Prathama Banerjee

Sovereignty and Ascendancy

South Asian Reflections

The king is non-violent, though he kills
Chaste, though he has women
Truthful, though he lies
Ever fasting, though he eats well
A hero, though he uses trickery
Rich, though he gives away.
Kingship is rather strange![1]

Introduction

This paper argues that sovereignty is not a universal concept even though colonialism and nationalism have laboured to naturalise and universalise it across the world. European thinkers have themselves questioned the indiscriminate application of the term 'sovereignty' across time and place. Foucault has shown that modern governmentality has to do with distributed and disciplinary, rather than singular and spectacular, forms of authority;[2] and Balibar has argued that sovereignty has been more of a juridical claim than a historical fact,[3] always already thwarted by the counter-powers of market, capital, community, corporation, and cultural/religious heterodoxy.

And yet sovereignty continues to be widely used as a universal term to describe modern political phenomena such as the nation-state (national sovereignty), democracy (popular sovereignty), security regimes (state sovereignty), constitution (juridical sovereignty), rights (sovereignty of person), and so on. In fact, sovereignty returned to European political philosophy with renewed analytical purchase in the late twentieth century. Political philosophers of widely different ideological persuasions, like Claude Lefort, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben,[4] resurrected the post-World War II work of Carl Schmitt and

1 *Amukta-Malyada* by King Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara (r. 1509–1529), cited in Rao et al. 2004, 611.

2 Foucault 2004, 37.

3 Balibar 2004, 133–54.

4 Agamben argues that governmentality and sovereignty are twin, rather than opposing, principles of rule in European history. See Agamben 2011. Also see Derrida 2009 and Lefort 2006.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110733198-004

Ernst Kantorowicz[5] in order to argue that the political theology of sovereignty lies at the very heart of contemporary questions of democracy and human rights. Not only in Europe, in South Asia too,[6] the term sovereignty remains in common use both in the academy and in government-speak.

In this paper, I dispute this apparent universality of sovereignty as a concept. I argue, drawing examples from South Asian history, that there may be other conceptions of rulership operative in the world. I propose 'ascendancy' as one such possible concept. Taking cue from a formulation in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, one of the earliest treatises of statecraft in South Asia, perhaps even the world, I conceptualise ascendancy as the movement of *utthan* – literally the movement of 'being on the rise'. Ascendancy, I suggest, is a temporal concept, which implies that political power and efficacy are necessarily subject to waxing and waning through time. Unlike sovereignty, ascendancy does not exist in perpetuity in a transcendental form – be it of God or State. Ascendancy is both achieved and lost and therefore works as a political imagination that returns contingency and changefulness to both regimes rule and forms of struggle.

I should clarify right away that in opening up the concept of sovereignty to interrogation by other conceptual histories, my effort is not to 'provincialise Europe.' Nor is it to propose a philosophical nativism that pits a purist or monochromatic notion of South Asian philosophy against an equally purist and monochromatic imagination of European political philosophy. Instead, I seek to expand our shared horizon of thought, by 'thinking across traditions'[7] – European, Sanskrit, Perso-Arabic and Indic vernacular – in a way that allows us to rethink the theory of the state, across spatial and temporal locations. In fact, as will become evident, some of the features of historical rulership in precolonial South Asia that I discuss can also be found in precolonial Europe, which is why I suggest that thinking political power as ascendancy rather than sovereignty might be a fruitful exercise for academics of both the north and the south, because it might help unsettle the hegemonic vocabulary of colonial modernity which has come to be naturalised and ossified in time. Needless to say, such an

5 Schmitt 2005; Kantorowicz 1957.

6 I use the term 'South Asia' with some hesitation because its use tends to gloss over the subcontinent's unmistakable diversity. However, since I work with historical instances from precolonial times, the term 'India'– denoting the modern nation-state – is equally inappropriate. In earlier times, Pakistan, Bangladesh and to some extent Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Afghanistan were very much part of a territorial and political continuity, irrespective of linguistic and cultural diversity. Colonial India too was included these regions as part of the same British empire. Hence my use of the term South Asia should be understood as a tentative placeholder, and no more.

7 Banerjee et al. 2016.

exercise follows and builds on postcolonial and decolonial criticism but imagines itself as a more positive and affirmative orientation, of developing new theoretical possibilities from out of multiple times and histories.

Histories of Rulership in South Asia

As we know, sovereignty is not just another synonym for political power. It has a particular conceptual and historical constitution, derived as it was from European traditions of Christian kingship, and reinvented many times over through the centuries – in the carrying over of the Roman legal conception of *dominium* to medieval theories of kingship; the seventeenth century recasting, à la Bodin and Hobbes, of the king/state as an absolute power in all matters civil and military; the eighteenth century imagination of the world state as the epitome of universal Reason à la Hegel; the nineteenth century rise of the liberal figure of the sovereign (male, property-owning, rights-bearing, white) individual, who functioned as a symmetrical and countervailing concept to the sovereign state; the globalisation, via liberal imperialism of the British and French varieties, of the notion of a globally regnant 'rule of law'; and, above all, the rise of twentieth century democracy predicated upon a conceptual unity called 'the sovereign people.' This is by no means to say that there were no criticisms of sovereignty or forms of non-sovereign and/or distributed power in European history.[8] Rather, this is to engage the hegemonic form that the concept of sovereignty assumed, once carried over into modern political thought and universalised through the worldwide circulation of colonial epistemologies.

In this hegemonic form, the concept of sovereignty had the following constitutive elements. Firstly, sovereignty was a prescriptive rather than descriptive concept. Its purpose was to theoretically distinguish state power from actually existing dispersed forms of social, commercial, ritual, intellectual and/or communal power. Secondly, sovereignty was posited as a form of transcendental authority – in analogy to the Judaeo-Christian God's – and so beyond the fact of social antagonisms.[9] Thirdly, it was in a relation of alterity to the sovereign that 'society'

8 Much historical work draws on alternative sources such as myths, popular iconography, and archives of legal disputes to show how, in pre-modern Europe, sovereignty was hardly a settled condition or a unitary concept. See Sheehan 2006; Canning 1996; Miller 2008.

9 Jones 2017. For the redefinition of state sovereignty as the sovereignty of reason (both Hegelian and bureaucratic), see Houlgate 2001. Histories of the evolution of the modern state (and with it 'civil society') were often stories of the increasing de-socialisation and rationalisation of the

became thinkable in modernity as a coherent and civil whole, perfectly aligned and opposed to the state. Fourthly, sovereignty was fundamentally predicated upon a notion of personhood – a mystical, fictitious, immortal personhood that permitted the imagination not only of the king's 'two bodies' but also the modern state as an abstract and enduring entity, irrespective of who the ruling classes were. The same notion of personhood produced the imagination of a heterogeneous people as a singular and sovereign unity called the 'people,' just as it made possible the legal fiction of the modern economic form of the joint-stock company as a person with rights of ownership equivalent to that of any real individual.[10] Fifth, law and violence were constitutive of sovereignty as an idea, sovereignty being defined as both the source of law and the exclusive prerogative to violate the law.[11] Sixth, sovereignty was posited as a perpetual or atemporal substance, in that it outlasted regime changes and political revolutions.[12] Seventh, sovereignty was a spatial concept, implying that there could never be two sovereigns in the same space at the same time – which is why sovereignty found its ultimate form in the modern nation-state. And finally, sovereignty was seen as analogous to (though not the same as) property, in that the sovereign state, despite its claim to 'eminent domain,' i.e., the right to dispossess people of their property in 'public interest,' faced both its own mirror image and its own limit in the heroic figure of liberalism, namely, the property-owning, autonomous, rational, sovereign individual and his domain of 'private interest' and his inalienable right to life, liberty and property.

In precolonial South Asia, however, political power did not quite consist of this configuration of elements. Political power here was not in any obvious conceptual antinomy or transcendental relationship to social life. Kingship was only one of the polity's many nodes, alongside guilds, religious sects, monasteries, temples and caste assemblies, networked into a general 'social constitution'.[13] The operative dichotomy here was not so much between state and society as between *the social and the anti-social*, the latter being the dissident/secession-

state as a political form. For classic histories of state formation, see Anderson 1975; Bourdieu 1999; and Thapar 1984.

10 Esposito 2015; McWhorter 2018. McWhorter in fact says that Foucault's critique of sovereignty can only be completed through a simultaneous critique of the concept of personhood in European history.

11 Agamben 1998; Primera 2014. For a discussion of how war, occupation and law came about simultaneously through colonial trade and conquest, see Cohn 1989; Singha 1998; Fitzmaurice 2018; Benton and Ford 2016.

12 Kantorowicz 1957.

13 Kolff 2008.

ist domain of ascetics, wandering warriors, untouchables, outcastes, and 'wilderness' peopled by mobile, hill, forest, and desert communities.[14] The king was meant to tame this dangerous 'outside' and enforce social norms universally. Or so it was demanded by Brahmanical normative texts, the *dharmashastras*.

The social constitution was variously imagined and intensely contested: as the hierarchical order of castes and stages of life (which the king was meant to uphold);[15] the order of principled conduct (with kings, ascetics, priests, *ulama*, monks, and village assemblies vying over the right to adjudicate what constituted right conduct according to diverse norms and customs); the order of justice/governance, predominantly structured by politics, war and statecraft (epitomised in the tradition of the *Arthashastra* of Chanakya/Kautilya); or the productive society of householders (the taxable but potentially rebellious subject population defined in opposition to various orders of renouncers).[16] Within this social constitution, however imagined, different institutions exercised fair autonomy and power. Kingship was thus one amongst many forms of power, including spiritual, intellectual, commercial, and ritual power, each competing with the other for supremacy.

According to the caste constitution, Brahmans were supreme, because they monopolised knowledge and the language of knowledge, which was Sanskrit. The friction between Kshatriya warriors, who aspired to kingship, and Brahmans, who aspired to authorise kingship, was one of the most fascinating dynamics of political power in early India.[17] Often wrongly read as a struggle between politics and religion, this was in fact a struggle between two imaginations of the social constitution, one based on the principle of efficacy and justice, and the other on the principle of ritual power and differentiated social rights.[18] While, by the caste principle, Shudras were meant only to serve, never to rule, there were actually numerous historical instances of Shudra kings in precolonial South Asia, showing that the social/ritual principle and the political principle were often locked in battle. Several instances of powerful Brahman rule, the Vakatakas of fourth to fifth century southern India and the Peshwas of seventeenth century

14 Falk 1973; Parasher-Sen 1998; Madan 1988.

15 In this paradigm, humans were divided into four *varnas*: scholars/priests (Brahmans), warriors/kings (Kshatriyas), producers/traders (Vaishyas) and servants/labourers (Shudras). Individuals were supposed to pass through four *ashramas* or stages of life: celibate studentship (*brahmacharya*), householder (*garhastha*), retirement (*vanaprastha*) and renunciation (*sannyas*). The Shudra was however denied all *ashramas* except the householder's life of labour.

16 Much of my sense of ancient Indian politics draws from Singh 2017.

17 Ambedkar 1987, 67–69.

18 McClish and Olivelle 2012.

western India, belied the formal social division between priests and warriors.[19] Sovereignty, if it could be called that at all, was thus dispersed, disequilibrated, and contested – which is why scholars of South and Southeast Asia have talked of 'segmentary' polities, 'galactic' polities, 'shared sovereignties' and 'little' kingships rather than simply of sovereign states.[20] Characterised in Eurocentric narratives as incomplete or imperfect state formations, these constituted a different paradigm of political power, one not based on the neat binaries of state/society or social/political. Interestingly, the conception of the segmentary state was borrowed, in a classic act of thinking across traditions by Burton Stein, historian of early south India, from the history of forms of domination in Africa's Alur society, made famous by Aidan Southall, British anthropologist and one-time professor at Makerere University, Uganda.[21]

Like political power, the right to violence, too, was dispersed in South Asia. While Kshatriyas had the caste prerogative of war, Brahmans monopolised the violence of sacrifice. Hence in early India, kings often mobilised Brahmans to preside over immense royal sacrifices, great occasions for kingly display and wealth distribution, before and after war. No less feared than kings, as William Pinch shows, were the wandering ascetic warriors of the countryside, who often led lower- and middle-caste peasant communities.[22] The Tamil Sangam literature of southern India aestheticised local warrior heroes, who, though not kings in the conventional sense, were indeed rulers of a sort. Forest peoples like the 'heroic' Bhils of central India, and untouchable communities like the Doms of eastern India and the Mahars of western India, were also traditional warriors and highly desired military allies and mercenary employees.[23] This marked dispersal of the prerogative to violence is in stark contrast to the sovereignty paradigm of the king's exclusive right over life/death, a principle that later mutated into the liberal principle of the state's 'monopoly of violence.'

Violence rather than sovereignty was the most enduring political problematic in South Asia. Buddhist and Jain philosophies of non-violence critiqued Brahmanical sacrificial violence, though they admitted that a certain amount of thoughtful violence was constitutive of kingship. There were many Buddhist kings in South and Southeast Asia, including the exceptional figure of king Asoka, who undertook large-scale military exploits while exhorting his subjects

19 Bayly 2000, 26–30.
20 Stein 1980; Tambiah 1977.
21 Southall 1988.
22 Pinch 1996.
23 Constable 2001; Curley 2008; Guha 2006, 113–16.

to refrain from unnecessary violence, including the eating of flesh and inter-community verbal abuse![24] The epic *Mahabharata* offers the most famous contemplation of violence in South Asia. The story of the epic is of a universal fratricidal war leading to total destruction of the warrior caste. Here, a conceptual distinction is suggested between non-violence (*ahimsa*) and non-cruelty (*anrsamsya*), non-violence being the path for renouncers of society, non-cruelty the duty of social beings. The implication was that violence was the natural condition of both species' life and social life, and by no means an exception or emergency (in Buddhist and Jain lore, even agriculture was a violation of the earth and the earth's creatures). It was one's discriminatory sense with respect to violence that was at stake here, rather than any absolute division between violence and non-violence, political society and civil society.[25]

One of the earliest origin myths of kingship in South Asia went as follows. When mortals tired of endless battle – with big fish eating the small (*matsanyaya*) – they got together to elect Manu as the first king. But Manu refused kingship because he knew that kingship entailed the sin of violence. The gods and the people had to promise to absolve Manu of the sin of violence before he agreed to rule the earth![26] Note how distinct this narrative is from Hobbes' narrative of the state of nature, social contract, and the rise of the Leviathan. Needless to say, all texts of statecraft advised the king to be judicious in the use of violence – neither too little nor too much – and royal panegyrics meticulously balanced the king's warrior image with his benevolent and ascetic temperament, and sometimes even his aesthetic and poetic disposition!

In this paradigm of dispersed logics of violence, kingship was not about law (or the suspension of law), as in the sovereignty paradigm. Law was seen to pre-exist kingship. There was the early concept of *rita*, cosmological regularities, only imperfectly translated as law. Then there was *dharma*, the regime of social rights and duties, mostly connected to the stations of caste and gender, and enforced by the writers of *smriti* (traditions of timeless memory, also known as the *dharma-shastras*). To this was later added the *sharia*, and at least four different schools of Islamic law. Then there were *deshachar* (regional laws), *sadachar* (laws of conduct followed by the virtuous) and *lokavyavahar* (customary or popular practices), all of which competed with royal decree and Brahmanical injunctions for the status of law. There clearly was no one Law with capital L vested with sover-

24 Singh 2017, 40–54.
25 Mukherjee 2014.
26 Singh 2017, 64.

eignty.[27] Kingship was about *nyaya* (justice) and *danda* (punishment) – i.e., about juridical discernment, arbitration, and judgment – and not about the institution or suspension of laws. Local professional and caste bodies as well as monasteries also functioned as courts of law based on community and regional customs. The *Arthashastra*, therefore, elaborately discussed judicial procedures, distinguishing between civil and criminal law in what appear like very modern ways, but said nothing about the promulgation or the source of law.[28]

We see in South Asia, therefore, a critical distinction between political power and the power of law. One could even say that political power was that which could cut through the regime of laws – as when lower-caste kings defied the Brahmanical law of caste *dharma*. The Kshatriya, or the kingly *varna*, thus became socially elastic, absorbing lower-caste groups within its fold whenever the latter acquired effective political power through war and realpolitik. This distinction between politics and law became even more salient during Mughal rule (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), in the highly charged face-off between *siyasat* (political rule, the business of kings and princes) and *shariat* (religious jurisprudence, the business of *ulemas* and *maulavis*) – rival principles of governance, not to be confused with a binary between secular and religious power. The jurists demanded that Mughal territories be ruled on Islamic jurisprudential principles. But precisely because the kingdom consisted of multi-religious and multi-ethnic subject populations, the political dispensation had to be attuned not only to diverse regional and community laws but also to a universalistic philosophy of justice.[29] Emperor Akbar promulgated *sulh i kul*, roughly translatable as the doctrine of universal accord or civility.[30] And Prince Dara Shukoh, in order to fashion the philosophical basis of a new political universalism suitable to empire, undertook a grand project of reinterpreting the Upanishads through Koranic concepts, calling it the *Majma ul Bahrain* or 'the meeting of the two oceans'.[31]

That political power was a distributed rather than a concentrated or sovereign substance is clear from even a cursory reading of the Arthashastra. The king here was not the singular locus of the state. The state was meant to have seven limbs – *swamin* (king or lord), *amatya* (minister or counsel), *janapada* (territory cum people), *durga* (fort or city), *kosa* (treasury), *bala* (force or army) and *mitra* (friends and allies). In fact, in many latter-day texts, counsel and friend were seen

27 Derrett 1968.
28 Olivelle trans. 2013.
29 Alam 2004.
30 Ernst 2010, 356–64; Nizami 1989.
31 Ganeri 2012.

as more important than the king himself, as if a state could survive an inept king, but not bad counsel and treacherous friends! Kingship in this tradition was also imagined as part of a 'wider circle of kings' or *mandala*. In other words, political power was seen as necessarily circumscribed and countermanded by other political powers, variously classified as enemy, friendly, indifferent, enemy of enemy, neighbourly, rear guard and also oligarchic, foreign, barbarian, wild and so on. Vis-à-vis these diverse counter-powers, the king was meant to deploy the multipronged strategy of *sama*, *dana*, *bheda*, and *danda* (reconciliation, gift, divide and rule, and force) in order to achieve ascendancy.[32]

By the same logic of dispersal, political power, even though embodied, was never really imagined in terms of 'personhood' in South Asia. The king's body was often considered sacrosanct and majestic, but it was not the singular locus of political power, in either a corporeal or a mystical sense. The Mughal ruler's body was seen as the repository of royalty and divine luminosity, often represented in miniature paintings with a surrounding halo, but that royalty and luminosity could in fact be transferred through the gift of the king's robe (*khelat*) to subordinate rulers and subjects, an important Mughal courtly ritual.[33] The king's body was also subject to education and askesis – precisely because it was more vulnerable to vice and corruption (*dosa* and *vyasana*) that necessarily accompanied kingship.[34]

Consequently, the modes of identification between ruler and ruled in South Asia were not those of the state impersonating and unifying society à la Hobbes. In early times, as in the rest of the world, the king could be father to his subjects, bound together by love and care. The *Ramayana* imaged the ideal-typical king Rama thus. But the story of the *Ramayana* was really about how Rama came to be a tragic hostage to 'public opinion.' Rama was forced to subject his devoted wife, Sita, earlier abducted by the anti-hero Ravana, to a test by fire to prove her chastity in public eye. Even when she passed with flying colours, he banished her, pregnant and alone, to a forest hermitage. He was also compelled by public opinion to kill the low-caste ascetic Shambuka, because the latter dared outdo the Brahmans in austerities, even though in a seventh century retelling of the story by the poet Bhavabhuti, Rama did so reluctantly, lamenting that his right hand, which did the killing, did not belong to him![35]

32 Olivelle trans. 2013, 48–49.
33 Bayly 1986, 299.
34 Singh 2017, 112–13.
35 Pollock 2007, 50.

The identification of the king with his subjects could also be imagined as cosmological, with the king embodying the times rather than the territory. If the king was corrupt, famine, pestilence, natural calamities, anarchy, and violence visited the realm. The Mughal king was in fact the Lord of the Conjunction of planets and stars. The king was also the court of final appeal, and the dispenser of justice, forgiveness, and mercy. A periodic release of prisoners was meant to mark important royal occasions. *Darshana*, the presenting of the royal self (like a deity) to public viewing and public appeal, was an important aspect of the king's daily routine.[36] Following the tradition of pre-Islamic Sassanid ruler Anushirwan the Just, the Mughal king Jahangir had a chain of gold-plated bells installed for any common petitioner to ring at his or her time of need, establishing the principle of a personal compact of justice with each subject.[37] Theoretically, the king was also the valiant warrior who could die in battle in order to protect the people; a provider (who gave tax exemptions in times of scarcity, distributed grants and gifts, built roads, roadside inns and irrigation works, and planted shady trees for the weary to rest under). The king was also supreme patron of spiritual and aesthetic adepts, and meritorious and needy people in general. Indeed, an ideal king was expected to be the primary node of wealth redistribution – giving grants of land, villages and other prerogatives and immunities to Brahmans, temples of various religious denominations, Jain and Buddhist monasteries, artisanal guilds, and in general distributing gifts to the public at auspicious moments. The myth of Raja Harishchandra, popular to this day including in modern theatre and cinema, told of a king who gives away his kingdom, wife, and son and, with nothing left to give away anymore, gives his own person away as a slave to the untouchable king Kalu Dom. It is from the untouchable, who oversees the polluting task of cremating dead bodies, that the king learns the ultimate truth about the mortal human condition.

The subject-king identification could also be more technical. Taking the example of the eleventh century poet-king Bhoja, Sheldon Pollock describes rulership as an imaginary regime of social and moral order that identified with the grammatical order of the 'language of gods', namely, Sanskrit. Pollock notes that in this paradigm the term for social station was the same as the term for the basic phonetic sound of speech – namely, *varna*.[38] Again, in the thirteenth century Mamluk Sultanat of Delhi, the king's premium subject was the loyal *banda* or slave – natally alienated and socially dead, and, precisely for that reason, uncon-

36 Singh 2017, 156, 334; Juneja 2011.
37 Kaicker 2020, 62.
38 Pollock 2006, 274.

ditionally committed to the service of kingship. Such royal slaves came to be important powers in north India (as in Egypt), producing the paradoxical phenomenon of slave kings and slave nobles.[39] Not surprisingly, *bandagi*, or servitude, came to be seen as a highly noble and ethical mode of identification, such that even devotion to God eventually came to be called *bandagi* in popular Islam, in analogy to *dasya bhava*, or the affect of servitude as practiced in some strands of the medieval *bhakti* tradition of Krishna-worship. This led to the production of a master-slave rather than sovereign-subject form of political identification, based on a relationship of bondage and intimacy rather than of transcendence and impersonation. Note that in the case of the slave king, political power did not imply freedom/autonomy as a sovereign attribute. In the case of the Mughal state (and Safavid Iran), on the other hand, the identification of the king with his premium subjects could take the form of a *murshid-murid*, a teacher-disciple relationship, as the *padshah*, or ruler, came to fashion himself in the image of the Sufi master or saint – once again involving a relationship of devotion and following, rather than of subsumption in the king's mystical body.[40] Alternatively, in the extensive Vijayanagara kingdom of the southern peninsula, premium subjects were 'political sons,' premium subjects chosen by the ruling king over the feuding biological successors to the dynasty.[41]

Note that, across these admittedly diverse and changing forms of political identification, the king-subject interface was not theological in the strict sense of the term, which brings me to the question of the relationship between religion and politics in South Asia, a crucial aspect of the European sovereignty paradigm. Kings in early South Asia were not imagined as divine in the standard sense of divine kingship, though one of the many origin myths of kingship was that the first king was made of particles from many gods, who assembled and alienated aspects of themselves in order to fashion a king who could defeat the anti-gods.[42] And yet, apart from the fact that gods were many, and competed with each other for supremacy, in early South Asia – as in many 'pagan' mythologies of the world (including Nordic tales) – gods (and anti-gods) were as kingly as kings were godly! The epics talked of kings as partaking in the nature of specific gods, and yet, as earthly kings, these part-gods, including god-incarnates, were suffering, troubled and morally compromised beings, like the gods in heaven, engaged in perpetual contest with humans and anti-gods for fame and success!

39 Kumar 1994.
40 Moin 2012, 272.
41 Chekuri 2012.
42 Singh 2017, 125.

Buddhism, for its part, denied the very existence of god, but elaborately theorised kingship, including the supremacy of the Buddha himself as world-conqueror. In later times, when South Asian kings began to claim a royal religion and construct royal temples – identifying with particular Vaishnava and Shaiva sects, i.e., competing followers of the rival gods Vishnu and Shiva – they continued to patronise multiple religious communities, including Buddhism, Jainism and, in later times, Sufi orders and Jesuits, because, as kings, they had to be seen as much as universal patrons as supreme devotees of one or the other god.[43] In fact, Christian Novetzke's depiction of the public sphere in twelfth to fourteenth century Maharashtra shows us how multiple forms of religiosities competed with each other for popular following, requiring the Yadava kings, despite their subscription to an overarching Brahmanical ecumene, to engage with multiple communal philosophies of devotion as well as social critique.[44]

The religion question became even more interesting in Mughal times. Akbar's court became famous for sponsoring regular disputations amongst Muslim, Hindu, Jain and Christian theologians regarding the truths of various religions. Eventually, braving the censure of many an orthodox jurist, he went on to promulgate his own spiritual doctrine, *Din-i Ilahi*. Yet, as A. Afzar Moin shows, Akbar's spiritual move was a neither a form of syncretism nor a case of political secularism but a way of pitching the king himself as a saint – with miraculous powers, a prophetic vision of the future, and a supremely personal sense of justice beyond the letter of the law. Unsurprisingly, in Mughal times we find intimate alliances as well as intense rivalry between the king and the Sufi because they were seen as holders of analogous master-offices.[45] The last great Mughal king Aurangzeb's attempt to establish a bureaucratic and legalistic vision of rule based on Sunni theology, Abhishek Kaicker shows, in fact became a popular target of derision by poets and satirists of Delhi, a city peopled by deeply heterogeneous Muslim (and Hindu) publics.[46]

In other words, the multi-religious and multi-ethnic demographics of the subcontinent prevented the rise of political theology of the kind we see in the history of early modern and modern Europe just as it disabled a unitary imagination of 'society' as *natio* and as the mirror image of a monotheistic sovereign. What Sheldon Pollock has shown for the Sanskrit cosmopolis can be said to be generally true for later vernacular and Perso-Arabic ecumenes – namely, that the king, even when marked by divine attributes, never became the centre of a royal

43 Singh 2017, 184–86.
44 Novetzke 2016.
45 Moin 2012.
46 Kaicker 2020, 102.

cult nor the object of religious worship. Most importantly, the king's god was never the god of a political *ethnie*. It is worth citing Pollock's comparison of the political category *imperium romanum* and literary and cultural category *latinitas* with the Indic politico-cultural order:

> [...] the populations that inhabited it [the Sanskrit cosmopolis] were never enumerated, standardization of legal practices was nowhere attempted beyond a vague conception of moral order to which power was universally expected to profess its commitment. Sanskrit cosmopolitanism never carried particularistic religious notions like those that marked the recreated cosmopolitan forms of Charlemagne and Otto. [...] Sanskrit cosmopolitanism was not about absorbing the periphery into the center but turning the periphery itself into a center, not about taking the whole world into our city (*ingens orbis in urbe fuit*) but taking our city into the whole world (*nagarim ekam ivorvim sasati*). Sanskrit cosmopolitanism duplicated locations everywhere; it was a world of all centers and no circumferences [...] .[47]

In other words, while kingship did have an intimate relationship to the spiritual question in South Asia – if one uses the term spirituality to simply mean a generic orientation towards existential and cosmological questions of life and beyond – it was not exactly theological, exegetical, or confessional in nature. One classical example of the kind of spirituality that was enjoined for kings is found in the ideal of the *rajarsi* – the sage- or the renouncer-king – whose legitimacy rested on the fact that he could give up territory and treasure.[48] Indeed, the ideal end to a successful king's reign was when the king retired voluntarily and went to the forest to meditate (as every upper-caste householder was expected to do and as allegedly did the sixth century BCE Maurya king Bimbisara) – the highest power in the world being the hard-earned ability to give up power itself![49] In fact, one could say that spirituality was salient to kingship precisely because kings had the greatest access to power and pleasure, making them particularly vulnerable to the kind of extreme fall and corruption that only power, and desire, can bring!

The matter of the rise and fall of kings brings me finally to the question of temporality which is at the heart of my interrogation of the concept of sovereignty. In precolonial South Asia, kingship was not imagined as perpetual or a-temporal, in the image of God presiding over eternity.[50] There was an abiding sense that the movement of time ensured an inevitable waxing and waning, rise and fall, of political supremacy. Time passed through cyclical ages, or *yugas*, of moral

47 Pollock 2006, 572.

48 Gonda 1969, 1–5.

49 Singh 2017, 85.

50 For diverse traditions of thinking political time and spirituality in South Asia, see Murphy 2011; for diverse philosophies of time in India, see Balslev 2009.

decline interrupted by intense political ruptures. The last of these epochs, seen as coterminous with the age of human history, was also meant to be the time of social inversion, in which lower castes and women rose to the top. The narrative of the *Mahabharata*, for example, begins at the onset of the *kaliyuga* and thematises the destruction of almost the entire ruling class prior to a restitution of the world.[51] In fact, colonial rule itself came to be thematised as *kaliyuga* in popular discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – implying that fundamental political rupture was also an inherent aspect of the movement of time.

As Afzar Moin shows, in Mughal India and Safavid Iran, kingship was imagined in terms of astrological and millennial temporality, with emperors – 'Lords of Conjunction' or *sahib qirans* – presiding over epochal change and engaged in competing prophecies about the imminent future (unlike in national times, when the contest becomes a battle over history).[52] This was in fact a much wider phenomenon. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam shows, the sixteenth century was a millennial century not just in South and West Asia but also in Europe.[53] Anne Blackburn on her part shows that in Buddhist kingships of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, political regimes imaged themselves in relation to particular temporal points in the cycles of Buddha's births and rebirths.[54] Again, Said Arjomand reminds us that the Persian term for supreme political power, *daulat* (often translated as sovereignty), meant 'political fortune' as well as 'a turn in power'. The implication was that rulership was by definition subject to dissolution. Revolution, or *inquilab*, here had a double connotation. It indexed both the natural, inexorable cyclical movement of stars and planets, which was subject to the science of astrology and analogous to the impermanence of all regimes and epochs; and the ever-present possibility of the ruler's moral decay and his failure to adhere to principles of justice, which called for righteous insurgency and the overthrow of the king. In that sense, the term revolution was already being used in Persianate cultures in a politico-temporal sense way before the astrological term took on political connotations in eighteenth century Europe.[55] In this imagination, political authority was always already subject to the relentless work of time, and widely recognised as such.

In the case of the mighty Mughal regime, Farhat Hasan shows that conquest and supremacy did not mean territorial consolidation as much as the creation of

51 Inden 1978.
52 Moin 2012.
53 Subrahmanyam 2003.
54 Blackburn 2017.
55 Arjomand 2012.

an imperial transactional network – of gifts and services – involving local rulers, corporate groups, and intermediaries, producing a 'public sphere' or 'political society,' to use today's terms. In this domain, popular protest (rather than popular representation in the modern sense) was a critical mode of people's participation in the regime. To cite Hasan, popular uprising was a technique of playing the 'diffuse and supple quality of the political cell', reproducing the king of kings, I would add, as a mediating rather than transcendent figure.[56] Kaicker shows for seventeenth and eighteenth century Delhi that street action by 'people' – ranging from shoemakers to lowly preachers to foot soldiers, poets, and satirists – was an enduring phenomenon in the very functioning of kingship. Popular protest in the Mughal capital functioned both to correct the king's errors and injustices and defend kingship when threatened by 'illegitimate' counter-powers like the English East India Company in 1857.[57] To take another eloquent example, the Vijayanagara empire, which boasted of extensive territorial overlordship in fourteenth to sixteenth century Deccan, developed the *nayamkara* system, by which the Raya or supreme king, and the Nayakas, regional/local leaders, came together literally as co-parceners – like members of a joint family – of sovereignty, each with entitlements to both revenue and governance. The Nayakas, in turn, distributed their share of sovereignty to other chiefs and leaders in a further parcelling out of rulership. And in Vijayanagara too, as Chekuri shows, popular rebellion was a recurrent phenomenon, not in the collapse, but in fact in the actual functioning, of the system.

In other words, the waxing and waning of political supremacy in South Asia had to do with a repeated tilting of balance, a regular alternation, between the ascendancy of trans-regional polities and that of regional and local polities via insurgency and secession. The breakup of both the great Mughal and the great Vijayanagar regimes were precisely of this kind, following the collapse of arrangements of shared authority between rulers, supreme rulers and commoners. It is for this reason that I propose that what we see in precolonial South Asia is a form of political power – termed variously in Sanskrit and Persian as *rajasri*, *sultanat*, *daulat*, *riyasat*, *siyasat* etc. – that is better conceptualised as ascendancy rather than sovereignty. Ascendancy indexes a form of power that is 'on the rise' and eventually 'subject to fall.' That is, it is power which is contingent, ephemeral, and hence predicated more on notions of flux and temporality than stability, perpetuity, and territoriality. Ascendancy also indexes power that is relative to other powers and not absolute, indivisible and perpetual as in the case of sovereignty,

56 Hasan 2004, 24, 53.
57 Kaicker 2020, 9, 16, 295–96.

which is why the supreme title of kings in both ancient and medieval South Asia was 'king of kings' – *rajarajadhiraja* and *shahenshah* – and not just 'king of the people.'

This dynamic – the waxing and waning of ascendancy – based on the erosion of time and on the inevitability of insurgency and secession – is captured wonderfully in the *Arthashastra* (*arthasva mulam utthanam*) – where it is said that worldly efficacy, of which kingship is the epitome, is ultimately a function of the capacity of *utthan*, or ascension, involving unceasing striving and alertness, running to stay in the same place, as it were! Even the most clever and just king fails for lack of this capacity. Nrisinghaprasad Bhaduri – in his study of *dandaniti*, the tradition of statecraft that went through multiple Sanskrit and vernacular reiterations from the time of the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra* through the Mughal times to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – argues that *artha* was seen as foundational to both ordinary everyday life and kingship. Even the achievement of *dharma* and *moksha*, i.e., religion and liberation, required this prior movement of ascension, the pursuit of *artha*.[58] In that sense, ascendancy was not an exclusive property of kings. Incidentally, classical aesthetic theory makes a distinction between *vir* and *rudra rasas* or affects. *Vir rasa* (roughly translated as valour) is seen to accrue to noble characters such as kings and warriors. Its main expressive form is *utsaha* or dynamic energy (both *utsaha* and *utthana* share the same Sanskrit prefix *ut-*, implying an upward movement) and its associated orientations are correct perception, decisiveness (*adhyavasaya*), political wisdom (*nyaya*), courtesy (*vinay*), army/strength (*bal*), influence (*prabhav*) etc. *Rudra rasa* (translated as anger) however accrues to demons, monsters and violent men. Its main expressive form is fury and its associated orientations are provocation (*adharsana*), insult (*adhiksep*), lies, assaults (*upghat*), harsh words, oppression (*abhidroh*) and envy. While *vir* and *rudra* may appear proximate, *vira* is distinguished by heroic *utsaha,* the orientation that produces the possibility of ascension or *utthan*, rather than simply conflict, dissipation and destruction.[59]

The Colonial Transition

It was in the above context of competing ascendancies that the English East India Company arrived. The Company, as we know, was a corporation,[60] chartered by

58 Bhaduri 1998, 22.

59 Masson and Patwardhan 1985, 48–58.

60 For the Euro-American story of the transformation of corporations from political entities to economic 'persons,' see Barakan 2013.

the British Crown and given monopoly rights over Asian trade. The Company, however, was as interested in territorial revenue as it was in commercial profit, which is why Philip Stern aptly calls it a Company-State.[61] And yet, while admitting that the Company was indeed a political entity and not just an economic body, we must take seriously the Company's unique double character, which made it an unprecedented form of political power in South Asia. The East India Company waged war, conquered territory, set up forts, municipalities, and law courts in different parts of South Asia – effectively acting as a sovereign, and invoking 'public' authority. But in its character as a commercial entity, it also frequently asserted its 'private' interest vis-à-vis both the English Crown and Indian kingdoms. In other words, the Company asserted both rights of sovereignty and rights of property, as two faces of the same coin. This was very much in line with how sovereignty as a concept had evolved in early modern and modern Europe, enabling the Company to alternate – depending on who it was addressing – as a sovereign ruler and as a sovereign property owner, the former on the basis of 'rule of law' claims and the latter on the basis of 'liberty' claims. It cited shareholder interest in face of demands by the Crown, and Crown authority in face of parliamentary and native criticism!

In South Asia, the Company encountered the Mughal empire, a shadow of its former self but still of great dignity and legitimacy, apart from a number of regional states who were autonomous of the Mughals. It is interesting that, in the initial years, the Company operated through the 'prerogatives' of custom-free trade and revenue collection (*diwani*), acquired from the Mughal 'sovereign.' By doing so, the Company pretended to be one amongst many South Asian rulers and merchant corporations who participated in the South Asian system of 'shared sovereignty.' In actuality, the Company saw Mughal rule as an instance of 'oriental despotism,' after the image of eastern tyranny that had come to be popular in Europe at this time.[62] This was the image of an all-powerful monarch who owned all the land of the country and extracted taxes/rent from a passive and obedient subject population who possessed no sense of liberty and property and therefore no right of redress against the state. This was the Company's ideological basis for denying the 'sovereignty' of South Asian kingships, including eventually that of the Mughals (leading to Edmund Burke's famous eighteenth-century criticism that the Company disrespected the 'ancient constitutions' of other nations).[63]

61 Stern 2011.
62 Travers 2007.
63 Chatterjee 2012; Dirks 2006.

It is true that in ancient and medieval South Asia, the king was meant to have a rightful dominion over the whole earth – embodied in the earliest form of the ideal of the *chakravarti*, indexing the king whose chariot wheels traversed all territories, his own and other kings'. This rhetorical usage led to the colonial misunderstanding that in reality, all land belonged to the king, who could grant and resume the subject's property at whim. Yet in South Asia, the king's dominion (*isitva* or lordship) over land was never a form of ownership. As Jaimini's *Mimamsasutra* (c. 300–200 BCE) put it, even in context of the *visvajit*, or world-conquering sacrifice, the king had no right to dispose of the earth as he pleased! The king, like any other person, had a right to *bhoga*, or enjoyment of the fruits of his dominion – in that sense he was no different from his any of his subjects. (Note here the distinction between enjoyment and ownership.) The *Narada Dharmashastra* in fact stated in so many terms: 'In this world there are three who are independent – the king, the teacher and *every householder of every caste in his home'* (emphasis mine), the last vouching for the fact that every individual of every caste, however 'low,' had a right to private property and a private sphere, though the term 'private' is a bit of a misnomer here. The only extra privilege the king had over other property-holders, as the *Baudhayana Dharmashastra* put it, was his entitlement to a 'support' of one-sixth of the earth's produce, in exchange for his protecting others' dominions. Note that the king here 'is supported' (*bhrta*) by revenue (the term *bhrta*, meaning to hold up, a usage which later yielded the term *bhritya* for servant). This was analogous to the fact that the king also shared in the collective merit of his subjects, and vice versa.

In fact, there was in precolonial South Asia a highly elaborate discourse on personal property, involving conceptual tools and legal instruments that could help assert individual ownership rights against rulers, rival claimants, and those with subordinate claims, like tenants, cultivators, mortgagees etc. As early as in Panini's grammar, circa 400 BCE, we find discussions of the abstract concepts of *svamitva* (ownership) and *svatva* (the condition of being owned), generating a long tradition of ordinary language philosophy that theorised both identity and property. The *Arthashastra* spoke of the 'relation between property and owner' (*sva-svami-sambandha*) as a specifically legal matter relevant to statecraft (called the domain of *vyavahara* or practicalities). Later, as in the thirteenth to fourteenth century *Navya Nyaya*, the 'new epistemology' school of logicians,[64] there were

64 *Navya Nyaya* was a school of logical/inferential reasoning inaugurated by Gangesa in the thirteenth century and elaborated in the next few centuries, especially in the eastern regions of Mithila and Bengal. There are many debates in this tradition around notions of identity, property, and ownership.

threadbare debates around rights of use and rights of ownership. The *dharmashastras* too had a lot to say about socially differentiated property rights, as did more practical documents like royal inscriptions of land grants, religious endowments, and tax exemptions granted to different communities and institutions. Given the multipolar nature of political power in South Asia, property dealings, unsurprisingly, were guided by multiple laws – state laws, royal decrees, *dharma*, local customs, community norms and so on, the latter often ensured by the presence of local councils and assemblies at moments of transaction.[65]

There was however one aspect to this elaborate property regime which is particularly salient with respect to the sovereignty question, and which came into contention at the moment of the establishment of colonial rule in the subcontinent. This was the critical distinction between *svamitva* (ownership) and *adhikara* (entitlement), which was central to the administration of property in precolonial South Asia. The idea here was that, without having ownership or alienation rights in a property, certain people – such as minors, wives, slaves, dependents, and the mentally incompetent – might indeed have both ritual and legal entitlement to it. The *Arthashastra*, for example, argued that slaves, who were the property of masters, were themselves entitled to property and/or share in property. It also debated what it meant for women and children to 'belong' to spouses and parents, and whether or not such belonging could be seen as a form of ownership. In short, property entitlements accrued to even those who would appear, in the European legal tradition, as non-persons or non-sovereign individuals. Or, to put it differently, private property here did not necessarily preclude the entitlement of others to that property, including those who might be otherwise considered 'unfree'– something that would also have been familiar in many regions of Europe prior to the enclosure of commons. Ownership was usually understood to rest with the *mula-svami*, the 'root' owner (as opposed to, say, the *svami* or the king, or the current user of the property), but that ownership did not imply 'absolute' freedom, because ownership also generated a certain set of obligations. In the two dominant property systems of north and east India – the *Dayabhaga* and the *Mitakshara* – the household was seen as the primary propertied unit, and the qualified rights of fathers vis-à-vis sons, wives, servants, and the sheltered were an important subject of discussion. In fact, a *Navya Nyaya* interlocutor asked if 'being owned' – the condition of 'owned-ness,' so to speak – was about an entity's susceptibility to be 'used just as the owner wished' or to be used 'in the right way'! (The question then became whether one could stake property claims on an object which one blatantly misused.) In other words, ownership here was not

65 This discussion on early South Asian property systems is drawn from Lubin 2018.

understood here as a sovereign quality or property of an individual, even though ownership was no doubt clearly marked, documented and legally justiciable.[66]

British officials misread this proprietorial complexity to mean that in South Asia individuals had no property rights, and the state therefore had despotic power. Accordingly, the East India Company and subsequently the British India Office set themselves up as 'despotic,' allegedly in continuity to the despotic tradition of South Asian kingship. I shall not dwell on this aspect of the story here, instead referring readers to Partha Chatterjee's excellent discussion on how liberal British thinkers justified authoritarian colonial rule on the basis of a paradigm of world history consisting of European political norms and non-European exceptions and deviances.[67] What is more relevant for us here is the fact that the colonial state, for the first time in South Asia, enacted the classical form of absolute and undivided sovereignty – a totally new experience for the colonised. This it did by pitching itself not just as a transcendental entity based on an abstract and universal 'rule of law' which had nothing to do with regional or community norms (though the move from multiple legalities to legal monism was a highly contested transition), but also by literally performing its own racial and civilisational 'foreignness' with respect to the society it ruled. The colonial state thus acquired an inscrutability and externality befitting a monotheistic God, producing for the first time in South Asia the hitherto unfamiliar state-society face-off![68] The postcolonial national state in India inherited this constitutive externality of sovereign power and, despite its formal representational structure, pitted itself as

66 In other words, ownership does not necessarily entail individualism or sovereign personhood. In precolonial South Asia, the sense of individuated embodied selves (*jiva*) was highly developed, despite colonial accusations to the contrary, as was the highly complex philosophical debate around the possibility of a universal or shared self. The *dharmashastras*, even though they were about the hierarchies of caste, community, and gender, saw the embodied individual as the main addressee of normative discourse. And the widely shared theory of *karma* – which argued that good and bad deeds resulted in the accrual of merits and demerits across multiple births – posited the individuated self or *atman* as a stable entity across time. None of these theories, however, was a theory of *personhood*, based on a clear-cut separation of persons from non-persons. In fact, what we find here is the imagination of a range of life-forms – from worms and plants to merchants, kings, and gods. The story tradition of the *Jataka*, for example, narrativises the Buddha as having to go through multiple births, both human and animal, before he achieves Enlightenment and universal compassion. The *Panchatantra* too gave lessons in political competence through animal stories! For a fascinating account of the relations between personhood, identity, property, and rulership in the case of a twentieth century 'little kingdom' in Bengal called Bhawal, see Chatterjee, "The Identity Puzzle," in Chatterjee 2002, 115–37.

67 Chatterjee 2011, 1–28.

68 Banerjee 2018.

a rational, superordinate force, exercising a rule of law untouched by the alleged corruptions and compromises of society, and entitled to intervene from above to forcibly modernise/develop a backward, irrational and superstitious people.

But then, in order to effectively assume sovereignty, the colonial state had to first neutralise the rulership claims of native kings – not just those of the imperial Mughals but also the variety of local and regional rulers and warrior communities that operated in South Asia as autonomous 'little kings.'[69] To do so, the Company embarked on a 'pacification' drive, a military exercise meant to disarm landholding, peasant and tribal communities. But, as importantly, the Company went about setting up what has been aptly called the 'rule of property' in the colony.[70] This it did by promulgating new kinds of land-revenue settlements across the country – most famously, the 1776 Permanent Settlement of Bengal. This Settlement was based on the idea that landlords should have unqualified, permanent, and absolute ownership rights over land, and should no longer be subject to any social, community or political obligations attendant on ownership. The only condition for ownership was henceforth a purely economic one – namely, the regular payment of annual revenue to the colonial state. Village headmen and smallholding peasants, too, were turned into similar revenue-paying property-owners.

This new set of arrangements had an unprecedented effect. It created in South Asia a class of propertied elite – landed gentry, the Company argued, invoking the class dynamics of the English countryside – who had economic power but no political right or responsibility (though that was not true of the British aristocracy). Company officials, in the name of 'free trade,' systematically dispossessed landholders of earlier forms of political, military, and commercial authority, simultaneously 'resettling' marketplaces as purely economic sites of exchange, without any cultural or political relationship to landownership and/or rulership in the locality.[71] The landed elite could no longer boast of political legitimacy and/or patronage functions. Their subjects – the *praja* – were also turned into pure economic agents, namely, workers and peasants. This new bifurcation between the political and the economic – reflecting the modern European dichotomy between the state as sovereign and the property-owning individual as its mirror image – transformed the nature of political dynamics in the south Asian countryside, with important implications for nationalist politics in the region. That, however, is the subject of another paper.

69 Berkemer and Frenz 2003.
70 Guha 1982.
71 Sen 1998.

Conclusion

The two central terms *artha* and *daulat* – in Sanskrit and Persian respectively – that denoted kingly power in precolonial South Asia conceptualised the political and the economic as co-constitutive of rulership. *Artha* – whence the discipline of *arthashastra* or the science of politics – had a range of meanings, including purposive action, meaning/implication of a word, worldly success, the science of managing territory and also, literally, wealth. *Daulat* meant political fortune, rulership, turnover in government and, indeed, also wealth. In other words, in earlier times, it was common sense that economic power necessarily had political implications, and vice versa. The disciplinary separation of politics and economics – the binary between state and market, sovereignty and liberty, state and individual – was thus quite unthinkable in earlier days. The modern idea of sovereignty, however, is crucially based on this politics/economics binary, which is why it is assumed, even today and in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary (in the form of trans-national profiteering and diverse modes of impoverishment, destitution, and racism operative in the world today), that the nation-state is still a sovereign entity and the human individual still a sovereign rights-bearing subject, protected by sovereign law and the indisputable master of life, liberty, and property!

Of course, reality on the ground is another matter. Today, state sovereignty is radically challenged by transnational financial networks, big corporations, data companies, and ecological, energy and health challenges at a planetary scale. Equally, in South Asia and other parts of the Global South, myriad forms of 'shared,' dispersed and nested sovereignties operate in internal frontiers, borderlands, urban spaces, and religious/caste/racial/ethnic sites. To adequately perform its putative sovereignty, the nation-state therefore has to repeatedly take recourse to extra-legal action, sometimes outright violence, and emergency laws, against these so-called counter-sovereignties, often including communities of its own people. [72]

It seems to me worthwhile, then, to free ourselves from the hold that sovereignty as a concept has over our modern political sensibility. Thinking with diverse alternative understandings of power helps us get rid of a reified notion of the state (as well as of the corporation, and indeed the autotelic agency which we have come to know as Capital as such) as a *perpetuum ens*, i.e., a perpetual entity which lives on unaltered despite revolutionary changes in its concrete embodied form. Equally, it helps us to free ourselves from the modernist imagination of

72 For a discussion on shared sovereignties in contemporary South Asia, Turkey and Southeast Asia, see the E. L. Beverly 2020, 407–93.

the human as being in a sovereign proprietary relationship with the planet, and indeed with non-humans, including those humans who are politically dehumanised in today's world. In this essay, I have proposed as one possible alternative the term ascendancy, with its inescapable connotation of contingency and change as constitutive of political authority. To my mind, these alternative understandings may help us rewrite not just regional but also global histories of political thought.

I have also argued in this paper that, to fashion alternative concepts, we need to put mainstream philosophy and European history in critical conversation with other philosophical traditions and other histories of the world. Here, given the nature of the precolonial past of South Asia, I have had to traverse Sanskrit, Perso-Arabic and regional language traditions. Equally, I have had to gesture towards moments when historians and ethnographers of Africa and Southeast Asia have had to join South Asianists in critiquing the concept of an absolute sovereign state. And I have also had to bring into focus the changes wrought by colonial epistemology in South Asia and indeed the world at large.

I call this mode of analysis, perhaps rather inelegantly, 'thinking across traditions and temporalities,' though I admit this is neither an easy nor a fully achieved methodology. Today we are faced with geopolitical divisions that have hardened into disciplinary divisions, most explicitly in the Area Studies paradigm, which makes it difficult for us to set up conversations between different regions of the world. For historians, equally challenging is the archive question, given that the world is today organised in terms of discrete national archives which must be breached if we want to genuinely think across traditions. Thinking across traditions also requires multilingual skills of a rare kind, and even though many of us might be bi- or trilingual, we still have to depend on translations, which have had their own complex and fraught history in colonial and postcolonial times. Above all, thinking across temporalities is obstructed by the periodisation schema of the discipline of history, which again makes conversation difficult between classicists, medievalists, early modernists, and contemporary historians. Nevertheless, I do believe that, collaboratively, decolonial scholars of the world can begin a conversation across times and territories, and this paper has been a modest and limited effort at joining just such a conversation.

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. 2011. *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Alam, Muzaffar. 2004. *The Language of Political Islam: India 1200–1800*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ambedkar, B. R. 1987. "Philosophy of Hinduism." In *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Volume III, ed. Vasant Moon, 67–69. Bombay: Government of Maharashtra.

Anderson, Perry. 1975a. *From Antiquity to Feudalism*. London: New Left Books.

Anderson, Perry. 1975b. *Lineages of the Absolutist States*. London: New Left Books.

Arjomand, Said. 2012. "Concept of Revolution in Persianate Political Thought." *Journal of Persianate Studies* 5: 1–16.

Balibar, Etienne. 2004."Prolegomena to Sovereignty." In *We, the People of Europe: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship,* 133–54. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Balslev, Anindita. 2009. *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.

Banerjee, Prathama. 2018. "The Abiding Binary: The Social and the Political in Modern India." In *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and Postcolonial Orderings*, eds. Diana Heath, and Stephen Legg, 81–105. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Banerjee, Prathama, Aditya Nigam, and Rakesh Pandey. 2016. "The Work of Theory: Thinking Across Traditions." *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 3: 42–50.

Barakan, Joshua. 2013. *Corporate Sovereignty: Law and Government under Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bayly, Chris A. 1986. "The Origins of Swadeshi: Cloth and Indian Society, 1700–1930." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, 285–322. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bayly, Susan. 2000. *Caste, Society and Politics in India: From the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Benton, Lauren, and Lisa Ford. 2016. *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Berkemer, Georg, and Margret Frenz, eds. 2003. *Sharing Sovereignty: The Little Kingdom in South Asia*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz.

Beverly, E. L., ed. 2020. "Introduction to Rethinking Sovereignty, Colonial Empires, and Nation-States in South Asia and Beyond." Special issue, *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 40, no. 3: 407–93.

Bhaduri, Nrisimhaprasad. 1998. *Dandaniti*. Kolkata: Sahitya Sansad.

Blackburn, Anne. 2017. "Buddhist Technologies of Statecraft and Millennial Moments." *History and Theory* 56, no. 1: 71–79.

Bodin, Jean. 1992. *On Sovereignty*, ed. Julian H. Franklin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1999. "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field." In *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz, 53–75. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Canning, J. 1996. *A History of Medieval Political Thought: 300–1450*. First Edition. London and New York: Routledge.

Chatterjee, Partha. 2002. "The Identity Puzzle." In *The Princely Imposter: the Kumar of Bhawal and the Secret History of Indian Nationalism*, 115–37. Delhi: Permanent Black.

Chatterjee, Partha. 2011. "Introduction." In *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*, 1–28. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chatterjee, Partha. 2012. *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chekuri, Christopher. 2012. "A 'Share' in the 'World Empire': Nayamkara as Sovereignty in Practice at Vijayanagara, 1480–1580." *Social Scientist* 40, no. 1: 41–67.

Cohn, Bernard S. 1989. "Law and the Colonial State in India." In *History and Power in the Study of Law: New Directions in Legal Anthropology*, eds. Peter Just, June Starr, and Jane F. Collier, 131–52. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Constable, Philip. 2001. "The Marginalization of a Dalit Martial Race in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Western India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 2: 439–78.

Curley, David. 2008. "Battle and Self-Sacrifice in a Bengali Warrior's Epic: Lausen's Quest to be a Raja in Dharma Maṅgal." In *Rites of Spring: Gajan in Village Bengal*, ed. Ralph W. Nicholas, 142–219. Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008. https://cedar.wwu.edu/liberalstudies_facpubs/7/, accessed December 14, 2021.

Davis, Kathleen. 2008. *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Demenchonok, Edward. 2007. "From a State of War to Perpetual Peace." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 66, no. 1: 25–48.

Derrett, John D. M. 1968. *Religion, Law and the State in India*. London: Faber.

Derrida, Jacques. 2009. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Volume I. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Dirks, Nicholas B. 2006. *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Ernst, Carl W. 2010. 'Fayzi's Illuminationist Interpretation of Vedanta: The Shariq al-ma'rifa.' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3: 356–64;

Esposito, Roberto. 2015. *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity Books.

Falk, Nancy E. 1973. "Wilderness and Kingship in Ancient South Asia." *History of Religions* 13, no. 1: 1–15.

Fitzmaurice, Andrew. 2014. *Sovereignty, Property and Empire, 1500–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 2004. *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France*. London: Penguin Books.

Ganeri, Jonardan. 2012. "Dārā Shukoh and the Transmission of the Upaniṣads to Islam." In *Migrating Texts and Traditions*, ed. William Sweet, 177–88. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press. Also accessible at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/papers/Ganeri(migratingtexts).pdf.

Gonda, Jan. 1969. "Introduction: Ideas Connected with the Main Terms and Epithets of 'King'." In *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View*, 1–5. Leiden: Brill Archive.

Guha, Ranajit. 1982. *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement.* Delhi: Orient Blackswan.

Guha, Sumit. 2006. *Environment and Ethnicity in India 1200-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hasan, Farhat. 2004. *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, C.1572–1730*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Houlgate, Stephen. 2001. "Hegel, Rawls and the Rational State." In *Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism: Studies in Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. Robert R. Williams, 249–73. New York: State University of New York Press. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/papers/Ganeri(migratingtexts).pdf; https://cedar.wwu.edu/liberalstudies_facpubs/7, accessed August 16, 2020.

Inden, Ronald. 1978. "Ritual, Authority and Cyclic Time in Hindu Kingship." In *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. J. F. Richards, 28–73. Madison: University of Wisconsin.

Jones, Meirav. 2017. "'My Highest Priority Was to Absolve the Divine Laws': The Theory and Politics of Hobbes' *Leviathan* in a War of Religion." *Political Studies* 65, no. 1: 248–63.

Juneja, Monica. 2011. "Translating Body into Image: The body Politic and Visual Practice in the Mughal Court of Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries." In *Images of the Body in India: South Asian and European Perspectives on Rituals and Performativity*, eds. Alex Michaels, and Christoph Wulf, 235–60. Delhi: Routledge.

Kaicker, Abhishek. 2020. *The King and the People: Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal Delhi*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kantorowicz, Ernst H. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Kolff, Dirk H. A. 2008. "A Millennium of Stateless Indian History?" In *Rethinking a Millennium; Perspectives on Indian History From the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century – Essays for Harbans Mukhia*, ed. Rajat Datta, 51–67. Delhi: Aakar Books.

Lefort, Claude. 2006. "Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" In *Political Theologies: Public Religion in a Post-secular World*. eds. Hent De Vries, and Lawrence Sullivan, 148–87. New York: Fordham University Press.

Lubin, Timothy. 2018."The Theory and Practice of Property in Premodern South Asia: Disparities and convergences." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61, no. 5–6. Washington & Lee Legal Studies Paper No. 2017–3. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2909048, accessed September 6, 2020.

Madan, T. N., ed. 1988. *Way of Life: King, Householder, Renouncer: Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.

Masson, J. L., and M. V. Patwardhan. 1985. *Santarasa and Abhinavaguptas Philosophy of Aesthetics*. Pune: Bhandarkar Research Institute.

Mattern, Johannes. 1928. *State, Sovereignty, and International Law: With Special Reference to the Juristic Conception of the State*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

McClish, Mark , and Patrick Olivelle. 2012. "Introduction." In *The Arthaśāstra: Selections from the Classic Indian Work on Statecraft*, IX–LXXII. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing.

McWhorter, Ladelle. 2017. "Sovereigns and Persons in Ethical Thought." *Genealogy* 1, no. 21. www.mdpi.com/2313-5778/1/4/21/pdf, accessed August 2, 2018.

Miller, Dean. 2008. "Royalty and Mythology: Connections and Similarities between Ireland's Kings and Monarchy in the Classical World and Elsewhere." *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 67: 107–11.

Moin, Afzar A. 2012. *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mukherjee, Gangeya. 2014. "Himsa-Ahimsa in the Mahabharata: The Lonely Position of Yudhisthira." In *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*, ed. Arindam Chakrabarti, and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, 219–43. Delhi: Routledge.

Murphy, Anne, ed. 2011. *Time, History and Religion in South Asia*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.

Nizami, Khaliq Ahmad. 1989. *Akbar and Religion*. Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli.

Lee Novetzke, Christian. 2016. *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*. New York: Columbia University.

Olivelle, Patrick, trans. 2013. *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthasastra — A New Annotated Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Parasher-Sen, Aloka. 1998."Of Tribes, Hunters and Barbarians: Forest Dwellers in the Mauryan Period." *Studies in History* 14, no. 2: 173–91.

Pinch, William R. 1996. *Peasants and Monks in British India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pollock, Sheldon. 2006. *The Language of Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Pollock, Sheldon, trans. 2007. *Rama's Last Act by Bhavabhuti*. New York: New York University Press and J. J. Foundation.

Primera, Villamizar German Eduardo. 2014. "Potentiality, Sovereignty and Bare Life: A Critical Reading of Giorgio Agamben." *Ideas y Valores* 63, no. 156: 79–99.

Rao, Velecheru Narayana, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. 2004. "A New Imperial Idiom in the Sixteenth Century: Krishnadevaraya and his Political Theory Vijayanagara." In *South Indian Horizons: Felicitation Volume for Francois Gros*. eds. Jean-Luc Chevillard, and Eva Wilden, 597–625. Pondicherry: Institut Français De Pondichéry.

Schmitt, Carl. 2005. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Sen, Sudipta. 1998. *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sheehan, J. J. 2006. "The Problem of Sovereignty in European History." *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 1: 1–15.

Singh, Upinder. 2017. *Political Violence in Ancient India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Singha, Radhika.1998. *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Stein, Burton. 1980. *Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stern, Philip J. 2011. *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. 2003. "Turning the Stones Over: Sixteenth-century Millenniarism from the Tagus to the Ganga." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, no. 2: 129–61.

Sunil Kumar. 1994. "When Slaves were Nobles: Shamsi Bandagan in the Early Delhi Sultanate." *Studies in History* 10, no. 1: 23–52.

Tambiah, Stanley J. 1977. "The Galactic Polity: the Structure of Traditional Kingdoms in Southeast Asia." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 293, no. 1: 69–97.

Thapar, Romilla. 1984. *From Lineage to State: Social Formations of the Mid-First Millennium BC in the Ganga Valley*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Travers, Robert. 2007. *Ideology and Empire in the Eighteenth Century: The British in Bengal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.