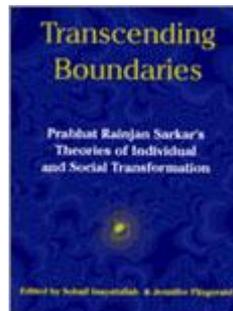


TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES

Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar's Theories of Individual and
Social Transformation



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Earth in Heaven

Linear, Cyclical and Transcendental Theories of Social Change¹

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Introduction

Conventional attempts to locate and compare the works of Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar have focused on mythological-sentimental space, primarily placing him within a 3500 year cycle. In this model, Shiva is seen as beginning society, Krishna as creating a unified Indian nation, and Sarkar as creating the context for the establishment of a global culture and polity.²

Within Indian history, we can also locate Sarkar within a theory of ideas framework. In this view, the Buddha is understood as leading a revolt against Vipran-Brahmin domination, followed by Shankaracarya who led the revolt against atheism. Caetanya concludes this pattern with the bhakti (devotional) movement, a revolt against Buddhism and idealism. More recently Aurobindo saw decolonization and the political emergence of Third World nations as part of a spiritual awakening. Gandhi continued this effort but added the very important economic dimension of self-reliance. Nehru furthered this project but attempted to industrialize India as well. Sarkar then puts it all together avoiding priestly dominance and nihilistic idealism, melding spiritual devotion and service to humanity, as well as balancing local economic policies and national/global development.

In this essay, however, we eschew this historical pattern of the great thinker, we take a macrosociological approach focusing on the structure of theory and shape of time.³ Amongst Sarkar's most significant contributions to humanity is his reconceptualization of macrohistory.

In general, grand theories of theories of macrohistory can be divided into linear, cyclical and transcendental categories.⁴ These are further related to two dimensions, agency and structure.⁵ Our point of departure is the following question: Is it possible to have a model that combines linear evolution (progress, the irreversibility of time) with cyclical history (there is a season for everything, ancient ways are crucial for maintaining

civilizational balance, and the strong shall fall and the weak shall rise) and the transcendental (the role of superagency) with individual agency (humans can create the future) with structure (there are deep patterns of change, whether varna, class, episteme, or gender that place limits on change)? Clearly asking for such elegance is difficult.⁶ To understand how he does this, let us examine the categories he uses.

The modern view

The modern view of space and time was articulated by 12th century monk Jochin De Flora who took the Christian pattern of three and applied it concretely to history creating the ancient, medieval and modern.⁷ The modern became the end of history. Those who were not modern (whether the periphery, labour, or female) were to be corrected. The Spanish, the Dutch, the British, the Nazis, the Stalinists, and finally the Americans have been part of this project.⁸ It can be characterized by the following: expansionary, racist, and against nature, the weak, and females.⁹ The backdrop of the modern is the certainty of truth, of empirical truth.

Auguste Comte further articulated this with his three stages: Theological, Metaphysical and then Positive.¹⁰ It is this final stage which will solve history and relegate the cycle to prehistory as part of the theological (created by priests) or the metaphysical (created by philosophers). Religion, ethnicity, and magic all were to disappear and a new world of rational individuals living in nation-states would replace the old world of empire and church. For in this perspective, cyclical views are fatalistic, they do not lead to economic development, to technological revolutions. Why change the world since the cycle will continue anyway, with this body or through a new body?

But the modern world promised a different life: free from superstition, free from Nature, free from familial ties. The modern world promised, after all, the individual; a self no longer caught in-between heaven and earth, caught between samskara and karma, between sexuality and religion. It promised heaven on earth.

The cyclical view

The cyclical view of the ancients, however, has always asserted that one must wait for heaven.¹¹ One must wait for the right leader. For Chinese historian Ssu-Ma Chien, one had to wait for the sage-leader;¹² for Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldun,¹³ one had to wait for the new bedouin warrior who was not urbanized, who still had strong rural values, unity, and a strong sense of religion. In the cyclical view, everything has its time and history does not end.¹⁴

The future in this model does not end in the perfect marketplace (greed leading to growth) or the perfect state (power leading to justice), but rather the cycle continues onward.¹⁵ The critique of this view is well known – fatalistic, can't support large populations, often heavily dogmatic with power controlled by local authorities, usually the priest, mullah or brahmin. At the same time, this view set limits on humans. It knew that everyone would have their turn. It knew that nature was to be respected. The collective or the group was far more important than the individual. In the cyclical view, there are periods of heaven and periods of hell, with the large part of history being the period of earth.

The transcendental

Now there has always been a third group, not the warriors expanding outward, or the priests expanding inward but the shaman. The yogi. Yogis have always existed on the fringe. The state as empire or as church could not buy them, could not appropriate them for the expansion of power. The yogi survived through his/her ability to fast, live without clothes and shelter (to live outside of the production/consumption cycle). He lived on the edge. In the mystical or the transcendental view this has also been a central theme, neither city nor village but forest, mountain or desert. Of course in the social formation that resulted from the battle between church and empire, that is, the ever expanding capitalism, the yogi has not done that well. Even the spiritual has become commodified.

But Sarkar enters these theoretical tensions, and by combining cycle and progress; individual and collective; growth and distribution; and structure, agency and the transcendental, he creates a new cosmology.

The cycle comes from his theory of social change: social dialectics and varna. However, varna is redefined from its caste basis to a structure of power, to even a social-psychological way of knowing. Karma as well is redefined (karma can be imposed thus one should not blame the victim) and a structural dimension is added. Sarkar has a strong theory of exploitation showing how imperialistic warriors, cunning intellectuals, and clever merchants have historically denied rights to females, peasants, and children. Exploitation has occurred through the extraction of labour, ideas and wealth to the centre from the periphery.

While Sarkar's theory of cyclical social change is important, he also has the linear dimension. Economic progress is critical, albeit for the purpose of the third dimension: the transcendental, for creation of a good society where human suffering is reduced, where individuals can express their spiritual potential. There is an evolutionary dimension in Sarkar's thought. Evolution is based on struggle with the environment (the materialist position) struggle between ideas (the idealistic position) and the Attraction of the Great (the mystical position).

To make this move Sarkar has to reinterpret Nature. He does this by asserting that part of evolution is about humans taking over the functions of Nature. But he balances this approach with his Neo-Humanism, the giving of rights to animals and plants.¹⁶ Electronic technologies, bio-technologies suddenly become potentially positive, creating the possibility of a more spiritual society where poverty is eliminated. Of course Sarkar is well aware of the politics of science and technology (issues of access, control and cultural context) but he does not fall into the cyclical mistake of arguing against technology.¹⁷ He is not a luddite.

But given Sarkar's stages of history, his spiritual dialectics, what of the role of the individual? It is individuals through struggle who can transform the cycle. But they cannot create a perfect society for Sarkar's Indian metaphysics do not allow this theoretical move: *vidya* (the introversial force) and *avidya* (the extroversial force) are eternal.¹⁸ Unlike the West in which the project is to destroy evil, for Sarkar evil merely becomes ignorance not a living force one must battle with. Individuals can realize this, becoming enlightened and thus escape the cycle, but society as a whole cannot. Thus the down stages, the phases of exploitation of each era can be reduced. What emerges then is a vision of a good society, not a perfect society.¹⁹

This limit on the possibility of change all but eliminates the possibility of terror. Every new ideology eventually has justified itself in its search for the perfect world by eliminating the not so perfect. This has led to genocide, externally, and neurosis, internally (the individual's battle). Thus Sarkar's vision to a great deal is sensitive to the critique that today's utopias are tomorrow's terrors.²⁰

Central to this is the understanding that, among other factors, Consciousness cannot be expressed in language. That is, we are but metaphors of ourselves. The real is not literally true as with the fundamentalist, but a way of speaking about the world. As Foucault would write: as metaphor.²¹

Now what of the transcendental? Sarkar does not make Hegel's mistake and allow the spirit into categories such as the nation. The transcendental cannot be owned by any particular individual nor by any particular State. The Geist, the historical Spirit, does not go from nation to nation searching for the perfect home, using world leaders to solve social contradictions. The transcendental functions, however, to liberate our minds from our own minds. It creates a new way of knowing, love or devotion, that attempts to break the bondages of family, race and nation.

But Sarkar does understand the need for a presence that is not merely Consciousness in the abstract. This is his Taraka Brahma, the link between the self and Consciousness – it is this link that provides a connection to the mysteries of the unknowable. However, and this is important, this link is not an empirical link, it is a sentimental, a devotional, link. That is there is not a claim to an ontological link rather it is a functional link given the need for humans to shape Consciousness – the unshapable – in human terms, in intimate terms.

Conclusion

Thus Sarkar has linear and cyclical dimensions, individual (theory of effort) and structural (a theory of exploitation) dimensions, and above all he has a transcendental focus. He is eclectic having a market and a plan; a basic needs economy but with an incentive structure.

Few thinkers have managed to put it all together like he has. Often they have remained at the individual level, forgetting class and gender relations, and merely focused on individual enlightenment. Or they have only focused on structural dimensions, forgetting the importance of individual efforts. Those who have had both structure and individual have missed the transcendental dimension, the spiritual aspect of humans. The yogi might be outside of modernity but for Sarkar this will not suffice. It is only the mind of the yogi that must be outside of boundaries of the present, his or her actions must be in society, in efforts to eradicate suffering.

To conclude, let us move into a temporal frame: Sarkar has a multiple theory of time which is inclusive of efficient time, cyclical time, and spiritual timeless time. He has a theory of structures (of patterns of change) and a theory of individual effort (of the possibility of change). Central to this possibility is the notion of Kairos. That is the right time, the time, the moment in which there is a bifurcation of past and present and the world is made anew – in which, individual and history join together to create the future.

If not heaven on earth, perhaps earth in heaven.²²

Notes

1. This essay is based on research conducted in Sohail Inayatullah, *Understanding P.R. Sarkar*. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Hawaii, May 1990 and Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*. Westport, CT., Praeger, 1997.
2. For more on this perspective, see, Tadbhavananda Avadhuta and Jayanta Kumar, *The New Wave*. Calcutta, Proutist Universal, 1985.
3. For an analysis of various models (equilibrium versus dialectical, for instance), see Anthony Galt and Larry Smith, *Models and the Study of Social Change*. New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1976. Also see, Irwin Laszlo, 'Footnotes to a History of the Future,' *Futures* (Vol. 20, No. 5, 1988).
4. For short essays by various grand theorists, see Amitai Etzioni and Eva Halevey-Etzioini, eds., *Social Change*. New York, Basic Books, 1973. Also see Robert Brown, *The Nature of Social Laws*. Oxford, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
5. For more on this, see Peter Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989.
6. One such effort is by Buddha Prakash, 'The Hindu Philosophy of History.' *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Vol. 16, No. 4, 1958). But Prakash fails in that he takes the classic cycle of gold/silver/copper/iron not as metaphor but as a concrete description of reality. Moreover, his analysis is totally void of a theory of exploitation, even going so far as believing that India is currently in a golden age, nationalism having eradicated the kali yuga (iron age) of colonialism.
7. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*. Trans. Charles Atkinson. New York, Alfred Knopp, 1972.
8. Johan Galtung, *Essays in Peace Research: Vol. 1-6*. Copenhagen, Christian Ejlers, 1988.
9. See, for example, Merryl Wyn Davies, Ashis Nandy and Zia Sardar, *Barbaric Other: A Manifesto on Western Racism*. London, Pluto Press, 1993.
10. Auguste Comte, *Positive Philosophy*. Trans. Harriet Martineau. London, Trubner, 1875.
11. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1971.
12. B. Watson, *Ssu-Ma Chien: Grand Historian of China*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1958.
13. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Trans. Franz Rosenthal. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1967.
14. See, for example, Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987.
15. Sohail Inayatullah, 'Cycles of Power', *Edges* (March 1990).
16. Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar, *The Liberation of Intellect: Neo-Humanism*. Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1982.
17. Sohail Inayatullah, 'Rethinking Science', IFDA Dossier 81 (April-June 1991).
18. Ananda Mitra Avadhutika, *The Spiritual Philosophy of Shrii Shrii Anandamurti*.

Denver, Ananda Marga Publications, 1981.

19. Eleonora Masini, ed., *Visions of Desirable Societies*. Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1983.

20. Ashis Nandy, *Tradition, Tyranny and Utopias*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987.

21. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, ed., New York, Pantheon Books, 1984.

22. That is, instead of bringing the perfection of heaven to earth, raising earth with its contradictions to a better state, to a heavenly state.

