

Evil as temporal category: Historicist ethics and the sociologisation of the yuga theory in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy

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Abstract

Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy (2010-2013) proposes a category of evil that the existing scholarship on the novels has not adequately identified: evil as temporal rather than ontological, produced by duration and scale rather than by fixed essence. This paper argues that the trilogy's most philosophically significant contribution to the tradition of Hindu mythological retelling is its deliberate departure from the Puranic Yuga doctrine's cosmological fatalism. Where the Puranic tradition treats the ages as cosmologically predetermined, Amish converts the Yuga into a quality generated by collective human choice. The Somras drawn from the Vedic Soma tradition functions throughout the trilogy as the central symbol through which this conversion is dramatised: a substance genuinely beneficial under one set of conditions, genuinely harmful under another, whose moral status changes not through any change in its nature but through the persistence of its production beyond the conditions that justified it. The Nagas and the dying Saraswati together constitute the human and ecological testimony to this temporal evil. Reading the trilogy against the Puranic background and through Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbolic meaning, this paper argues that the sociologisation of the Yuga theory is the trilogy's single most original intellectual contribution to both the living Hindu tradition and the broader tradition of contemporary Indian English mythological fiction.

Keywords: Amish tripathi, shiva trilogy, yuga theory, historicist ethics, somras, mythology

Introduction

When The Secret of the Nagas the second volume of Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy delivers the trilogy's central philosophical proposition in four short sentences, it does so without fanfare. No authorial intrusion, no narrative pause, no character standing still to deliver a speech on metaphysics. Shiva simply thinks:

Nothing is evil in the beginning. Every demon was once a good soul. Every evil was once a good practice. Something must have gone wrong along the way. (Tripathi, The Secret of the Nagas 248)

Four sentences. The fourth one does the philosophical work the first three prepare. "Something must have gone wrong along the way" is not a claim about a specific evil agent or a specific evil substance. It is a claim about temporal process about accumulation, about duration, about what happens when a practice persists beyond the conditions that originally justified it. Evil, in this formulation, is not a fixed property of certain beings or substances. It is what certain beings and substances become, under certain conditions, over time.

The existing scholarship on the Shiva Trilogy has not adequately grappled with this formulation's philosophical novelty. Commentary has tended to note the trilogy's moral ambiguity, to praise its departure from a simplistic good-versus-evil schema, and occasionally to criticise it for moral relativism all of which responses share the same limitation: they describe the claim's surface effect without engaging its underlying structure. The claim is not relativistic. Moral relativism holds that good and evil are matters of perspective, with no objective purchase. The trilogy's claim is considerably more specific: that evil is a temporal category, that what makes a practice harmful is not its intrinsic nature but its persistence past the conditions that

made it beneficial, and that the perpetual moral task facing any society is recognising when those conditions have changed before the harm becomes irreversible. This is historicist ethics, not relativism, and the distinction matters for how we understand both the trilogy's intellectual achievement and its relationship to the Hindu philosophical tradition it draws on.

This paper traces that historicist argument across its three primary sites of deployment in the trilogy: the Somras, which functions as the material substance through which the principle of temporal evil is most concretely dramatised; the Nagas, who constitute the human testimony to the consequences of ignoring that principle; and the Saraswati, the dying river whose ecological decline makes those consequences visible at the civilisational scale. But it argues further that these three sites cannot be fully understood without the broader theoretical transformation the trilogy performs on the Puranic Yuga doctrine. Amish converts the Yuga cycle from a cosmological given into a quality generated by collective social choice, and it is this conversion the sociologisation of a cosmological fatalism into a counsel of ongoing political and ethical responsibility that constitutes the trilogy's most significant and most underexamined contribution to the tradition of contemporary Indian English mythological fiction.

The puranic yuga theory: Cosmological fatalism and its limits

The Yuga doctrine, as it appears in its fully developed Puranic form, is among the most systematised cosmological accounts in the Hindu tradition. The cosmos moves through four ages in descending order of moral quality: Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, and Kali Yuga, with the cycle repeating indefinitely through the enormous spans of time

that Puranic cosmology assigns to each age. Mircea Eliade describes the logic of this cycle in its most general formulation as the myth of the eternal return: “the time of origins,” when the cosmos was at its purest, is perpetually recalled through ritual and narrative, while historical time moves progressively away from that origin (Eliade, *Myth and Reality* 5-6). In the specifically Hindu Puranic context, this takes the form of moral and spiritual deterioration across the four ages from the uncorrupted dharma of the Satya Yuga, through the progressive diminishment of the Treta and Dvapara, to the degeneration and confusion of the Kali Yuga that the tradition understands itself as currently inhabiting.

What is philosophically important about this doctrine is what it implies for human agency. If the ages are cosmologically predetermined if the Kali Yuga is the inevitable consequence of a cosmic clock rather than the accumulated result of human choices then the scope for moral responsibility is substantially constrained. One can conduct oneself well within the Yuga one inhabits; one cannot change which Yuga one inhabits. The deterioration is cosmic and therefore, on the Puranic account, inevitable. Dharma itself, as P. V. Kane establishes in his foundational treatment of the concept, varies across the Yugas: “what is dharma in one Yuga may not be dharma in another Yuga” (Kane I.1), a formulation that acknowledges moral variation while attributing it to the cosmic cycle rather than to human decision.

This cosmological fatalism has been understood as both a consolation and a limit. As consolation: the Kali Yuga’s deterioration is not the fault of any living person; it is the condition all persons currently find themselves in by cosmic assignment, and its eventual end the dissolution and renewal of the cycle is equally guaranteed. As limit: the doctrine can function ideologically to discourage structural transformation of social arrangements, since those arrangements are understood as expressions of cosmic order rather than as contingent historical products. The tradition itself contains arguments within this limit the Bhagavad Gita’s insistence on right action regardless of outcome, the Bhakti tradition’s radical democratisation of spiritual access but the cosmological fatalism of the Yuga doctrine has remained a persistent strand in the tradition’s self-understanding.

What Amish Tripathi does with this doctrine in the *Shiva Trilogy* is not to reject it but to transform its causal structure. The transformation is quiet, never explicitly announced, and all the more philosophically significant for being enacted through narrative demonstration rather than stated as philosophical argument.

The Euhemeristic Frame and Its Philosophical Stakes

Before the Yuga transformation itself can be examined, the trilogy’s basic narrative method euhemerism needs to be placed in relation to the philosophical argument it makes possible. Euhemerism, the presentation of gods as historical human beings who achieve or are subsequently attributed divinity, is not Amish’s invention; it has roots in the Hindu tradition itself, in various Puranic accounts of mortals achieving divine status through exceptional tapas and moral accomplishment. What is new in the *Shiva Trilogy* is the sustained deployment of this method across a full three-volume popular-fiction narrative, and the specific use to which that method is put.

By presenting Shiva as a historical human being who becomes the Mahadev through the quality of his choices, the trilogy converts the sacred history of divine action that Eliade identifies as myth’s characteristic mode “myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’” (Eliade, *Myth and Reality* 5-6) into the secular history of human decision-making. The primordial time collapses into historical duration. The divine action becomes human action. And crucially, the consequences of that action are no longer cosmologically given but historically produced: they follow from specific choices made by specific people under specific conditions, and they are therefore, at least in principle, revisable. It is precisely this revisability that the Yuga doctrine’s cosmological fatalism denies and that the trilogy’s euhemeristic method opens up.

A. K. Ramanujan’s account of the tradition of retelling that the trilogy belongs to is useful here. “No text is original, yet each is a fresh context,” Ramanujan argues, with each new telling creating “its own world of Rama” or, in the present case, its own world of Shiva “within the historical and cultural context of its production” (Ramanujan 46). The context the *Shiva Trilogy* belongs to is post-liberalisation India, in which a generation educated in Western rational frameworks has inherited a devotional tradition those frameworks make difficult to inhabit directly. The euhemeristic method is Amish’s specific response to this context: it makes the tradition’s stories available in secular historical narrative without translating their symbolic content into something thinner. Shiva remains Shiva. The mythology remains alive. But the account of how divine status comes to exist in the world changes from cosmological given to historical achievement, and this change carries direct consequences for the philosophical account of evil the trilogy proceeds to develop.

The Somras as Temporal Symbol: From Amrita to Poison

The Somras is the trilogy’s central material symbol, and its relationship to the Vedic Soma tradition announces itself in the name without apology. The Vedic Soma was simultaneously plant, deity, and cosmic principle the ritual drink capable of producing genuine sacred contact and, in Heinrich Zimmer’s formulation, “the substance of immortality, the drink of the gods, the source of inspiration and invincibility” (Zimmer 61). The tradition’s treatment of Soma is thoroughly ambivalent: the *Rigveda* celebrates its powers while also warning of the confusion that follows its misuse. The Soma is not simply beneficial; it is powerful, and powerful things can go wrong.

Amish inherits this ambivalence and extends it into a full narrative argument. The Somras, as the trilogy establishes it, was genuinely beneficial at the scale at which Meluha first began producing it. It extended lives. It enabled the civilisational achievements that make Meluha, in the first novel, genuinely admirable rather than merely impressive. Nothing about its early production is presented as mistaken or wrongheaded. The trilogy does not suggest that the Meluhans should have left it undeveloped, or that its production was morally tainted from the beginning. It was genuinely good. This matters, because the claim “nothing is evil in the beginning” requires a counterpart: nothing was wrong here at the start.

What goes wrong is scale and duration. The Somras's production, expanded to meet the growing demands of an expanding civilisation, generates waste products at levels the surrounding ecology cannot absorb. The waste accumulates in the Saraswati's watershed, producing the river's progressive decline. It produces genetic damage in the offspring of populations exposed to high concentrations, manifesting as the deformities that mark those offspring as Nagas under the Vikarma doctrine. The substance itself has not changed. The conditions have changed. Production has outrun the ecological and human systems that could sustain it at its original, beneficial scale. And the moral status of the practice has changed accordingly: what was genuinely good has become genuinely harmful, through persistence past the conditions that made it good.

Paul Ricoeur's account of the symbol's capacity to generate multiple and inexhaustible lines of thought rather than being reducible to any single referent is relevant here. Ricoeur argues that "the symbol gives rise to thought" "I do not posit the meaning, it is the symbol which gives it; but what it gives is something for thought, something to think about" (Ricoeur 347-48). The Somras as symbol does exactly this. It has generated readings as a figure for nuclear technology, fossil fuels, genetic engineering, and caste privilege, and every reading finds partial support in the text without exhausting what the symbol is doing. What the symbol dramatises is not any specific modern analogue but the general structural pattern by which beneficial practices become harmful a pattern that is recognisable across contexts precisely because the symbol does not reduce it to any single context.

The change in the language surrounding the Somras across the three volumes tracks the change in its moral status almost exactly. In the first novel, characters describe it as a gift, a blessing, the foundation of civilised life. By the third volume, even its defenders have abandoned that vocabulary. Nobody calls it a blessing anymore. They call it necessary, or established, or too costly to undo. The linguistic shift from gratitude to entrenchment is the trilogy's most subtle piece of evidence for the temporal evil argument: the substance has not changed, but the relationship of the people who produce it to the people who bear its costs has changed, and the language reflects that change before the narrative explicitly acknowledges it.

The Sociologisation of the Yuga Theory

The trilogy's transformation of the Yuga doctrine is nowhere stated as a philosophical position by any character. It is enacted through the plot's causal structure, and that enactment is its most significant formal achievement. The Puranic Yuga doctrine attributes the moral quality of an age to cosmological processes operating independently of human choice. The Shiva Trilogy attributes the moral quality of an age to the cumulative effect of the collective choices a society makes, generation by generation, about how it organises its production, manages its costs, and accounts for the people it excludes from its benefits.

Meluha, in the first novel, presents itself as a Satya Yuga civilisation. Its citizens and its ruler genuinely believe this. The evidence for this belief is not entirely manufactured: the civilisation's achievements are real, its commitment to merit-based social organisation is genuine, its governance is by its own standards honest. By the conventional Puranic account, these qualities would identify it as belonging to one

of the higher Yugas. And yet, by the trilogy's third volume, the same civilisation is producing Nagas in the forests, poisoning the most sacred river in the Vedic tradition, and sustaining both harms through an elaborate institutional apparatus of theological explanation, geographic separation, and specialised knowledge management.

The trilogy's implicit argument is that Meluha produced its own Kali Yuga, from inside a self-understanding as a Satya Yuga society, without any cosmological mandate or predetermined schedule. Not a cosmic clock but a collective moral drift: the drift of a civilisation that preserved its best achievements and allowed the costs of those achievements to accumulate where they could not be seen by those doing the preserving. This drift is the Kali Yuga, in the trilogy's revisionary account of what the doctrine means. It is not cosmologically given. It is historically produced.

The implications of this revision extend beyond the trilogy's own fictional world. The Puranic doctrine, applied in its original cosmological form to contemporary India, functions as a counsel of patience: the Kali Yuga will end, the cycle will renew, and the proper response to deterioration is spiritual practice rather than political transformation. Amish's version of the doctrine functions instead as a counsel of perpetual political and ethical responsibility: if Yugas are qualities societies generate through their own choices, then the responsibility for the Kali Yuga belongs to the society that drifted into producing it, and the possibility of improvement belongs to the society that chooses differently.

Sheldon Pollock's account of how Sanskrit literary and philosophical tradition has always been shaped by its historical and political contexts offers a useful frame for understanding what the trilogy is doing here. The tradition's canonical texts have never simply transmitted unchanging doctrine; they have transformed doctrine in response to the specific problems their historical moment presented (Pollock 28). The Shiva Trilogy's transformation of the Yuga doctrine in response to the specific problems of post-liberalisation India the coexistence of extraordinary material achievement and persistent structural exclusion, the persistence of caste hierarchy beneath the rhetoric of merit, the environmental costs of rapid development absorbed disproportionately by those with least political power is continuous with this tradition of responsive transformation rather than a departure from it.

The Nagas as Historical Consequence: Karma Without Cosmic Intention

If the Somras is the trilogy's central symbol of temporal evil, the Nagas are its central human testimony. Their function in the plot's moral argument cannot be separated from the specific way the trilogy accounts for their deformities, and understanding that accounting requires attention to what the trilogy is doing with the karma doctrine alongside the Yuga doctrine.

The Vikarma system, through which the Nagas' deformities are officially understood within Meluha, reads their suffering as the consequence of sin committed in past lives. This is the karma doctrine deployed in its most ideologically convenient form: the suffering of a specific group gets attributed to the cosmic justice of past-life sin rather than to the present-life choices of those who benefit from excluding that group. Uma Chakravarti's analysis of brahmanical patriarchy is precisely relevant here. Chakravarti shows how

the mythological tradition was used to legitimate the subordination of specific groups “by constructing a notion of ideal femininity that required women’s complete subordination to the domestic and reproductive roles defined for them by the male-dominated social order” (Chakravarti 579) a process whose mechanism, the conversion of historically produced exclusion into cosmically ordained status, is exactly what the Vikarma doctrine performs for the Nagas.

The trilogy’s revelation, across the second volume, that the Nagas’ deformities are caused by Somras waste rather than by past-life sin is therefore not simply a plot twist. It is a reversal of the ideology the Vikarma doctrine embodies. The karma is not the Nagas’; it is Meluha’s. The suffering is not cosmic punishment for past-life transgression; it is historical consequence of present-life production choices. And the mechanism that has protected those production choices from scrutiny the theological framework that made the Nagas’ suffering appear to be their own spiritual problem rather than Meluha’s political problem is precisely the mechanism that enabled the harm to accumulate to its current scale.

This reversal is philosophically significant beyond its specific application to the Nagas. It demonstrates the structure by which ideological naturalisations of historically produced exclusion operate: the harm gets attributed to a cause located in the harmed party themselves (their past-life sin, their cosmic unworthiness, their biological or cultural inferiority), which simultaneously explains the harm and exempts those who produce it from accountability. The trilogy’s argument is that the proper response to this structure is not a counter-metaphysics not an alternative cosmic account of why the Nagas do not deserve their suffering but an empirical investigation of what actually produced the suffering and who made the choices that produced it. Dharma, on the trilogy’s account, cannot be discharged through theological explanation of suffering. It requires honest investigation of what causes it.

The relationship between karma and time in the trilogy’s implicit philosophy is also worth specifying. The Puranic karma doctrine holds that actions in this life generate consequences experienced in future lives, with the causal chain extending across the boundary of individual existence. The trilogy does not dispute this doctrine. What it disputes is its specific ideological deployment: the use of karmic explanation to naturalise present-day institutional arrangements that produce harm. Karma still operates in the trilogy’s world. But its operation in the specific case of the Nagas is assigned to Meluha, whose past choices made in this life, within historical time are generating present consequences that land on bodies Meluha has excluded from its field of moral concern.

The Dying Saraswati: Civilisational Accountability at the Ecological Scale

The Saraswati’s decline runs in parallel with the Naga revelation throughout the trilogy’s second volume, and the parallel is not coincidental. Two consequences, one root cause, arriving through two different channels: a body and a landscape, a people and a river. Together they constitute the trilogy’s fullest demonstration of what temporal evil actually looks like at the civilisational scale.

The Saraswati’s theological status in the Hindu tradition gives the ecological argument a weight it would not carry if

any other river were dying. Diana Eck establishes that in the tradition’s own self-understanding, “the land itself is held to be a divine presence, manifested in rivers, mountains, forests, and the countless shrines where gods and goddesses have made themselves known through the ages” (Eck 3). The river is not simply a natural resource; it is a divine body. Its dying is not simply an environmental problem; it is a theological crisis, an instance of the sacred itself being damaged by the choices of the society that claims to honour it.

Three separate scenes in the trilogy return to the riverbank to mark stages of the Saraswati’s decline. The first shows a reduced but flowing river a worried observation rather than a crisis. The second shows a cracked riverbed, water running only in a narrow central channel. The third shows dry stone: a memory of a river rather than a river. The progression is never narrated as a single continuous event. It accumulates across gaps between chapters, the way the harm itself accumulated across generations each individual reduction manageable, the cumulative total catastrophic.

This narrative structure gradual revelation rather than dramatic event is itself an argument. Temporal evil does not arrive as a discrete crisis. It accumulates. The crises that make it visible the fully deformed Naga child, the fully dry riverbed are the end points of long processes rather than inaugural events. Recognising temporal evil requires attending to trends rather than events, which is precisely the kind of attention that institutional arrangements are typically organised to prevent. Meluha’s administrative apparatus for managing the Nagas and for managing knowledge about the Somras’s ecological costs is, in effect, an apparatus for preventing that kind of long-term trend attention. The Vikarma doctrine forecloses inquiry at the individual level; geographic separation forecloses it at the social level; specialised knowledge management forecloses it at the institutional level. Together they produce a society perfectly organised to accumulate temporal evil without noticing it.

Shiva’s value to the plot is partly explained by this structure. He stands outside all three of Meluha’s institutional forgetting arrangements. He has no investment in the Vikarma doctrine’s explanatory convenience. He arrives without the geographic separation between Meluha’s cities and Naga-affected zones already naturalised. He lacks the specialised knowledge that makes Somras production seem like a settled background fact of civilised life. His outsider status established in the opening pages as simple narrative premise turns out to be the structural precondition for the entire mystery plot. Only someone outside the forgetting apparatus can ask the question “what is the evil of the age” and actually expect it to have a specific, investigable answer.

The Ethics of Accumulated Harm: Apad-Dharma and the Pashupatiatra

The trilogy’s philosophical argument about temporal evil does not end with its diagnosis. It extends into an ethics of response, concentrated in the Pashupatiatra sequence that occupies much of the third volume. The specific ethical question the trilogy poses here is: once temporal evil has been identified, and once the conditions that produced it are fully established, what does the recognition of that harm morally require?

The question is complicated by the scale of accumulated harm. If the Somras’s production had been stopped at the

first sign of Naga deformities, or at the Saraswati's first measured decline, the intervention required might have been proportionate to ordinary dharmic conduct. But by the time Shiva arrives and the full extent of the harm is revealed, the accumulation is so severe that ordinary instruments legal reform, policy change, market adjustment cannot address it at the pace the ongoing harm demands. The Somras facility is the source, and stopping the source requires destroying the facility, and destroying the facility by available conventional means would take years the continuing production of Nagas and the continuing decline of the Saraswati do not permit.

The Vayuputra council's extended deliberation over the Pashupatiasthra, occupying much of the final third of *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, engages directly with the apad-dharma tradition discussed in Kane's treatment of the dharmashastra literature: the recognition that certain emergencies exceed what normal ethical instruments can address, and that dharmic conduct in such emergencies may require actions that would be impermissible under normal conditions (Kane I.1). What makes the Shiva Trilogy's engagement with this tradition philosophically serious rather than merely convenient is the equal weight given to both sides of the deliberation. Parvateshwar's resistance to the Pashupatiasthra is not presented as cowardice or naivety. It is a principled commitment to the dharmayuddha tradition's insistence on accountable, discriminating violence, a commitment the trilogy has spent two volumes establishing as admirable. The apad-dharma exception does not make it wrong. It makes it insufficient a different moral judgment.

Winthrop Sargeant's translation of the Bhagavad Gita's instruction on nishkama karma is the appropriate philosophical background for understanding Shiva's final decision: "Let right deeds be thy motive, not the fruit which comes from them.. abandoning attachment and regarding success and failure as equal" (Sargeant 134). Shiva's deployment of the Pashupatiasthra is not triumphant assertion of will. It is the discharge of an obligation recognised as inescapable, performed without the comfort of believing the action to be costless or that history will receive it as unambiguously heroic. The line that follows the weapon's use "I believe it was necessary. Whether it was right is not a question I am qualified to answer alone" (Tripathi, *The Oath of the Vayuputras* 412) is, read against the Gita's teaching, very nearly a direct enactment of nishkama karma's demand: act from the fullest understanding available, and resist the temptation to claim more certainty about the action's righteousness than the situation actually permits.

The ethic of accumulated harm that the trilogy develops is therefore not a simple consequentialism it does not hold that sufficiently bad consequences justify any response. It holds that some situations, through the accumulation of temporal evil that ordinary ethical instruments failed to prevent at each incremental stage, become emergencies that require departing from those ordinary instruments while acknowledging, without attempting to conceal, the cost of the departure. The acknowledgment is not decorative. It is the moral marker that distinguishes apad-dharma from simply doing what is convenient under emergency cover.

The Trilogy in the Living Tradition: Anuvada and Philosophical Transformation

The philosophical transformation the Shiva Trilogy performs on the Yuga doctrine is not an isolated

modernisation. It belongs to a long tradition of creative philosophical reinterpretation that the Sanskrit critical tradition itself names and values as *anuvada* the restatement of received material in a new context, understood not as a lesser activity than original composition but as a recognised and valued mode of creative and intellectual engagement. Kalidas's Puranic transformations, Tulsidas's refiguring of Valmiki, the Bhakti tradition's radical democratisation of access to the divine: each of these is *anuvada* in this sense inheritance transformed rather than simply repeated.

The Shiva Trilogy's *anuvada* of the Yuga doctrine is philosophically specific in a way that distinguishes it from other contemporary mythological retellings. Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) performs a perspectival reversal the familiar Ramayana story told from Ravana's point of view without transforming the philosophical categories the story operates within. Devdutt Pattanaik's popular mythological writings perform interpretation rather than transformation: they explain what the tradition's symbols mean rather than developing what those symbols can mean in new configurations. The Shiva Trilogy is doing something different: it takes a specific philosophical doctrine from within the tradition the Yuga cycle's cosmological fatalism and transforms its causal structure while retaining its descriptive vocabulary. The Yugas still describe the ages. They still name the same qualities. What changes is the account of what produces those qualities. This is philosophical transformation from within the tradition's own vocabulary, not importation of an external framework.

The parallel with Ramanujan's account of the Ramayana's plurality is instructive. Ramanujan demonstrates that the tradition has always generated multiple, substantially different accounts of the "same" story, each making its own sense of shared material within its own historical and cultural context, and that this plurality is a mark of the tradition's vitality rather than a compromise of its integrity (Ramanujan 46). The Shiva Trilogy's transformation of the Yuga doctrine belongs to this tradition of productive plurality: it is a new telling that makes its own sense of received material in a specific post-liberalisation Indian context in which the questions of who bears the costs of civilisational achievement, and whether cosmic explanation can justify institutional exclusion, are politically urgent rather than merely philosophically interesting.

Implications: Historicist Ethics and the Problem of Recognition

The historicist account of evil the trilogy develops has a specific implication that this paper wants to draw out before the conclusion. If evil is temporal rather than ontological if what makes a practice harmful is not its intrinsic nature but its persistence past the conditions that justified it then the central moral problem facing any society is not the identification and defeat of evil agents but the recognition of the temporal threshold at which beneficial practices become harmful ones. This is a much harder problem than identifying and defeating agents, because it requires sustained attention to trends rather than to events, and because the institutional arrangements that produce and sustain the harm are typically also the arrangements that prevent the trend attention the recognition requires.

Meluha's failure is precisely a failure of recognition. The Somras's harm accumulated incrementally across

generations, at each stage manageable enough that the specific individuals overseeing production could honestly believe they were administering a beneficial system. No individual Meluhan is presented as knowingly producing Nagas for the sake of civilisational convenience. The harm is institutional rather than personal: produced and sustained by a set of arrangements geographic separation, theological explanation, specialised knowledge management each of which is individually defensible and collectively catastrophic.

This structural analysis connects the trilogy's philosophical argument to a broader body of social and ethical thought about what it means for institutions to do harm that no individual within them chooses or intends. The moral philosophy of institutional harm developed in different ways across utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics has consistently found the hardest cases to be not the ones where individual agents choose wrongly but the ones where cumulative institutional arrangements produce harm without anyone choosing it. The Shiva Trilogy dramatises this case with considerable precision, and the dramatisation is effective precisely because it arrives through narrative revelation rather than through philosophical argument: the reader experiences the horror of the Nagas' situation as revelation, the way Shiva does, rather than encountering it as a position to be evaluated.

The trilogy's ethics of recognition also carry implications for how we understand the tradition's concept of Dharma in its most general application. Kane's root definition "that which holds together a thing or a being, that which gives it its stability and its proper character" (Kane I.1) is, on the trilogy's interpretation, dynamically rather than statically understood. What holds a society together under one set of conditions may destroy it under another. Dharmic conduct is not the adherence to a fixed code but the ongoing, effortful attention to whether the practices through which a society organises itself remain adequate to the conditions under which it actually exists. Meluha believed itself dharmic because it was following its own established principles. Its tragedy is that following established principles through changing conditions, without attending to the change, is exactly how temporal evil is produced.

Conclusion

The Shiva Trilogy is not a philosophical treatise. It does not lay out its ethical positions in the form of arguments, engage with rival positions, or explicitly claim the philosophical novelty this paper has argued for. The philosophical content is enacted through plot, character, and symbol rather than stated as position, and much of the most important argumentative work happens in the language characters use to describe substances and practices shifts from gratitude to entrenchment, from blessing to necessity that most readers do not consciously register as philosophical argument at all. This is precisely what makes the trilogy philosophically interesting rather than merely philosophically topical. It demonstrates rather than asserts the historicist account of evil. The reader who finishes all three volumes carries a felt understanding of how temporal evil accumulates, how institutional arrangements prevent its recognition, and what recognising it eventually requires an understanding built through narrative experience rather than through abstract argument. Ricoeur's formulation of the symbol's relationship to thought the symbol gives rise to thought

rather than encoding a pre-existing thought that could be stated more efficiently without it describes exactly this kind of understanding. The trilogy's symbols do not illustrate a philosophical position. They produce the conditions under which the philosophical position becomes thinkable.

The sociologisation of the Yuga theory is the trilogy's most original intellectual contribution to the tradition it belongs to, and the contribution is made entirely through narrative demonstration. Meluha does not inhabit a cosmologically predetermined Kali Yuga. It builds its own Kali Yuga, from inside a Satya Yuga self-understanding, through the accumulated moral failures of ordinary people making ordinary choices about production, cost distribution, and institutional explanation. The Yuga doctrine is retained but its causal structure is reversed: from cosmological fatalism to social responsibility, from cosmic determination to historical accountability.

In the specific context of post-liberalisation India a context in which extraordinary civilisational achievement has coexisted with persistent structural exclusion, in which the costs of rapid development have been absorbed disproportionately by populations without political power, and in which the relationship between merit-based aspiration and hereditary social advantage has become a central site of political contest this transformation of the Yuga doctrine from fatalism to accountability is not merely philosophically interesting. It is politically urgent. The tradition, on the trilogy's account, does not exempt a society from responsibility for the harms its achievement generates. It demands that the society attend, perpetually and honestly, to the conditions under which its practices operate and that it recognises, before the harm becomes irreversible, when those conditions have changed.

That demand is old. It runs through the samudra manthan myth, through the Gita's ethics of action, through the Mahabharata's insistence that there are no clean victories. What the Shiva Trilogy adds to it is a specific account of how a civilisation can fail to answer it not through dramatic wickedness but through the quiet, institutional, incremental forgetting that temporal evil requires. The trilogy does not footnote the Puranas when it makes this argument. It thinks with them. And thinking with them, it arrives at something the tradition had not previously needed to say in quite this form: that the Kali Yuga is not given from outside. It is built, from inside, by societies that stop asking whether the conditions that once justified their practices still hold.

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