), it is difficult to pin-point exact intellectual roots, but I will offer some hypotheses about possible sources below. I would also underline here the polycentric nature of these discourses, many of which emerged out of large caste association meetings and peasant assemblies. While the vast majority of Rajavamshis were non-literate in the early twentieth century, the strength of oral culture and political communication would have ensured multilateral dialogues between the literate leaders and the non-literate publics during these annual assemblies, as well as in many other gatherings throughout the year.

The 1918 record began by describing an original state of nature (*prakriti*), to which the world (*jagat*) was subject. Nature was always active (*kriyashila*); in it, all things (*vastu*) were mobile (*chanchala*). Of these things, living creatures (*jiva*) were particularly active, as well as characterised, due to their sensations (*anubhava*) and knowledge (*jnana*), by feelings of attraction (*akarshana*) and repulsion (*vikarshana*) towards known objects (*jnata vastu*). Of living creatures, human beings had particularly well-developed faculties of knowledge and sensation. Hence, whenever there was a gathering (*samagama*) of human beings, the unrestrained actions (*uddama kriya*) of each human being came into conflict (*virodha*) with similar uncontrolled actions of others. Such a gathering of human beings was therefore reduced to a state of mutually antagonistic (*paraspara virodhi*) and pain-inflicting (*paraspara yantranadayaka*) mass of animals (*jantupunja*).[14]

As this pain (*yantrana*) became intolerable, human beings sought to escape from it. So they made attempts to tame/subdue (*damana*) or regulate (*niyaman*) their hitherto unregulated efforts. In the first effort (*prathama cheshta*), a single person (*ekjan*) or a group of people (*janasamuha*) was necessary (*avashyaka*), who would have the power (*kshamatashali*) to tame/subdue (*damana*) both the one who hurt (*ghati*; originally in Sanskrit, the term referred especially to a killer) and the one who retaliated (*pratighati*). By imposing laws (*vidhi*) or prohibitions (*nishedha*), backed by force (*balanusrita*), that person or group of persons was able to offer protection (*raksha*) to the antagonists

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14   Kshatriya Samiti, *San 1324 Saler Ashtama Varsher Vritta-vivarana* (Rangpur[?]: Kshatriya Samiti, 1918), 27–28.

as well as to everyone related (*samsargi sakalke*), and could thus deliver people from a state of pain into a state of greater happiness (*sukhatara avastha*) and joy (*sphurti*). This was the rule of the master (*prabhushasana*).[15]

The master at the top (*uparistha prabhu*) thus subdued the antagonisms (*ghata-pratighata*; literally, blows and counter-blows) of the person below (*adhahstha vyakti*), and brought about a more peaceful state. Antagonisms were increasingly replaced by feelings of union (*milanabhava*), amicable feelings towards each other (*paraspara anukula bhava*), and happiness (*ananda*). This generated respect (*shraddha*) towards the master. Hence the name of the master (*prabhu*) was king (*raja*). The master also felt affection (*sneha*) towards the people (*janasamuha*)—as if the people were the son (*putra*) of the master. Hence they were named praja.[16] In colonial Bengal, the term praja was used to refer both to the subjects of a state as well as to the tenants of (*quasi-kingly*) zamindar landlords. But, as this Rajavamshi discourse emphasises, the term bore an original sense of "offspring," since the Sanskrit root, prajan, means "to be born or produced," "to bring forth, generate, bear, procreate."[17]

The report described how the king-subject-relation (*raja-praja-samvandha*) kept each connected to the other. The rule of the king (*rajar shasana*), by removing antagonisms, allowed the subjects (*prajavarga*) to come together and develop (*paraspara miliya unnati*). But the rule of the master was unable to achieve more than this. It was unable to properly regulate the relations between subjects or to bring under control feelings like affection and love (*sneha-mamatadi bhava*). However, these feelings were innate to human beings, and held people together in relation to each other. These relations (*samvandha*) could be seen as the root of society (*samaja-mula*), and the feelings of society (*samajabhavaguli*) could be called social feelings (*samajika bhava*). But, having developed unrestrained, these social feelings came into antagonism with each other, resulting in pain. To escape this pain, people developed rules and prohibitions through which society (*samaja*) was regulated. These were social customs or rules (*samajika achara ba niyama*). The rule of society (*samajer shasana*) was directed against the individual who went against these social rules and who hindered the social happiness (*samajika sukha*) of another or the happiness of society. The rule of society (*samajashasana*) could thus prohibit or regulate some social feelings, but it was often incapable of purifying (*shuddhi*) these feelings. Given an opportunity, one tried to advance one's own aims and the harm of the other. Without self-rule (*atmashasana*) or self-control (*atma-samyama*), these feelings could never be purified.[18]

15   Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 28.
16   Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 28.
17   Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960 [1899]), 658.
18   Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 28–29.

The report underlined that "to achieve self-control one needs to rule oneself" (*atmasamyama karite haile nije nijake shasana karite haibe*). The rule of the outside (*bahirer shasana*) was unable to achieve influence here, so there was no alternative other than the rule which emerged from the self (*atma haite udbhuta shasana*). If one engaged in thinking with a calm mind, one heard a wonderful voice (*apurvavani*), which was magnified by its own grandeur (*nija mahimay mahimanvita*). The rule of the outside (*bahirer shasana*), was like a mere slave/servant (*kimkara matra*) of this voice. This voice, shining in the virtuous mind, was right or good precept (*sanniti*).[19]

Human life (*manavajivana*), or the life of human society (*manavasamaja-jivana*), moved through certain stages (*stara*) of expanding happiness. In the regulation of human behaviour, the application of exterior force bore the name of rule (*bahyashaktir prayoger nama shasana*), while the application of interior force bore the name of education (*abhyantarika shaktir prayoger nama shiksha*). In the course of human life or the life of human society, the influence of rule (*shasana*) was gradually reduced, while the influence of education (*shiksha*) grew. Ultimately, the operation of both rule and education came to an end. As a human being approached the ultimate goal (*charama lakshya*), both rule and education ceased to be. Human behaviour became stainless (*nirmala*); the self (*atma*) found its own blossoming. The human being achieved fullness of desire (*purnakama*), fullness of happiness (*purnananda*), fullness of satisfaction (*purnatripti*). The human being achieved fullness (*purnatva*).[20]

The above report, dating from 1918, came during a pivotal period for Rajavamshi politics. The declaration in August 1917 by Edwin Montagu, British Secretary of State for India, promising "self-governing institutions" and "responsible government" in India, had intensified Rajavamshi desire for democratic self-rule within the framework of the British Empire.[21] In November 1917, Panchanan Barma, the most important leader of the Rajavamshi movement, sent a letter (preserved in both English and Bengali variants) on behalf of the Samiti to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, seeking to meet the visiting minister. Vernacularizing the British concept of "self-governing institutions" and juxtaposing it with Rajavamshi notions and structures of communitarian rule, Barma noted that the "Kshatriya Community"/ kshatriyasamaja, as a part of "Hindu Society"/hindusamaja, had traditionally been

> internally governed by small Samajas or Societies each with its controlling head and a Panchayat or a council composed by the Pramanikas […]. These Samajas were in their respective spheres self-governing and representative,

19 Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 29.
20 Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 29–30.
21 House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers, East India (Constitutional Reforms), Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms (London, 1918), 5.

and worked by love […], blending the people as if in one body, making them respect the order and law […]. Their leaders as also the king himself were completely under the control of the law and order.[22]

This enabled the Kshatriyas to be "loving confederates with all other similar Samajas as also the rest of mankind." The letter urged the British to rekindle and strengthen this heritage of local governance, of which elements still existed, by fostering "self-governing and self-improving (in Bengali, atmashasani o atmotkarshi) Institutions," and considering "village Communities and Panchayats" as "the basis of popular representation." Barma stressed, without any ambiguity, that in government councils, "the representation must be thorough and every community high or low, and every interest," especially "of the small communities or interests," should be given due regard. Otherwise there would only be "a rule of one part of the people over the other."[23] The Rajavamshis, like many other 'lower caste' as well as 'minority' (especially Indian Muslim) actors, justifiably wished to prevent a devolution of powers which would only benefit high-caste Hindu elites. Hence the emphasis on the "low" and the "small" in Barma's letter, and they too, and not just the elites, in the Rajavamshi perspective, deserved self-rule. Otherwise, there could be no real autonomy for them, if representation implied only rule of one section of Indians over another. (This critique of representation has lost none of its relevance in postcolonial India, with its resilient structures of majoritarian and elitist dominance.)

If we juxtapose Barma's 1917 letter with the Kshatriya Samiti report of 1918, we immediately perceive a connection. We can perhaps assert without too much exaggeration that, in the realm of periodisation and philosophy of temporality, the report of 1918 served as a founding act for the Rajavamshi drive for autonomy. Of course, the 1918 report displays a marked lack of reference, in that it offers no specific historical context, let alone any mention of the Rajavamshis themselves. It presents itself as a dialectic of world history: of how human life (*manavajivana*) or the life of human society (*manavasamaja-jivana*) progresses through certain stages (*stara*). The term dialectic is meaningful, given the weight it has now acquired, not only implying dialogue, but also opposition, confrontation, contradiction, and synthesis. Much of the report revolves around such intersections of opposites: attraction (*akarshana*) and repulsion (*vikarshana*), blow (*ghata*) and counter-blow (*pratighata*), conflict (*virodha*), and ways of resolving it. To return to our expropriation of Walter Benjamin, the periodisation of 1918 is mythic, it founds a new (vision of) political order, and is not only analogous to a legal order, but is in fact deeply embedded in it. Much of the periodisation hinges on the role of laws (*vidhi*) and prohibitions (*nishedha*), whether

22 Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 50–55.
23 Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 50–55.

imposed through force (*balanusrita*) by the master (*prabhu*) or king (*raja*), or by society (*samaja*) itself. Law is inexorably related to violence: violence gives force to law, but is also tamed/subdued (*damana*) and regulated (*niyaman*) by law. This foundational role of "law and order" (in the Bengali version, *vidhi o shasanashrinkhala*) is of course also evident in the earlier letter of 1917. The movement of time—the energy behind periodisation—is thus fuelled here in significant part by the dialectics of law. Top-down state law replaces the original anomie, and is subsequently phased out by social laws, which are in turn subordinated to self-government—*atmashasana*, the term that has an institutional-political sense in the 1917 letter, and a wider philosophical charge in the 1918 report—until all government finally withers away. The Rajavamshi periodisation is both law-creating and law-destroying (to re-invoke Benjamin); it begins with the inauguration of a legal-political order and ends with its anarchic demise.

Why is Rajavamshi periodisation so intimately linked to law and rule? One major clue is offered by the fact that, very much like Hobbes, the Rajavamshi discourse presents an original state of nature, which is so full of antagonism and mutual destructiveness, that the people—to transcend the condition of a bestial multitude (*jantupunja*)—resort to a first effort (*prathama cheshta*), leading to the establishment of the rule of the master/king. We might also say, to the birth of the state. The period of nature thus gives way to the period of rule (*shasana*), the beginning of history proper. This is a political myth in its grandest sense, and has many possible lineages. Across the 1910s and early 1920s, many Bengali/Indian historians read ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts from the late first millennium BCE/early first millennium CE—like the *Mahabharata*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the *Manusmriti*, the *Digha Nikaya*, and the *Mahavastu*—as offering variations of social contract theory, including ideas proximate to those of Hobbes. These historians often established equivalences between early modern European social contract theories and ancient Indian arguments about the origins and limits of rule. Their broad aim—in an age of rising anti-colonial mass militancy, as well as debates on devolution of powers to Indians—was to imagine the state as being rooted in the contractarian will of the people. State power was to be considered contingent upon its ability to pursue the protection and welfare of the people, rather than on the arbitrary and exploitative fiat of a foreign government. In this milieu, ancient Indian texts justified twentieth-century demands for democratising governance.[24] As is clearly visible from Kshatriya Samiti records and other Rajavamshi writings between the 1910s and 1930s, the Rajavamshi leadership was deeply engaged with reworking Sanskritic ideas to produce their own political thought. Some of these leaders also had the relevant academic training. For example, Panchanan Barma had acquired university degrees in Sanskrit and law in the 1890s, and practised as a lawyer

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24 Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 228–233.

in northern Bengal in the 1900s, before heading the Kshatriya Samiti.[25] The writers of the 1918 report may thus have been aware of ancient Indian texts about a transition from a period of anarchic antagonism to a period of hierarchic rule and kingship. They may also have had knowledge about the elite-Indian nationalist discussions of the 1910s about social contract theory, and perhaps even some knowledge of Hobbesian arguments. Finally, the Rajavamshis are also likely to have had knowledge of an indigenous Bengali tradition, embodied in the early modern *Chandimangal* genre (which remained popular in colonial Bengal). In the most famous example of this genre, by Mukunda (late sixteenth/early seventeenth century), a (literal) forest (*vana*) of mutually destructive animals gave way to a state, as the goddess Chandi responded to a petition by the animals to remove their fear (*sashanka*) of being killed, and to institute an order of non-fear (*niratanka*). In the state, clear prohibitions (*baran*) were laid down, in order to reduce warfare and create a measure of non-conflict (*avirodha*) among the animals.[26]

It needs underlining that the Rajavamshi periodisation begins with the affirmation of the inevitability of the rule of the master/king. The discussion on the state of nature prepares the ground for this. This perspective differs from that of someone like Muhammad Ali, the celebrated anti-colonial Khilafat revolutionary, who, in the course of his trial in 1921 by the British, denounced the argument that the British had rescued Indians from a Hobbesian state of nature, an argument which purportedly justified colonial sovereignty as a neutral umpire between supposedly conflicting races, creeds, and castes.[27] In contrast, the Rajavamshis affirmed loyalty both to the British colonial state, and especially to King-Emperor George V—the *raja* who loomed most large in the Kshatriya Samiti's imagination in the 1910s—as well as to the ruler of the princely state of Cooch Behar. Like many similarly placed 'lower caste' movements in India at the time, they saw the British as an ally who would give them employment. For example, the Rajavamshis joined the colonial army in large numbers during the First World War, and many served in Mesopotamia, Egypt, France, and Belgium. They also wanted access to higher education (hitherto often monopolised by high-caste elites), and above all, political representation. Rajavamshis had constituted a dominant

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25 Upendranath Barman, *Thakur Panchanan Barmar Jivanacharita* (Calcutta: Panchanan Smaraka Samiti, 1980), 1–16; Barma, *Indomitable Panchanan* (see note 13).

26 Mukundarāma Cakrabart, *Chandimangal,* ed. Khudiram Das (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2007); Milinda Banerjee, "State of Nature, Civilized Society, and Social Contract: Perspectives from Early Modern Bengal on the Origin and Limits of Government," *Calcutta Historical Journal* 28, no. 2, (2008 [back issue published in 2010]): 1–55; Milinda Banerjee, "Besitz, Widerstand und globale Geistesgeschichte im Spiegel des *Chandimangal* aus dem frühmodernen Bengalen," *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte* 17, no. 1 (2016): 71–90; Milinda Banerjee, "Gods in a Democracy: State of Nature, Postcolonial Politics, and Bengali Mangalkabyas," in *The Postcolonial World*, ed. Jyotsna Singh and David Kim (London: Routledge, 2016), 184–205.

27 Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 359–360.

social group in precolonial sub-Himalayan northern Bengal. However, in the colonial era they had gradually lost control over land as well as political and administrative power in the face of immigrant Western-educated higher-caste (especially, Bengali) elites. Indeed, the very crystallisation of 'high' and 'low' in the caste hierarchy, here as elsewhere in British India, was shaped in part by colonial interventions. The loss by Rajavamshis of social, economic, and political-administrative power was due to structural transformations wrought by colonialism: revenue maximisation, demilitarisation of martial-peasant groups, administrative modernisation, growth of a strong and interventionist state, and the premium placed on Western education in the growing state apparatus. Nevertheless, the Kshatriya Samiti still saw the British as a possible ally who would rescue them from their current epoch of decline. By the 1930s, they were classified by the British as a Scheduled Caste (an official category) and they managed to wrest from the colonial state significant political representation at the provincial level, as well as some employment and educational benefits. They were also able to promote some pro-peasant measures through the colonial legislature. Moreover, the Rajavamshis ideologically positioned themselves as a kingly Kshatriya community with an aptitude for political authority. Indeed, the very name Rajavamshi means "of the royal lineage." This name relates to the role which various martial-peasant groups played in precolonial state formation in sub-Himalayan Bengal and western Assam, and especially during the birth (at the end of the fifteenth, early sixteenth century), and consolidation of the Koch kingdom (the ancestor of the Cooch Behar princely state and of various other ruling lineages across northern Bengal and Assam).[28] Given this overall context, it is understandable why the Rajavamshi discourse of 1918 would see the rule of the master or king as a structural necessity in the forward movement of history.

As the archetypal voice of the state, law (*vidhi*) occupies a significant position in this periodisation scheme: by regulating human interactions, it is what allows people to come together without destroying each other. It is also what separates man from animals (*jantu*), and indeed lifts man out of nature (*prakriti*) into history, creating the very possibility of a periodisation scheme. The term damana offers a significant clue here. In the periodisation described above, it is closely associated with the order of law (*vidhi*) and prohibition (*nishedha*). In Sanskrit, *damana* and related terms imply processes of taming and subduing, and are not only used for human beings, but also in relation to taming horses, bullocks, and so on.[29] In a provocative recent book, James Scott has argued that the early historical state arose when human beings sought to domesticate other human beings in the same way as they had earlier domesticated

28   Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 312–331.
29   Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (see note 17), 469.

various flora and fauna.[30] It is hardly a coincidence that the Rajavamshi discourse on *damana* is about converting the wild animals of nature into proper humans, and that the state should arise through a process of domestication, which is also about domination. While Scott takes examples from ancient states—especially in Mesopotamia—I would argue that this paradigm of domestication would also apply to later narratives of forest/nature-to-state transition, as in the *Chandimangal* or in the Kshatriya Samiti report of 1918.

For Rajavamshi peasant actors, to whom animal husbandry was crucial, such a narrative bore rich significance. Rajavamshi activists frequently associated the control, upkeep, and protection of animals, especially cattle, with leadership: mastery and protection of cattle justified the Rajavamshi claim to being herdsmen of the polity. Such a discourse about pastoral governance, which reminds us strongly of Michel Foucault's formulations on the theme[31], had an appeal among other 'lower caste' communities in colonial Bengal too, including among the pastoral Gop-Yadavs.[32] The metaphor of the rule of the master/king as an agent that transforms wild nature/beasts into tamed humanity had obvious traction among a social group who were engaged in daily work with domesticating animals. However, the narrative was double-edged. Rajavamshi activists also feared being transformed into animals. In Rajavamshi discourses, we find a recurring anxiety that the impoverished peasants were being exploited to such an extent—through expropriation of their land and labour, as well as their transformation into producers of raw materials and consumers of costly finished products—by "foreign" (*bhinna deshiyera*) dominant groups from afar, that they were being converted into an animal-like state (*pashubhava, pashur nyaya*).[33] A desire to resist such a transformation fuelled the drive for self-rule (*atmashasana*). Rajavamshi periodisation thus hinged on the discomforting tension, indeed oscillation, between an epoch of animality and the epoch of being human. In this sense, the dialectic between animal and human was not a one-way transition. On the one hand, the process of becoming human, of leaving the animal-like state, entailed the rule of the master/king, and thus the birth of the state and of law. On the other hand, an excess of politico-economic domination from above would reduce human beings, especially impoverished peasants, to precisely the stage of animality which they had contrived to escape from in the first place. Hence, self-rule offered a way out: it was rule, but a rule of oneself by oneself. In transitioning to self-rule, the rule of society (*samajashasana*), presented

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30   James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

31   Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). See also Anand Pandian, "Pastoral Power in the Postcolony: On the Biopolitics of the Criminal Animal in South India," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2008): 85–117.

32   Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 319–322, 411.

33   Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11)*,* 328–329, 410.

a mediation in the Rajavamshi periodisation. The term had polyvalent meanings in Rajavamshi discourse. First, it referred—as in the 1917 letter discussed previously—to the historical lineages of communitarian self-rule in precolonial South Asia. Like many other actors in colonial Bengal, Rajavamshis sought to revitalise the residues of these communitarian traditions of autonomy which had survived the ravages of colonial rule, in order to mould new structures and concepts of self-government.[34] Second, as again evidenced by the 1917 letter, the discourse on *samajashasana* linked itself to British colonial trajectories of devolving powers to Indians. Third, the Kshatriya Samiti presented itself as a miniature *samaja*: one through which Rajavamshis could unite (*milana*) as a community and seek to empower themselves.[35] Yet even the rule of society embodied *bahirer shasana* (literally, rule of the outside), that is, heteronomy. There is a tremendous complexity and contradiction at work here. In the 1917 letter, the term *atmashasani* was used as the Bengali equivalent of the British colonial language of "self-governing," and mapped within a political cosmology where subaltern communities achieved adequate powers and capacities of political representation, self-rule, and self-improvement. In the 1918 discourse though, it was clearly not enough for a community or society to govern itself. Rather, every individual self, too, needed to become capable of self-government to truly eradicate heteronomy.

I would argue that this periodised transition from heteronomy to autonomy had, apart from obvious ethical and political implications, a deep grounding in labour as well. In various interwar Rajavamshi discourses, we find a strong emphasis on being *atmanirbhara* (self-reliant). These discourses sometimes had specific (male) authors, whereas at other times, no specific author is mentioned. In all cases, these discourses were part of bigger public deliberations, textualising discussions carried out in caste meetings and assemblies. While we see records of differences in opinion, we also witness certain shared perspectives. Rajavamshi activists in the interwar years frequently saw themselves as the true generators of wealth (*dhana*) in society. Drawing on precolonial South Asian traditions, they presented the act of ploughing the soil as a sacred act, which rendered peasants similar to gods and kings. Rajavamshis claimed that their agricultural activities supported society, and yet the elites did not give them due recognition. They resented the way in which they were being displaced from ownership and control of land, while their labour (*shrama*) was being robbed (*apaharana*) by the elites, such as big companies and moneylenders. A new discourse on exploitation (*nishpeshana*) developed in reaction to these processes. A novel class consciousness emerged as well, pitting the rich (*dhani loka*) against the poor (*garib, nirdhana*), with Rajavamshis identifying themselves as part of the latter category. Simultaneously,

34 For the discourse on *samaja* in colonial Bengal, see Swarupa Gupta, *Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, c. 1867–1905* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).
35 Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 328.

sections of peasant elites sought to form their own companies, cooperatives, banks, and so on, in order to empower themselves economically against high-caste immigrant elites.[36] I have not yet detected any overt references to Marxism in these discourses. However, the Russian Revolution of 1917 generated enormous excitement in India, including in Bengal, in the interwar years; the Communist Party of India was founded in 1920. There is a high probability that the Rajavamshi discourse about exploitation of the poor drew on Marxist—or at least, broadly, socialist—debates.

Admittedly, the Kshatriya Samiti's interventions were marked by inequality: the concerns of peasant elites were often prioritised over those of lower class peasants, including sharecroppers and landless labourers.[37] Nevertheless, in a very fundamental sense, a new discourse on self-rule was generated which derived its material charge from the claim that Rajavamshi peasants ploughed the land, generated the true wealth of society, gave support (*avalambana*) and shelter (*ashraya*) to the whole of society, and therefore deserved economic empowerment, political representation, and social recognition. From the Rajavamshi perspective, the rich and the powerful also depended (*bharsa*) on the peasants. It was their labour (*shrama*), their work (*kaj*)—whether as peasants or as soldiers—which rendered Rajavamshis into divine and kingly beings, into those capable of *atmashasana*. The demand for political representation was rooted, in part, in the claim of labour. This is starkly visible, for example, in the Rajavamshi activist Upendranath Barman's poem 'Langaler Dabi' (The Claim of the Plough). This was a manifesto for the 1937 legislative elections, which marked the coming of age of 'lower caste' peasant politics in Bengal.[38] Re-reading the 1918 report through this long-term lens, we clearly see how the periodised progression from heteronomy to autonomy was necessarily mediated through labour. Through their agrarian and military labour, as well as through their political and conceptual work in self-organisation, Rajavamshi peasants achieved atmashasana. Labour, which was initially a marker of their servitude, of their low status, which allowed elites to denigrate them, turned through the dialectic into the marker of self-reliance and freedom.[39] There is a fascinating dialectic at work here, whereby the rule of the master becomes—through biting and unavoidable irony—a slave: a slave or servant (*kimkara*; indeed, nothing but a slave/servant, *kimkara matra*) of self-rule. In parallel, the subject (*praja*)—unambiguously described as the person who is at the bottom (*adhahstha vyakti*)—comes out on top. It is this subject who is the true hero, the narrative pivot, of the periodisation scheme, who drives forward the periodisation itself. If one wanted, one could compare this with Jean Hyppolite's famous description of Hegel's dialectic:

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36   Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 322–24, 328–329.
37   Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement* (see note 13).
38   Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 316–330, 410.
39   Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 322–323.

> The dialectic of domination and servitude […] consists essentially in show-
> ing that the truth of the master reveals that he is the slave of the slave, and
> that the slave is revealed to be the master of the master.[40]

When the 1917 letter is read together with the 1918 report, we realise that Rajavamshi periodisation in this era looked both backward and forward. It looked back to a past of self-government (the 1917 letter), or even of an extreme, albeit imperfect, freedom from rule (the 1918 report). Simultaneously, it looked forward to a future of freedom, which would remove the imperfections of the past. It is certainly possible to explain this Janus-faced nature of Rajavamshi periodisation in more than one way. Taking a cue from Andrew Sartori's discussions on Bengali Muslim concepts of labour-constituted property and autonomy, one might argue that there is a logic within the modern world of capitalism, which both looks back with nostalgia to a (constructed) pre-exploitative past, (in Sartori's words, "a natural and originary state in which labor is constitutive of, and the true measure of, property"), as well as forward, to a fantasised post-exploitative future.[41] However, it is not only the capitalist mode of production which generates such a model of periodisation, which simultaneously looks backward and forward. After all, myths of a primitive golden age and a millenarian future can be found in more than one society or historical epoch.[42] In the case of the Rajavamshi periodisation I have discussed, I would emphasise above all the condition of subalternity, which structured the Rajavamshi historical sensibility. As a heteronomous subject, Rajavamshi agrarian, military, political, and conceptual labour sought to break free from the suf-focating grip of domination, without abjuring the joys of collective social life which had been seemingly enabled, in part, by the very conditions of domination (laws, prohibitions, coercive force, and so on). Hence the fascinatingly dialectical nature of Rajavamshi periodisation which sought not a simple overthrow of the apparatuses of rule (*shasana*), but aspired rather to work through those very apparatuses—through a series of negations of negations—to achieve freedom.

   In practical terms, the Rajavamshi periodisation was part of a far bigger concep-tual arsenal, which Rajavamshis successfully deployed across the interwar years to gain electoral rights and legislative representation in Bengal. As a 'Depressed Class'—from the 1930s, designated as a 'Scheduled Caste'—Rajavamshis have been beneficiaries of

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40   Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 172.

41   Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 207.

42   The literature is too extensive to be summarised here. Among the most influential examples of scholarship on these themes are: Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957), and Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

reservations and other governmental benefits in areas like political representation, employment, and education. They have forged alliances with other lower-caste movements across Bengal and India. From the 1940s onwards, lower-class Rajavamshi peasants have led militant campaigns to fight against landlord power and for enhanced peasant rights. Through community self-organisation, Rajavamshis have created strong frameworks for achieving education, healthcare, financial autonomy, and improvement of agrarian and industrial technologies. From the 1940s until today, they have launched periodic campaigns for achieving territorial autonomy, in order to bolster the political power of indigenous 'lower-caste' and 'tribal' populations, and to reduce the dominance of high-caste Bengali elites. Their rise is part of an epic transformation in modern South Asia, embodied in the ascendancy of lower-caste/Dalit politics across India: what Christophe Jaffrelot has termed as "India's silent revolution."[43]

While a certain antiquarian engagement with the regional-communitarian past was already evident in Rajavamshi discourses of the early to mid-twentieth century, later decades of the twentieth and early twenty-first century would see an intensified historicisation of this Janus-faced periodisation model.[44] In the postcolonial decades, in fact until today, Rajavamshi political actors have often simultaneously looked back to a period of autonomy—identified especially with the precolonial Kamata and Koch kingdoms and with princely Cooch Behar—as well as forward to a time when they will regain their rightful place in history. For many Rajavamshi activists, the present (the period of rule by the state of West Bengal and by Bengali elites, following the final dissolution of the princely state of Cooch Behar after India's independence from British rule) marks the tragic dip in the U-shaped curve of history, between an ancient (if imperfect) age of power and a future of endless possibility.[45] The seeds of the structural preconditions for this U-shaped model of history are already visible in the Rajavamshi discourses of 1917–18.

In the Rajavamshi periodisation of 1918, the final stage of history was constituted by the cessation of all rule. Like every other previous phase of rule, self-rule (*atmashasana*) sowed the seeds for its own negation. The self became so stainless (*nirmala*), as it approached the ultimate goal (*charama lakshya*), that both exterior rule and interior rule withered away. All government simply ceased to be, like shackles that fell off. What was this ultimate goal? The 1918 report speaks in seemingly individualistic terms. The self realises its fullness, reaches plenitude (*purnatva*), of desire, of satisfaction, of joy. But Panchanan Barma's 1917 letter to the Government of Bengal gives another elaboration more engaged with alterity. It noted that, for the Samiti, "final emancipation

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43   Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (London: Hurst and Co., 2003).

44   See, for example, Barma, *Indomitable Panchanan* (see note 13), Chapter 3.

45   Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 330–35.

of the souls (*jivatmar vimukti-sadhan*) by the finding of the great soul in all we see (*drishyaman jagat madhye paramatmar darshan*), is the goal (*charama uddeshya*)."[46] Scholars have studied in minute detail the rise of Vedantic thinking in early modern and colonial India, and related this trajectory to the ideological imperatives of elite Indian actors.[47] But there is still a significant lack of research regarding the traction of Vedanta-inflected conceptual vocabularies in non-elite political thought. Here, one could mention the interwar Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, who related Vedantic and Islamic structures of thought in order to formulate a non-sectarian grammar of anti-colonial democratic revolution, geared especially towards the empowerment of peasants and other labouring classes as well as women.[48] The Rajavamshi actors I have analysed embody another strand of this Vedanta-inflected popular politics. Their vision of non-majoritarian subalternised democratisation was grounded in a metaphysics of seeing the divine in all, and of thus achieving emancipation (*vimukti*).

In "emancipation" or "*vimukti*"—to use the English and Bengali variants of the 1917 letter—Rajavamshi periodisation reached its climactic finale as well as its dissolution. History ceased to be as the self came into its own, and achieved fullness: the end of history was the beginning of freedom or salvation. The ultimate goal of periodisation—and here one notes the obvious similarities with other modes of dialectical thinking, including not only those in Hegel and Marx, but also with older forebears—was to surpass itself, negate periodisation, and transcend history. In fullness, there could be no more imperfection and domination, no more finitude, and hence no more forward movement of history. With the cessation of all rule, *purnatva* was, literally, anarchic: the self was now free of all government, and even from the stratification and government of time. This was the final step in the dialectic whereby periodisation, as dialectic, thus negated itself. The aim of this essay has been to historicise this trajectory—to explain why this periodisation necessarily took a dialectical form—in terms of the conditions of labour, social structure, and political aspirations of a subaltern community in a colonial agrarian society. It should be obvious, however, that to contextualise a dialectic is not to contain it. The structure of this dialectical periodisation still retains a majestic transhistorical force: an ability to arouse dissatisfaction with all forms of domination and rule (and imposed typologies and "universalisms" that subalternist and decolonial critiques seek to battle against), even under social conditions which may be vastly different from those within which the dialectic was first conceived.

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46 Samiti, *San 1324* (see note 14), 51, 54.
47 For example, Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
48 Banerjee, *Mortal God* (see note 11), 239–240, 363–368, 371, 384.